

On Disability Rep and Doomed Characters

I have an unfortunate tendency to fall for doomed characters. Don't ask me why; it just happens. *goes into a corner and bawls* I'm also trying to read as many (fantasy and sci-fi) books with representation of disability and chronic illness as I can, and I've found some great ones and some not-so-great ones lately.

It's one I place in the latter category that inspired me to write this post.

I always appreciate finding #OwnVoices books; if you're unfamiliar with that hashtag, it means a person with a disability has written a character—or more than one—with a disability. (Or a BIPOC author writing BIPOC characters, etc. But I'll be using it here in reference to authors with a disability or chronic illness.) This, of course, lends authenticity and allows the writer to empathize much better with the person(s) they're writing.

Not that you can't write a good disabled character if you aren't disabled, yourself. Some authors in this situation do their research and do a great job. Putting in time and effort can really pay off. But even if they've done fantastic research and written a fully developed character, there can still be problems.

The main “not-so-great” book I have in mind that I read recently is one where the author seemed to rush the ending; he seems to have done a good amount of research on the disability aspect of his story—kudos to him for that. But the ending seemed rather fudged and haphazard: time and effort seemed lacking there. I think the book, which was already quite long, should have been broken into two so the ending could be as long as it needed to be. Also, there wasn't enough foreshadowing of the death; it sucker-punched me (Nooo! Not another character I fell for being doomed!!) and even looking back after finishing the book, I didn't notice enough foreshadowing. There *was* a “hint,” but IMO it was way too ambiguous. There was a prophet who told the main characters' fortunes, but all his predictions had a twist . . . well, all but one. The death. He said he saw no future for this character, but all the other characters were like “He's crazy; don't listen to him; forget about it” and their own fortunes came true in a different way than I was able to guess. So I thought there would also be a twist and the “no future” would end up having a loophole or another way of being interpreted. But nope. Also, that was the only clue; it would have been nice to have more. And maybe give them *before* you make people fall in love with your character. (Hey, if authors love breaking hearts, they can do their thing, but maybe give some warnings, please?? Unfortunately, none of the reviews I saw warned that there was a character death.)

Also, the author seemed to be setting up the disabled character as a hero in the storyline; said character was extremely noble, smart/shrewd yet humble and teachable, and fully fleshed-out as a person, so much more than his physical circumstances. Such a well-written character! I thought surely this is one of those amazing authors who show that people with disabilities can still achieve their dreams, do great things, be heroes, etc. (SO much love to those authors!) Even if things don't work out perfectly, even if the character never gets healed/cured/etc. That's not the point. It doesn't have to be Perfectly Ever After. Actually, sometimes when authors cure/heal a character, it seems trite or like they were doing it for wrong reasons (see [this article](#)). But the first two-thirds of the book I'm talking about gave me the impression that this author was avoiding the “disabled person as sacrifice” trope that I loathe. The prophecy didn't come until the latter half of the book, and the setup was misleading. Another prophecy, established centuries before the story even started, said that this character *had* to survive. That's the one that was twisted. But it really didn't have to be. . . .

Art—books, music, anything creative—should NOT be rushed. Take your time and make sure your themes are clearly established and set up. Consider your audience, as well. If you're promoting the book like "Hey, check it out, disability rep over here!", who do you think is going to flock to your book? People who want to see disabled heroes—or at least non-sacrifices. And I bet you that a lot of these readers have disabilities, themselves, or a loved one who does. Do *they* want to be written off as just a sacrifice? "Oh, their quality of life would have been too bad if they'd survived." Is quality of life the only factor to be considered? *Hath not a disabled person senses, affections, passions? If you prick them, do they not bleed?* The disabled character in this book clearly did not want to die. His will to live wasn't considered. He was just, unfortunately, in the end, being used to make a point that I won't spoil. Yes, he's fictional! But he's also representing something about reality. He's connected to reality through his readers, who are real.

These disabled or chronically ill readers—who long to see people like themselves in books—have just as much value and dignity as anyone else, and probably have already spent loads of time contemplating their own mortality. (For example, my five years in *The Void* after I was first diagnosed. The darkest time of my life.) They may have been treated poorly and use books for escape, as many healthy people also do. What would really help lift their spirits is seeing disabled characters score some wins. Allowing those characters to live when so many authors down through history have not—hence why there's a disabled-sacrifice trope—is a powerful, affirming choice.

People with illnesses and disabilities are SO much more than their physical circumstances. They're not just characters you can sacrifice because "it was inevitable / it's a softer blow to the reader" or "they'll finally be at peace" or "it's only fair that the younger/healthier characters survive because they have more life left to live and more to offer society." Sure, sometimes in real life, choices like this have to be made—like with organ-donation lists, in triage, and in disasters with not enough supplies to help everyone—and no one wants to have to make them . . . but authors are not in that type of situation!

I am definitely not saying that authors can't kill characters—disabled or otherwise—or write grimdark or etc. That's not the point I'm trying to make. People can write what they want, and I'll read what I want. (I prefer "[hopepunk](#)" any day of the week.) I'm just asking authors to please make it a little more obvious than the above example if a character is doomed. Proper foreshadowing is good to use for any situation in your book! Sure, it can be subtle, but it should be clear enough in hindsight. This includes taking care in the way you market your book. Don't shout "Disability rep over here!" if you're just killing that character off in a sloppy way in a rushed ending. Don't write a sloppy ending, period!

Since I spent most of this post on a negative example, I'd love to finish with a positive one. Kendra Merritt is an #OwnVoices author who writes fantastic disability rep! I've already read one book (*Skin Deep*, a retelling of *Beauty and the Beast*) in her [Mark of the Least series](#), and I intend to read more! Her characters are so much more than their disabilities; they're fully human and flawed yet likeable. They don't get a perfect ending, but they get one that [fits the setup](#). And since the books are fairy-tale retellings, we expect a happy (enough) ending,* so that in and of itself provides proper foreshadowing.

Hmmm, maybe I should stick to reading fairy-tale retellings. . . . ;) J/k, I love original stories that I can't guess where they're going!

Do you have any recommendations of sci-fi or fantasy books with excellent disability or chronic-illness rep? (I've already read Bujold and Bardugo. And, of course, I mean books that eschew the disabled-sacrifice trope!)

P.S. My book, [*Hunter's Moon*](#), is kind of #OwnVoices because I portray lycanthropy as a chronic illness, and I have had one (obviously, a different one! LOL) for 17+ years now.

*Thanks to Disney! Heh, yes, I'm aware that the older fairy tales are quite dark and tragic. But I'm a Millennial who grew up on Disney!