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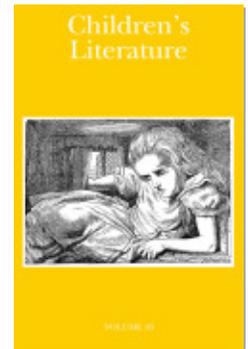
BeForever?: Disability in American Girl Historical Fiction

Sami Schalk

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# *BeForever?: Disability in American Girl Historical Fiction*

Sami Schalk

*... with inspiring characters and timeless stories from America's past ... BeForever gives girls today the opportunity to explore the past, find their place in the present, and think about the possibilities the future can bring.*

—“American Girl Unveils Beforever Line”

Launched in August 2014, the American Girl BeForever line is the brand's attempt to make historical fiction more marketable to the contemporary “tween” girl market with “all-new, historically accurate outfits and accessories for dolls; new and refreshed fiction books; and an original line of historically inspired clothing for girls” (“American Girl Unveils” n. pag.). This repackaged line contains the same stories American Girl has been publishing for nearly thirty years in a revised format which tries to emphasize that girls and the qualities the company associates with them, such as can-do attitudes, creativity, and helpfulness, are “forever.” Not all girls throughout history, however, fit into the optimistic, bright, and marketable images of the BeForever line and this rebranding does little to address the qualms many critics of American Girl have already expressed about the brand's watering down of history and its encouragement of rapid conspicuous consumption among its young audience.

Who fits into the BeForever image of the continuity of girls throughout time and who must be kept off the glossy pages of the American Girl catalog in order to sell this particular understanding of history to children? In what follows, I analyze the role of disability in the historical fiction of the American Girl brand. I argue that the American Girl brand represents disability as mostly absent from history, while gender, race, and class are depicted as universal concerns which exist throughout a variety of historical periods. I further assert that the representation of disability in the American Girl BeForever line is emblematic of concerns with diversity in children's historical fiction and reflects the particularly fraught nature of the incorporation of disability into neoliberal diversity models which prioritize specific notions of empowerment.

American Girl (AG) is a multiproduct brand that is marketed through discourses of gendered empowerment and education which

appeal to both girls and their caretakers. The AG brand produces books (including a line of historical fiction, a line of contemporary fiction, and a line of self-help and craft books), dolls and accessories (including items which match the characters from the two fiction lines), girls' clothing and accessories, a magazine, an interactive Web site, movies, and several flagship brand stores and smaller retail outlets. The brand has recently expanded to sell products in both Canada and Mexico. AG earns more than 400 million dollars per year and is recognizable to over ninety percent of girls in the United States (Borghini et al. 364, Schlosser 1).

The origin narrative of American Girl begins in 1986, when a former teacher and textbook writer, Pleasant Rowland, was inspired to start the brand after two experiences: first, visiting Colonial Williamsburg and wishing there was a way to bring history to life for children and, second, being dissatisfied choosing a doll for her nieces when the options were either a sexualized Barbie doll or a Cabbage Patch baby doll (Chuppa-Cornell 107, Borghini et al. 364). Rowland sought to create high-quality dolls which girls could befriend (rather than emulate or mother in the cases of Barbie and Cabbage Patch dolls, respectively) and which, through stories, would connect girls with history in interesting ways (Chuppa-Cornell 107). Thus American Girl was created, starting with just three dolls/characters, each with their accompanying six-book series (written at a fourth to fifth grade reading level) and a collection of text-related accessories for girls and their dolls, all sold by mail order catalog.

The brand rapidly expanded into the avenues noted above and in 1998, Rowland sold American Girl to Mattel (Rowland 41). Since then, the brand has remained consistently popular and revenue-generating with over 147 million books and 25 million dolls sold since 1986 ("American Girl | Fast Facts"). Mattel's takeover of AG has resulted in an increased focus on and expansion of the contemporary line, while simultaneously resulting in the relative stasis of the historical line as the company now "archives" certain historical characters, meaning that AG no longer produces those characters' books, dolls, or accessories. With the fall 2014 rebranding of the historical fiction line into the BeForever line—including the reintroduction of Samantha, one of the original three AG characters, back from the archives—American Girl has reasserted the centrality of historical fiction to the brand's own history and AG's self-presentation as simultaneously empowering *and* educational. As Sherrie A. Inness writes: "The books are not only presenting girls'

history, but also actively promoting it, a worthwhile change from the typical elision of girls that happens in most history texts” (172).

