

From Pity to Agency: Rewriting Disability Narratives in *Roll With It* and *The Chance to Fly*

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Abstract:

Children's and juvenile literature has long functioned as a formative cultural space in which ideas about difference, normalcy, and belonging are introduced to young readers. Historically, however, disability within this literary tradition has been framed through sentimental, tragic, or moralistic lenses, often positioning disabled characters as objects of pity or narrative instruments meant to inspire able-bodied readers. Such portrayals reinforce ableist assumptions by reducing disability to lack, dependency, or exceptional struggle. In contrast, contemporary juvenile fiction increasingly challenges these reductive frameworks by centering disabled protagonists as active agents within their own narratives. This paper examines how Jamie Sumner's *Roll With It* (2019) and Ali Stroker and Stacy Davidowitz's *The Chance to Fly* (2021) participate in this representational shift. Drawing on disability studies theory, particularly the work of Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, Lennard J. Davis, and Rachel Adams, the study analyses how both texts rewrite disability narratives by foregrounding voice, autonomy, and lived experience. Through close textual analysis and comparative reading, the paper argues that these novels move decisively from pity-based representation toward agency-driven storytelling, offering young readers more ethical, inclusive, and empowering models of disability and childhood.

Keywords: Disability Studies, Juvenile Literature, Agency, Representation, Ableism, Contemporary Fiction

1. Introduction

Children's and juvenile literature occupies a crucial role in shaping cultural understandings of identity, difference, and social belonging. As one of the earliest narrative spaces encountered by readers, it contributes significantly to the formation of attitudes toward bodies, abilities, and norms. Yet for much of its history, juvenile literature has reflected and reinforced dominant social hierarchies, particularly in its representation of disability. Disabled characters were frequently marginalised, sentimentalised, or instrumentalised, functioning less as subjects with interior lives and more as narrative devices designed to evoke sympathy, moral instruction, or inspiration.

Ann Dowker's examination of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century children's literature reveals a consistent pattern in which disability was framed as either tragedy or moral lesson. Such narratives often relied on cure, death, or transformation to restore narrative order, suggesting that disability was incompatible with fulfillment or agency. Even when disabled characters survived their stories, they were rarely granted autonomy or narrative complexity. Instead, their presence served able-bodied readers by reinforcing ideals of gratitude, perseverance, or moral superiority.

The late twentieth century witnessed a significant theoretical shift with the emergence of disability studies, which challenged medical and deficit-based models of disability. Scholars began to emphasize the social, cultural, and environmental factors that shape disabled experience. This paradigm shift has gradually influenced literary production, particularly within juvenile fiction, where authors have increasingly sought to represent disability as a lived, embodied experience rather than a narrative problem to be solved.

Jamie Sumner's *Roll With It* and Ali Stroker and Stacy Davidowitz's *The Chance to Fly* are exemplary texts within this evolving literary landscape. Both novels center disabled protagonists who navigate everyday challenges, aspirations, and relationships without being reduced to objects of pity or inspiration. This paper argues that these texts actively rewrite traditional disability narratives by foregrounding agency, voice, and self-determination. By moving from pity to agency, they contribute to a more ethical and inclusive vision of juvenile literature.

2. Disability, Normalcy, and the Legacy of Pity

To fully appreciate the representational significance of contemporary disability narratives, it is necessary to examine the historical construction of normalcy and its impact on literature. Lennard J. Davis argues that the concept of the "normal" body emerged alongside modernity, particularly through the rise of statistics, medical classification, and industrial efficiency. Once normalcy was established as a benchmark, bodily difference became marked as deviant, deficient, or pathological.

Children's literature has historically played a role in reinforcing this binary between normal and abnormal bodies. Disabled characters were often portrayed as dependent, fragile, or morally instructive figures whose primary function was to elicit sympathy. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson identifies this pattern as part of a broader cultural logic that positions disability as a spectacle or sentimental object rather than a legitimate form of embodiment. The act of "staring," she argues, becomes a means of regulating difference, reinforcing the authority of the normate. One of the most enduring consequences of this tradition is the persistence of pity-based narratives. Pity operates as a seemingly compassionate response, but it ultimately reinforces power hierarchies by positioning disabled individuals as passive recipients of benevolence. Rachel Adams critiques this framework by noting that pity-centered representations deny disabled characters agency and interiority, reducing them to symbols rather than subjects.

