
[Slide 2] Introduction

In this paper, I want to do four things:

1) Briefly introduce you to the context of my academic area of study: Critical Disability Studies;

2) Consider the role of disability within cultural texts by drawing from the work of Mitchell and Synder (2000) and their idea of ‘narrative prosthesis’;

3) Examine the dis/appearance of disability in *The Archers* with reference to the lives of three characters who have been identified as disabled people: Darrell Makepeace; Daniel Hebden-Lloyd; and Bethany Tucker.

4) Finally, I will argue that the use of disability as narrative prosthesis, a narrative device, has obscured possibilities for engagement with the social, political and economic dimensions of disability.

[Slide 3] An Introduction to (Critical) Disability Studies

I locate my work in the field of critical disability studies. It probably won’t surprise you to hear that Disability Studies is a relatively new academic discipline. Disability studies began to emerge as a distinct area of inquiry in the 1990s (Mallett and Runswick-Cole, 2014). Before the 90s, in academia, disability was usually discussed in the contexts of medicine and psychology (Barnes, 2008). However, disability studies has emerged as an inter-disciplinary area of study, cutting across traditional divides with contributions to the field coming from psychology (Finkelstein, 1980; Goodley, 2011) sociology (Oliver, 1990); education (Barton, 1997; Slee, 1997) feminist theory (Morris, 1993) as well as literary theory and cultural studies (Mitchell and Snyder, 2000).
These contributions to the study of disability are united by their rejection of any understanding of disability that locates (the problem of) disability solely within the person (Albrecht et al., 2001). In contrast, (the problem of) disability is firmly understood as a sociological concept, located in the social world, rather than as an individual, biological deficit (Mallett and Runswick-Cole, 2014).

In British disability studies, this focus on the sociological, rather than the biological nature of disability, is often underpinned by appeals to the social model of disability (Oliver, 1990). Central to the social model of disability is the distinction between impairment and disability:

**[Slide 4] The Social Model of Disability**

- IMPAIRMENT: is the functional limitation within the individual caused by physical, mental or sensory impairment.
- DISABILITY: is the loss or limitation of opportunities to take part in the normal life of the community on an equal level with others due to physical and social barriers

(Disabled People International, 1982 as cited in Goodley, 2011:6)

In this view, disability is a form of social oppression imposed on people with impairments in a disabling world, rather than a necessary result of the presence of impairment, per se.

**[Slide 5] Enter Critical Disability Studies**

Not surprisingly perhaps for a new area of inquiry, disability studies is constantly changing and developing. And recent change has included the emergence of Critical Disability Studies (Meekosha and Shuttleworth, 2009; Goodley, 2012). Critical disability studies aim to understand and to challenge exclusionary and oppressive practices associated with disablism and consider the ways these intersect with other forms of marginalisation including hetero/sexism, racism, poverty and imperialism.

**[Slide 6] Cultural Studies and Narrative Prosthesis**

It is Critical Disability Studies’ engagement with cultural studies that is the focus here, specifically Mitchell and Schneider’s concept of ‘narrative prosthesis’ (2001). In their book *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability & the Dependencies of Discourse*, Mitchell and Snyder explore the pervasive use of disability in
European and North American literature. They argue that, in cultural texts, disability serves as "narrative prosthesis": a disabled character appears as a crutch to shore up the 'norm' somewhere else in the text. Take for example, Berubé’s (2005) discussion of Dicken’s *A Christmas Carol*. In *A Christmas Carol*, the young ‘crippled’ boy, Tiny Tim, serves as a literary device to develop another character; Tiny Tim enables the miserly Scrooge to re-discover the human kindness within him and to gain redemption at the end of the narrative. The social and political dimensions of disability are obscured as Tiny Tim's primary function is not to condemn the treatment of 'crippled' children in Victorian England, but rather to facilitate the reclamation of Scrooge’s moral worth (Bérubé, 2005).

[Slide 7] Narrative prosthesis and *The Archers*

So, informed by Mitchell and Snyder's work, I seek to examine the function of the dis/appearance of disability in *The Archers*. I've written elsewhere about how disability is made visible or invisible in order to support the narrative arc through an exploration of the dis/appearance of disability in Channel 4’s *Benefits Street* (Runswick-Cole and Goodley, 2015). Here, I explore the dis/appearance of disability in *The Archers* with particular reference to three characters’ relationships with disability: Darrell Makepeace; Dan Hebden Lloyd and Bethany Tucker.

[Slide 8] Darrell Makepeace

Interestingly, given Berubé’s discussion of Tiny Tim, the decline of Darrell Makepeace has been described as containing all the elements of a classic Dickensian morality tale (Henderson, 2013). As you will remember, Darrell made a series of ‘bad choices’ from being led astray by workmates into receiving stolen goods and being imprisoned. His marriage broke up and he became homeless. This combination of events led to him engaging, sporadically, with mental health services. It could be argued that Darrell’s story line offers a timely social commentary on welfare cuts, mental health and community inclusion (Henderson, 2013; Goodley and Runswick-Cole, 2014).
But, Darrell was a newcomer to the village, and his time in Ambridge, as it turned out, was relatively short lived. Nonetheless, his temporary presence served an important role as narrative prosthesis; when homeless Darrell was offered a bed at the stables, Darrell’s troublesome presence as a houseguest allowed the erstwhile St Shula of Ambridge to assert her saintly credentials. While Darrell exasperated Shula, his presence allowed her, yet again, to demonstrate her compassion and moral worth. Disability appeared and then disappeared to shore up Shula’s claim for beatification, while an opportunity for an engagement with the socio-political aspects of disability, through sustained engagement with the issues faced by mental health service users in a time of austerity, was lost.