Despite American Girl’s clear attempts to promote an understanding of the role of girls in American history, much previous scholarship on the brand has argued that AG creates “a romanticized version of American history” (Acosta-Alzuru and Kreshel 147). Daniel Hade writes: “Filled with historical errors, misrepresentations, and overgeneralizations . . . these books show a sanitized version of the United States” and “perpetuate a feel-good, progress-oriented version of American history, while ignoring real historical issues” (163, 58). Critics often identify AG’s historically reductive representations and its failure to critically interrogate gender roles and other issues of oppression in the past as a major concern (Marshall, “Marketing” 19; Brady 222). Scholars suggest that American Girl historical fiction promotes static understandings of gender which encourage conservative, traditional gendered behaviors among young girls (Schlosser 5; Marshall, “Consuming Girlhood” 103; Marshall, “Marketing” 16). For example, Inness notes that “the American Girl collection adheres to a fairly traditional ideology about how girls should look [and behave] . . . American Girls still spend a great deal of time pursuing traditional girl activities, like cooking, playing with dolls, buying new clothing or dressing up in it—activities that work to demonstrate the ‘natural’ roles of the woman as nurturer and caregiver” (178). The bulk of the scholarship on AG historical fiction, therefore, has primarily focused upon its historical inaccuracies and its conservative representations of gender as well as race and class.

Nonetheless, the power and influence of the brand are undeniable. As Carolina Acosta-Alzuru and Peggy J. Kreshel argue, “this cultural phenomenon is changing the way girls conceptualize America and themselves” (140). It seems important, then, to study the ways in which, in “the case of American Girl, conservative and progressive values are intertwined” and how the conflicting messages of the brand potentially impact its young audience (Sherry 200). If American Girl is sending conflicting messages, what is the brand suggesting in regard to disability in particular? While scholars have for some time critiqued issues of gender, class, and race in the brand, none have yet discussed the role of disability in the American Girl imaginary specifically.<sup>1</sup> In addition, with the expansiveness of the brand, many previous critiques have been sweeping and general across AG’s many products and retail spaces rather than focused on close readings and analyses of individual texts or items. However, close readings are especially necessary for

understanding the role of disability in the brand since the explicit representations of disability are few and far between. As a result, it's important to pay close attention to these specific representations as well as read the lingering traces and absences of disability in the brand. For this article, I focus primarily on the BeForever historical fiction line.

### *Disability and American Girl Historical Fiction*

Prior to the creation of the BeForever line, American Girl historical fiction texts<sup>2</sup> were sold as a series of six illustrated books. Each series focuses on one girl for about one year from ages nine to ten, with the exception of the now-archived Marie Grace and Cécile series which divides the six books between the two girls. In addition to the fictional stories, each book in the original iterations of the historical fiction line also included a seven-to-ten-page "Looking Back" section that provided more in-depth historical information about the period and location of the text.<sup>3</sup> In the current BeForever line, the stories have been repacked into two nonillustrated chapter books each containing three of the original stories. The "Looking Back" section has been reduced to just two pages at the end of each book, now titled "Inside \_\_\_\_\_'s World." In addition to the repackaged original stories, now called American Girl BeForever Classics, each current BeForever character also has two additional books: one brand new American Girl BeForever Journey book featuring a contemporary girl going back in time to meet the historical character in her era in a choose-your-own-adventure style format, and one American Girl BeForever Mystery book featuring the central American Girl character solving a mystery.<sup>4</sup> While the BeForever Journey books are narrated by the contemporary girl character in the first person, the rest of the BeForever stories are all narrated from a third-person limited omniscient point of view, so the internal thoughts and feelings of each American Girl character are revealed to the reader and prioritized even though she is not narrating the stories. There has been a total of fifteen historical American Girl characters<sup>5</sup> whose time periods span from 1764 to 1974 and, as of this writing, nine of these characters and their products are currently available in the BeForever line—the others have been archived. Out of the fifteen historical characters produced by AG, only the first character released exclusively under the BeForever label, Maryellen Larkin, could be considered disabled. Before I discuss this new character, however, it's important to discuss what has come before Maryellen in the American Girl brand in terms of representing disability.