In juvenile literature, pity often intersects with inspiration narratives, where disabled characters are celebrated for achieving ordinary milestones or demonstrating resilience. While such stories may appear progressive, they continue to frame disability as exceptional or burdensome. Against this representational backdrop, *Roll With It* and *The Chance to Fly* offer a significant intervention by rejecting pity as a narrative foundation.

3. Narrative Voice and Agency in *Roll With It*

Jamie Sumner's *Roll With It* offers a compelling example of how narrative voice can function as a tool of agency. Told from the first-person perspective of Ellie, a young girl with cerebral palsy, the novel immediately positions the disabled protagonist as the central subject rather than a peripheral figure. This narrative choice is crucial, as it allows Ellie to articulate her experiences, frustrations, and desires directly, without mediation by an able-bodied observer.

Ellie's disability is neither hidden nor exaggerated. Instead, it is presented as an integral part of her daily life, shaped by interactions with her environment. Her transition from homeschooling to public school exposes the ways in which institutional spaces are often designed without disabled bodies in mind. Classrooms, hallways, and social expectations become sites of friction, not because Ellie's body is inherently lacking, but because these spaces fail to accommodate difference.

Garland-Thomson's concept of the "misfit" is particularly useful in analysing Ellie's experiences. Disability, within this framework, emerges from the mismatch between body and environment rather than from bodily deficiency. *Roll With It* consistently reinforces this idea by highlighting how minor adjustments, ramps, understanding teachers, supportive peers, can radically alter Ellie's sense of belonging. Ellie's passion for baking further complicates traditional disability narratives. Rather than serving as a compensatory talent designed to offset her disability, baking is portrayed as a genuine interest and creative outlet. Her participation in a cooking competition is not framed as inspirational because of her disability, but as meaningful because it reflects her skills and ambitions. This narrative move resists the trope of exceptionalism and normalizes disabled competence.

Ellie's agency is also evident in her emotional development. She sets boundaries, asserts her needs, and challenges assumptions made by adults and peers alike. Importantly, her resilience is relational rather than solitary. Friendships, family support, and moments of vulnerability coexist with independence, offering a nuanced portrayal of agency that acknowledges interdependence as a fundamental aspect of human experience.

4. Performance, Visibility, and Resistance in *The Chance to Fly*

While *Roll With It* situates agency within domestic and educational spaces, *The Chance to Fly* explores disability through the lens of performance and public visibility. The novel follows Nat, a young girl with a physical disability who dreams of performing on stage. Co-authored by Ali Stroker, whose lived experience as a disabled performer informs the narrative, the text brings a distinctive authenticity to its portrayal of ambition and exclusion.

Nat's disability is visible, particularly within the context of theatre, where bodies are subject to heightened scrutiny and normative expectations. Rather than internalizing shame or self-doubt, Nat confronts the systemic barriers that question her legitimacy as a performer. Auditions, rehearsals, and casting decisions become sites where ableist assumptions are exposed and challenged. The novel's engagement with performance highlights the politics of representation. Theatre functions both as a space of exclusion and empowerment, revealing how access to visibility is often restricted by narrow conceptions of ability. Nat's insistence on being seen and heard disrupts these assumptions, asserting that disabled bodies belong on stage not as novelties, but as legitimate artistic presences.

Crucially, *The Chance to Fly* avoids framing Nat's success as inspirational spectacle. Her achievements are grounded in effort, talent, and persistence rather than exceptionalism. Mentorship and community play a significant role in her journey, emphasizing that agency is cultivated through support and representation rather than individual heroism. This aligns with contemporary disability ethics, which prioritize access, inclusion, and collective responsibility.

5. Comparative Analysis: Rewriting Disability Narratives

When read together, *Roll With It* and *The Chance to Fly* illustrate complementary strategies for rewriting disability narratives in contemporary juvenile fiction. Both texts reject pity-based frameworks by centering disabled protagonists as narrators and decision-makers. However, they differ in their spatial and thematic focus, offering a broader understanding of agency across contexts. Ellie's story unfolds primarily within private and semi-public spaces, homes, schools, kitchens, where accessibility and belonging are negotiated through everyday interactions. Nat's narrative, by contrast, unfolds within public and performative spaces, where visibility and representation are central concerns. This contrast allows the novels to address both intimate and institutional dimensions of disability.