[Slide 9] Dan Hebden Lloyd

In contrast to the temporary residence of Darrell in Ambridge, Daniel Hebden Lloyd (or Dan as we must now respectfully call him) has been a core member of the extended Archers family for the last twenty-one years. However, while Dan’s character is a fixed presence in rural Ambridge, disability was a temporary presence in his life; it appeared and then disappeared. As a child, Dan lived with juvenile arthritis. Dan’s impairment played a crucial role in plot development; it facilitated a (not so saintly) liaison between Shula, Dan’s mother, and Richard Locke, their GP. Disability was made present in the story line only so long as was necessary to bring Shula and Richard together, and to create the chaos that ensued with their partners, Alastair and Usha respectively. Yet again, an opportunity to move beyond a brief awareness raising campaign about the medical nature of childhood arthritis, and to engage in a sustained way with the political and cultural contexts of childhood disability, was lost.

[Slide 10] And so Bethany had to go to Birmingham ...

And so, when Bethany Tucker was born on 16th January, 2013, given the permanent nature of her impairment, Down’s Syndrome, with the benefit of the present analysis, it seems inevitable that her residence in Ambridge would be only temporary. When Bethany was born, the story line offered a sensitive portrayal of the issues facing new parents of disabled children. Information about sources of support was posted on The Archers blog:
The scriptwriters didn’t pull their punches in their portrayal of Peggy’s discriminatory attitudes – the mundane disablism she exhibited outside the community shop was horribly familiar to many parents of disabled children, like me. And, as Bethany’s parents, Mike and Vicky, were well-established characters, it seemed that Bethany would grow up in Ambridge alongside her peers.

However, by the time Bethany was ready to start pre-school, it was clear that this was not to be the case. Instead, yet again, the presence of disability served as a prosthetic device, this time in order to explain the inexplicable: why Mike, who loved Ambridge, had lived in the village for years with family and friends around him, would leave and go to Birmingham.

Loxley Barratt Primary School ‘could not cope with a child like Bethany’, Vicky, her mother, told us; disability meant that they had to go to Birmingham, to get the ‘specialist’ help Bethany needed. There was no opportunity to discuss the possibility of inclusive education in rural Borcetshire – Bethany simply had to go to Birmingham.

[Slide 11] Conclusion

In thinking about this presentation and in talking with other people who listen to the programme, it is clear that I could have used a number of other examples to develop my arguments. Brian’s epilepsy is never mentioned anymore; Jack’s dementia, for the most part, disappeared into the Laurel’s with him, though Peggy remained to give a carer’s account; Christopher made a miraculous recovery from a devastating injury that allowed Alice, his wife, to re-commit to her marriage and to living in Ambridge.

Amazingly, among the established families in Ambridge: The Archers, The Aldridges, The Grundys, and The Carters, there is no one living with a long-term impairment, even though Elizabeth has a heart condition, it is rarely mentioned. In Ambridge, disability always and only emerges as a temporary phenomenon,
smoothing the plot development or nurturing characterization. So far, any opportunity that has appeared for a sustained, everyday engagement with the ordinary day-to-day lives of disabled people has been lost.

I want to conclude by addressing the question of whether the dis/appearance of disability in The Archers matters. And, of course, I think it does. There is ever increasing evidence that shows that cultural representations of disability have very ‘real’ impacts on the lives of disabled people (Inclusion London, 2011). In the context of austerity, the rise of the scrounger discourse, which positions disabled benefits claimants as a drain on the system, has coincided with a rise in reported hate crime on grounds of disability (Inclusion London, 2011). Disabled people’s lives are often missing in cultural representations and in sociological analysis. Think about the last time you saw a cultural representation of an adult with a learning disability – I’m guessing it might have been a newspaper story documenting horrific neglect: perhaps it was the publication of a report in The Guardian before Christmas that found that thousands of unexpected deaths of people with learning disabilities were not investigated by the NHS Trust who was caring for them. While it is important, of course, to document abuse, if these are the only images we see of people with learning disabilities, this only serves to reinforce negative images of vulnerability that ultimately de-humanise people.

So it is time for Bethany to return to Ambridge and to live a long and happy life in the bosom of her extended family, experiencing the ups and downs of the everyday.

[Slide 12] #BringBackBethany

And so I end with an appeal to the scriptwriters - let’s make it go viral:

#BringBackBethany

References


Inclusion London, 2011 *Bad news for disabled people: how newspapers are reporting disability* Available from: http://www.inclusionlondon.co.uk