In many ways disability is a frequent, yet occluded, part of AG historical fiction. This was especially true in the older versions of the historical fiction books because the “Looking Back” sections discussed epidemics, diseases, dangerous working and living conditions, and changes in medicine and technology—issues deeply connected to the history of disability and ability in the United States.<sup>6</sup> In the “Looking Back” sections of the original versions of *Julie Tells Her Story* and *Changes for Julie*, people with disabilities are explicitly depicted in regard to school integration and disability rights politics in the 1970s. In the BeForever version of Julie’s stories, however, there is no mention of people with disabilities except vaguely in a single reference to “Americans of all ages, races, abilities and political viewpoints” (McDonald, *Soaring High* 201). While the “Looking Back” sections of the original historical fiction books suggest the potential for engagement with disability in the narratives, disabled people are rarely represented as characters in the stories. With the “Looking Back” sections now essentially removed from the BeForever line, representations of disability in history within the American Girl brand are reduced to only the few secondary and minor characters who appear in the fictional stories.

Appearances by disabled characters in American Girl historical fiction are typically brief and part of a plot point which allows the central character to do something heroic, helpful, or selfless. The minor characters with disabilities who appear or are mentioned in the books include Caroline’s grandmother who uses a cane, Caroline’s father who breaks his leg and has a limp afterward, Addy’s brother Sam who loses his arm in the Civil War, M’dear, the blind, elderly mother of the boarding house owner in the Addy series,<sup>7</sup> Rebecca’s cousin who injures his leg and is held at immigration for fear he might be “lame,” a little person dressed as a clown when Rebecca and her family visit Coney Island,<sup>8</sup> and Molly’s classmate’s father who returns from war unable to walk. There are only two major secondary characters with disabilities in the BeForever line. I consider a character to be a major secondary character if they have an active, speaking/communicating role in the plot in multiple scenes. The two historical secondary characters with disabilities are Kaya’s adopted sister, Speaking Rain, who is blind, and Julie’s friend, Joy, who is deaf. Below I provide close readings of the roles of these disabled girls in the texts in which they appear and then discuss the newest character, Maryellen Larkin.<sup>9</sup>

*Speaking Rain*

Speaking Rain is the adopted sister of Kaya who appears in four of the six classic Kaya stories. Readers learn in the first two pages of the series that Speaking Rain is blind due to an illness during her infancy. In the first story, Speaking Rain is represented as relatively dependent. She tells Kaya she can't help take care of their twin little brothers because the boys play tricks on her and later, in the major dramatic point of the story, Speaking Rain accidentally walks over a steep embankment, causing her to fall into a river where she is rescued by Kaya. In the second story, Kaya and Speaking Rain are both kidnapped by raiders and Speaking Rain is represented as being particularly vulnerable. One of the kidnappers tries to give Speaking Rain food and "When she didn't respond, he waved his hand in front of her eyes, then made a noise of disgust. Kaya knew he was angry that the girl he'd captured for a slave was blind" (Shaw, *Kaya's Escape: A Survival Story* 13). Later, when they reach the raiders' camp, the women there act angry that the men brought back Speaking Rain and Kaya worries internally: "Were they saying that a blind slave was nothing more than another belly to feed? Would they decide that Speaking Rain was no use to them and abandon her here?" (Shaw, *Kaya's Escape* 21). After a few days, Kaya decides they must escape, but Speaking Rain insists she would be unable to keep up and tells Kaya to go alone and bring others back to save her. Kaya worries: "how could a blind girl get along without someone to care for her?" (Shaw, *Kaya Shows the Way* 4). In all of these instances, Speaking Rain is depicted as dependent and vulnerable in direct contrast to nondisabled, heroic Kaya.

While the texts occasionally mention how Speaking Rain contributes to the tribe, it typically occurs through an exceptional or compensational model which suggests that her blindness stands in stark contrast to her talents. This is apparent in the statement "although Speaking Rain couldn't see, she could make fine cord and could weave by touch" (Shaw, *Meet Kaya* 37). The series also suggests that Speaking Rain's blindness heightens her other senses. At one point Kaya thinks "that because her sister was blind, her sense of smell was especially sharp" and at another point, surprised that Speaking Rain detected emotion in her voice, Kaya thinks "because Speaking Rain couldn't see, she heard everything sharply" (Shaw, *Changes for Kaya* 4; Shaw, *Kaya's Escape* 6). In all of these instances, Speaking Rain is depicted as having useful abilities in certain areas, but these skills are always mentioned in direct

relationship to her disability as if disability is inherently a sign of lack rather than of difference.