Despite these differences, both texts challenge the binary between dependence and independence that has historically shaped disability narratives. Mobility aids, accommodations, and support systems are not portrayed as failures or weaknesses but as essential tools that enable participation. This reframing aligns with the social model of disability and challenges cultural myths of self-sufficiency. By foregrounding relational agency, both novels emphasize that autonomy does not require isolation. Instead, agency emerges through networks of care, advocacy, and mutual recognition. In doing so, these texts offer young readers a more realistic and ethical understanding of disability and resilience.

6. Implications for Juvenile Literature and Pedagogy

The representational strategies employed in *Roll With It* and *The Chance to Fly* have broader implications for juvenile literature and education. Inclusive narratives play a crucial role in shaping how young readers understand difference, empathy, and social responsibility. By presenting disability as a lived experience rather than a moral lesson, these texts encourage readers to question normative assumptions and recognize the diversity of human embodiment.

From a pedagogical perspective, such texts offer valuable opportunities for classroom discussion about accessibility, inclusion, and representation. They allow educators to move beyond tokenistic discussions of disability and engage students in critical conversations about social structures and ethical responsibility. Furthermore, for disabled readers, these narratives provide much-needed representation, affirming that their experiences are valid, complex, and worthy of literary attention.

In extending the implications of this study, it is also important to consider how *Roll With It* and *The Chance to Fly* intervene in the politics of representation within contemporary juvenile publishing. Disability representation is not merely a matter of inclusion but of narrative authority on who gets to speak, whose experiences are legitimised, and how those experiences are framed for young audiences. Both novels challenge the longstanding tendency of children's literature to filter disability through able-bodied perspectives by centering disabled protagonists who articulate their own realities. This shift from observation to self-representation marks a crucial ethical advancement in juvenile storytelling.

Furthermore, these texts complicate the idea of resilience, a concept often romanticised in narratives involving marginalised subjects. Rather than presenting resilience as silent endurance or heroic overcoming, Sumner and Stroker depict it as a process shaped by vulnerability, frustration, and negotiation. Ellie's emotional responses to exclusion and Nat's moments of anger and self-doubt are not erased or moralised; instead, they are integral to their growth. This honest portrayal resists reductive notions of "bravery" often imposed on disabled individuals and allows resilience to emerge organically from lived experience.

The comparative dimension of this study also highlights how disability is negotiated differently across spaces. Ellie's navigation of school corridors, classrooms, and kitchens foregrounds accessibility and everyday inclusion, while Nat's engagement with theatrical spaces underscores issues of visibility, performance, and public legitimacy. Together, these narratives demonstrate that disability is not a singular experience but one that is shaped by social context, institutional structures, and cultural expectations. Such a perspective aligns with contemporary disability studies' emphasis on intersectionality and contextual analysis.

Another significant contribution of these texts lies in their potential to reshape reader response. By rejecting sentimental tropes and refusing to frame disability as either tragedy or inspiration, these novels encourage readers to engage with disabled characters as peers rather than objects of sympathy. This shift is particularly important in juvenile literature, where early encounters with difference can

shape long-term attitudes. The narratives foster empathy grounded in recognition and understanding rather than pity, thereby promoting more equitable social imaginaries.

Finally, this study underscores the importance of continuing to examine juvenile literature as a dynamic and politically significant genre. As publishing trends increasingly embrace diverse voices, critical scholarship must remain attentive to how representation is constructed, circulated, and received. *Roll With It* and *The Chance to Fly* exemplify a broader movement toward ethically responsible storytelling, yet they also invite further inquiry into questions of authorship, audience reception, and the evolving role of disability narratives in children's culture.

In extending the discussion beyond these two texts, this research affirms that the movement from pity to agency is not a completed trajectory but an ongoing process. Contemporary juvenile fiction holds the potential to continue redefining how disability is understood, not as a narrative problem to be solved, but as an integral dimension of human diversity. Through agency-driven representation, such texts contribute to a literary culture that values inclusion, complexity, and justice, offering young readers stories that affirm both difference and belonging.

