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Chris Foss, Jonathan W. Gray, and Zach Whalen (review)

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**Chris Foss, Jonathan W. Gray, and Zach Whalen, eds. *Disability in Comic Books and Graphic Narratives*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. Print.**

Although the representation of disability has long played a notable role in comics—in Marvel's Daredevil and Professor X, for example—the intersection of comics and disabilities studies is a relatively new area of scholarship. The recent publications of José Alaniz's *Death, Disability, and the Superhero: The Silver Age and Beyond* (2014) and M.K. Czerwiec et al.'s *Graphic Medicine Manifesto* (2015) attest to the growing interest and urgency of this intersection. In *Disability in Comic Books and Graphic Narratives*, Chris Foss, Jonathan W. Gray, and Zach Whalen endeavor to expand the critical discourse of comics and disability. To do so, they collect twelve essays that address a variety of disabilities in comics ranging from superhero narratives to memoir. Although the collection is not immediately concerned with children's literature, children's literature scholars who work with comics, graphic narratives, picture books, or visual media more generally may find the text useful as the collection parallels ongoing discussions of disability representation in children's literature. However, despite its potential contributions to the fields of visual rhetoric, disability studies, and children's literature, the collection is limited by its nearly exclusive focus on American comics.

The variety of narratives addressed in the collection, from canonized texts such as David Small's *Stitches* to the recent *Dumb* by Georgia Webber, position the collection for possible inclusion in college literature classrooms, ranging from American literature surveys to graduate-level seminars. Although Foss, Gray, and Whalen never position the collection as an explicitly pedagogical text—it forgoes questions of how to teach comics and disability—this diversity furnishes readers an entrance into the intersection regardless of their experience reading comics. For instance, Christina Maria Koch's essay "'When you have no voice, you don't exist?': Envisioning Disability in David Small's *Stitches*" provides analysis of Small's critically acclaimed 2009 memoir that does not depend on an intensive knowledge of comics theory. Koch argues that Small's narrative of muteness and psychological

trauma transcends “individual trauma narration toward the representation of the social context of disability” (31). Koch supports this thesis through an examination of Small’s juxtaposition of images of himself as the observer and the observed of his own narrative, as well as the social implications of the medical gaze supplied by X-rays and other technology that mark Small as different. Koch’s criticism relies often on single images and Small’s repetition of self-representation rather than panel sequence. Thus, Koch’s methodology provides strong analysis that is accessible to readers regardless of their familiarity with comics or disability criticism. Moreover, Koch’s essay offers the clearest application to non-comics visual media.

Contrasting Koch’s methodology, Jay Dolmage and Dale Jacobs examine Webber’s *Dumb*, a serial and less studied text than *Stitches*, through a more intensive theoretical lens. Building on Thierry Groensteen’s theoretical work of *arthrology*—the reading of panel transitions and other sequences on the comics page as units of meaning—Dolmage and Jacobs analyze how Webber engages visual codes to replace verbal language following her loss of voice and recovery. In “Mutable Articulations: Disability Rhetorics and the Comics Medium,” Dolmage and Jacobs move beyond Groensteen’s formulation of arthrology by integrating Gérard Genette’s theory of *transtextuality*—a text’s relationship with all other texts—and illuminate how Webber develops complex visual codes and spatially reconfigures the narrative as means of “communicating with and through disability” (26). Specifically, Dolmage and Jacobs draw attention to Webber’s usage of lipstick as a code for whether she is not speaking and resting her voice (not wearing lipstick) or speaking (wearing lipstick) on any given day. Because this essay demands greater knowledge of comics theory, as well as an appreciation of *Dumb*’s visual complexity, Dolmage and Jacobs offer a more rigorous approach to comics and disability that benefits classrooms that focus on visual rhetoric.

As highlighted by the Koch and Dolmage and Jacobs’s essays, *Disability in Comic Books and Graphic Narratives* usefully focuses on the genre of memoir in key comics works. Spotlighting this genre acknowledges not only its vibrancy within comic studies but also its varied approaches to representing disability visually. For instance, Shannon Walters’s essay, “Graphic Violence in Word and Image: Reimagining Closure in *The Ride Together*,” stands out as an exemplary contribution about comics’ ability to depict disjunctions of meaning and alternative modes of meaning-making in the lives of those directly and indirectly affected by neurological disorders. As she analyzes Paul and Judy Karasik’s prose-comics hybrid memoir of living with their autistic brother, David, Walters maintains that David challenges the neurotypical processes of closure and meaning-making by forcing Paul to reimagine the world from a non-neurotypical perspective. Consequently, Walters continues,

the text's challenge to conventional epistemologies affects not only Paul's understanding of David's experience but also the reader's understanding of meaning-making between panel transitions, as well as the comic as a whole (123). Through this reimagining, Paul Karasik captures David's perception of reality by illustrating from David's perspective, in which fictional characters, such as Superman, coexist alongside his family, Paul and Judy. Here, Walters' argument highlights the affective potential of comics memoir as readers witness how David makes meaning of the world surrounding him, and his family's attempts to understand how David constructs his world.

Despite *Disability in Comic Books and Graphic Narrative's* effective incorporation of familiar and unfamiliar texts, the collection carries an almost exclusive interest in American comics, limiting the collection's reach outside of American literature or comics-centric classrooms. Consequently, the collection casts the intersection of disability and comics as a primarily American phenomenon. Although the collection never states a broad geographic representation as a goal for the text, it does position Foss's essay, "Reading in Pictures: Re-visioning Autism and Literature through the Medium of Manga," as helping the collection approach additional cultures. The editors write of Foss's essay as "approaching both sequential art and disability in the broadest possible sense" through a "different genre, manga" (10). By subsuming manga as a genre of comics (especially after Foss's title correctly identifies it as a medium), the editors underscore the American centrality of the collection and broadcast an American hegemony of the comics-disability intersection. This lack of attention to non-American texts occludes histories of disability that are depicted within *bandes dessinées* and manga. The absence of more attention to manga is especially troubling considering the proliferation of body horror and mutation themes in post-war manga. The themes are not new to manga, but works from the past few decades—Katsuhiro Otomo's *AKIRA* as a key example—speak to anxieties of the atomic bombing's aftereffect that evade representation in Western comics. Manga addresses many of the same questions of pathology and (dis)abled bodies that circulate the collection, but through a historic and cultural lens that differs significantly from Western comics and demands critical attention.

While acknowledging this limitation, *Disability in Comic Books and Graphic Narratives* still expands discourse of the intersection between comics and disability studies by offering critical interventions accessible at various levels of comics familiarity. Through their inclusion of many noncanonical or otherwise underappreciated comics texts, Foss, Gray, and Whalen provide comics scholars, as well as those located in such related fields as children's literature and visual rhetoric, the opportunity to think critically about key issues in disability studies and their particular representation in hybrid visual-

verbal texts. This collection captures the urgency of the intersection of comics and disability, and the absence of non-American comics texts suggests an opportunity for the discussion to continue developing further through various national and cultural perspectives.

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