After being kidnapped in the second story, Speaking Rain is absent until story five when she and Kaya are reunited. Here the representation shifts and Speaking Rain is represented as more independent and interdependent. Readers learn Speaking Rain was abandoned by the kidnappers and ended up near death in the woods until an elderly woman from a neighboring tribe found her and nursed her back to health. The two eventually developed an interdependent relationship and, as a result, Speaking Rain has vowed to stay with the woman and not return to Kaya's family. Kaya tells her grandmother that Speaking Rain has changed, stating: "She seems older. I always looked out for her. Now she doesn't seem to need my help anymore." Kaya's grandmother responds, "If she can't see, she'll always need some help," but Kaya asserts, "She's still blind in her eyes. . . . But her heart sees things clearly" (Shaw, *Kaya Shows the Way* 44). This is the last story in which Speaking Rain makes a major appearance. This story encourages readers to see her as more of an independent character rather than a mere plot device for Kaya's character development. Speaking Rain makes choices for herself and engages in a mutually beneficial relationship with an elderly woman rather than the more uneven relationships she seemed to have with Kaya and her family. This is a powerful representation of a disabled character in children's historical fiction; however, once Speaking Rain grows in this way, she no longer has a major role in the series.

In the choose-your-own-adventure style BeForever Journey book, *The Roar of the Falls: My Journey with Kaya*, Speaking Rain appears in the early parts of the text and is identified as being blind, so all readers will interact with her and recognize her as a disabled character no matter what their story choices. Speaking Rain appears most often for readers who choose to stay at camp rather than go train horses in the second story choice in the book. At camp, readers can learn about weaving or painting buffalo hide with Kaya and Speaking Rain, but readers who choose to go train horses either do not see Speaking Rain again after the initial meeting at all or only see her once they return back to camp after their time with the horses. Locating Speaking Rain exclusively at camp suggests her need to be watched, cared for, and protected as a disabled child as well as her adherence to traditional gender roles. This representation stands in stark contrast to brave, independent Kaya who trains horses, competes with boys in games, and faces raiders with an even keel. In the first Kaya Mystery book, *The Silent Stranger* (a reprint),

Speaking Rain makes minor appearances with a few lines of dialogue and has no influence on the plot. Again, she is primarily located in camp, performing domestic tasks. In both books, therefore, Speaking Rain appears with her blindness mentioned once and then gestured toward indirectly in other moments while she stays at camp as Kaya goes out on adventures. Additionally, neither of these texts acknowledges the major, character-developing plot point for Speaking Rain in the BeForever Classic stories of wanting to spend at least part of the year with the elderly woman who saved her life.

This representation of Speaking Rain changed significantly in March 2016 when American Girl released a new Kaya Mystery, *The Ghost Wind Stallion*. In this text, Speaking Rain has a prominent role and often leaves camp to share in Kaya's adventures. Speaking Rain is extensively more vocal, active, self-aware, and a mix of interdependent and independent—occasionally driving the events of the plot. The book also explicitly references how Speaking Rain lives with the old woman who saved her life for six months out of the year. In the story, Speaking Rain has a dream about riding a horse and she tells Kaya she desires to ride independently, without being led by someone else on another horse. When a mysterious wild stallion appears near camp, Speaking Rain and Kaya together work to tame him so Speaking Rain can ride him and fulfill her dream. This newest representation of Speaking Rain—written by new author Emma Carlson Berne rather than Janet Beeler Shaw, who wrote the original Kaya classic stories—is a remarkable and important shift in AG's representation of disability in children's historical fiction. While at times Speaking Rain is still represented as having incredibly—almost magically—sharp senses and Kaya is still positioned as being in charge of protecting her, their relationship is much more interdependent and Speaking Rain is clearly a stronger, braver, and more integral character than in any of the other Kaya texts.

Though Speaking Rain was already the most significant and independent character with a disability in the American Girl BeForever historical fiction line, the newest Kaya book makes this distinction even more unquestionable. In the classic stories, Speaking Rain initially has a more passive role—a role replicated in *The Roar of the Falls* and *The Silent Stranger*. Speaking Rain at first seems to be primarily a tool to initiate Kaya's adventures and personal growth by being someone Kaya must take care of and even save (twice). However, after her enslavement by an enemy tribe, Speaking Rain returns as a slightly different character. The experience of being kidnapped clearly changed Speaking Rain and

readers briefly see her become more interdependent and outspoken, a representation which momentarily disrupts the trope of disability as a sign of dependence. While *Speaking Rain*'s personal growth is not explored in the classic texts, it is clearly represented in the *BeForever* Kaya Mystery, *The Ghost Wind Stallion*. Notably, author Emma Carlson Berne's biographical note in the back of the book mentions her experiences working with people with disabilities for therapeutic horseback riding. This change suggests that authors who are better informed about the lives of disabled people in addition to being informed about the historical context of the novels are better able to represent disabled characters in complex, interesting, and less oppressive ways.