7. Conclusion

Roll With It and *The Chance to Fly* exemplify a transformative shift in contemporary juvenile literature's approach to disability. By moving from pity to agency, these novels challenge entrenched representational norms and offer more inclusive, ethical narratives of childhood and difference. Through narrative voice, attention to environment, and emphasis on relational resilience, both texts reimagine disability as a site of possibility rather than deficiency.

This paper has argued that such representations are not merely thematic innovations but structural and ethical interventions. By centering disabled protagonists as full narrative subjects, these novels expand the imaginative and moral horizons of juvenile literature. In doing so, they contribute to broader cultural efforts to dismantle ableist assumptions and affirm the value of diverse embodiments. The movement from pity to agency that *Roll With It* and *The Chance to Fly* exemplify is not merely a thematic shift within contemporary juvenile fiction; it signals a broader reorientation of how disability is imagined, narrated, and ethically engaged within children's cultural production. Historically, disability narratives for young readers functioned within narrow moral frameworks that emphasized suffering, endurance, or inspirational transcendence. Such representations, though often framed as compassionate, reinforced ableist assumptions by positioning disabled characters as passive figures defined primarily by lack or limitation. The two novels analysed in this study actively dismantle these conventions by centering disabled protagonists as narrators, decision-makers, and meaning-makers within their own stories.

One of the most significant contributions of these texts lies in their refusal to frame disability as an obstacle that must be overcome for narrative resolution. Instead, disability is presented as a lived condition shaped by social structures, environments, and interpersonal relationships. Ellie's experiences in *Roll With It* underscore how institutional design, educational norms, and social expectations create barriers that are often misattributed to the disabled body itself. Similarly, Nat's journey in *The Chance to Fly* reveals how cultural industries such as theatre operate on implicit assumptions about able-bodiedness, limiting access and representation. By exposing these systemic constraints, the novels align closely with the social model of disability and invite young readers to recognize that exclusion is socially produced rather than naturally inevitable.

Equally important is the way both texts reconceptualize agency. Rather than equating agency with complete independence or physical autonomy, ideals that often exclude disabled bodies, these narratives present agency as relational, negotiated, and context-specific. Support systems, accommodations, and interdependence are not depicted as weaknesses but as enabling conditions that

allow the protagonists to pursue their aspirations. This redefinition challenges dominant cultural narratives that valorize self-sufficiency and instead affirms interdependence as a universal human reality. Such a framework is particularly valuable in juvenile literature, where early exposure to inclusive models of agency can shape more ethical understandings of selfhood and community.

The narrative strategies employed in both novels also have important implications for representation itself. First-person narration and close focalization allow disabled characters to articulate their desires, frustrations, and joys without being filtered through an able-bodied gaze. This narrative intimacy disrupts the traditional positioning of disabled characters as spectacles or moral symbols and instead affirms their interiority and complexity. Moreover, the inclusion of everyday activities such as baking, rehearsing, friendships, family conflicts, normalizes disabled lives without erasing difference. Disability is neither sensationalized nor minimized; it is integrated into the fabric of ordinary experience.

From a pedagogical perspective, these texts offer powerful resources for inclusive education. They provide educators with opportunities to discuss accessibility, difference, and social responsibility in ways that move beyond abstract moral lessons. For disabled readers, such narratives offer recognition and affirmation, countering the long-standing absence or distortion of disabled identities in children's literature. For non-disabled readers, they foster empathy grounded in understanding rather than pity, encouraging a shift from charitable sympathy to social awareness and allyship.

The significance of this representational shift extends beyond literature into broader cultural and social contexts. As debates around inclusion, accessibility, and representation gain increasing visibility, narratives like *Roll With It* and *The Chance to Fly* contribute to reshaping public consciousness. They challenge entrenched ideas about who gets to be a protagonist, whose stories matter, and what kinds of bodies are deemed worthy of visibility and success. In doing so, they participate in a larger cultural project of resisting ableism and imagining more inclusive futures.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that contemporary juvenile fiction has the potential not only to reflect changing attitudes toward disability but also to actively shape them. By moving decisively from pity to agency, *Roll With It* and *The Chance to Fly* reframe disability as a site of voice, possibility, and belonging. Their narratives remind readers that agency does not emerge despite disability but often through it, in interaction with communities, environments, and creative expression. As juvenile literature continues to evolve, such texts offer a compelling model for ethically responsible storytelling, one that recognizes disability not as narrative deficiency but as a vital and meaningful dimension of human experience.

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