### *Joy*

The second secondary character with a disability to make a major appearance in the historical series is Julie's friend Joy, who only appears in the last story in the series set in San Francisco in 1974. Although Joy does not appear throughout the series, she is quite central to this final story and her disability plays an important role in the plot. Joy is a nine-year-old deaf girl who recently moved to Julie's neighborhood and is integrated into Julie's fifth-grade class. Joy signs, speaks, and lip reads to communicate. The plot of the story revolves around Julie running for school president with Joy as her running mate. The conflict occurs when kids at school are making fun of Joy's disability and Julie worries that she won't win. Importantly, throughout the text disability stigma and ableism are central and explicit.

The first time students are represented mocking Joy is after Julie practices her election speech. When Julie returns to the gymnasium to get the note cards she left behind, she hears one of the popular girls say, "She might have half a chance [of winning] if it weren't for that deaf girl running with her" (McDonald, *Changes for Julie* 28). Joy is too far away to read their lips, but based on Julie's reaction, she figures it out. Joy says, "I know they don't like me. . . . It's because I'm deaf, isn't it?" (McDonald, *Changes for Julie* 31). Julie replies, "I know it must be hard not being able to hear. But trust me, some things are better off not being heard" (McDonald, *Changes for Julie* 31). Although Julie basically ignores this initial instance of discrimination against Joy, Julie's discomfort is readily apparent in the scene.

Later, Julie herself unconsciously discriminates against Joy by asking Joy to hold their campaign poster while Julie talks to students at the end

of the school day. Joy recognizes this request as dismissive and signs, “*I may be deaf, but I can still speak for myself*” (McDonald, *Changes for Julie* 45; original emphasis). When Joy speaks to a few students, though, they immediately mock the sound of her voice. The narration then reads: “Julie crumpled inside. She had known that the other kids thought Joy was weird, strange, different. What she hadn’t realized—until now, seeing it with her own eyes—was that this made them a little bit afraid of her” (McDonald, *Changes for Julie* 46). After this second instance of Joy being mocked, Julie discusses the issue with her sister. She states: “It’s like they think Joy has a disease and they’re afraid they’ll catch it. They look at her like she’s weird. They call her names and say awful stuff about her, and she can’t even hear them. . . . I don’t have a chance of winning with Joy as my vice president” (McDonald, *Changes for Julie* 47–48). While Julie seems to recognize the problems with how Joy is treated, she initially doesn’t know how to combat or stop it. She decides to drop out of the election entirely. When Julie tells Joy about this decision, Joy once again immediately detects Julie’s discomfort and says, “It’s me isn’t it? . . . I may be deaf, but I’m not blind. Nobody likes me. I’m the one they avoid. They don’t even give you a chance because of me” (McDonald, *Changes for Julie* 49). When Julie refuses to respond, Joy then suggests Julie ask their friend T. J. to be the vice president because he’s “on the basketball team . . . and everybody likes him. But most of all, he’s not deaf” (McDonald, *Changes for Julie* 49). Once again, Joy is not only aware of the discriminatory treatment against her, but also how it impacts those who align themselves with her. She refuses, however, to feel badly about herself despite this treatment. Reinvigorated by Joy’s continued support, Julie decides to continue to run with Joy as vice president.

At the school election debate, Julie is asked why her vice president is qualified and rather than speaking for her, Julie asks Joy to speak for herself. Joy comes on stage and says: “I know I’m different . . . I know I talk funny. I can’t hear what you hear because I’m deaf. But everybody feels different sometimes. And even though I’m deaf, I promise to listen to you. I hope you’ll give me a chance” (McDonald, *Changes for Julie* 57). This powerful moment is immediately squashed when Julie and Joy return to their classroom to find the popular girls mimicking Joy’s voice and flailing their hands in mock sign language. Joy runs out of the room devastated. Here, the narrative, which has previously depicted Joy’s ability to understand and respond to discrimination independently, shifts to representing Joy as utterly exhausted and

defeated by this final, very public, bullying. This is the turning point in the story as Julie becomes the one who must do the resisting and fighting. Julie asks the teacher if the girls who made fun of Joy can be taught sign language during detention. She stays to teach the girls some signs and they enjoy it, eventually asking to learn to sign “sorry” to Joy. The girls all go with Julie to Joy’s house to apologize and the next day the popular girls dress in their cheerleading outfits and do a public cheer in support of Julie and Joy’s campaign. The school then votes and they win the election.

The narrative of Joy works in reverse of the narrative of Speaking Rain. Rather than moving from dependency to interdependence, Joy seems to move from active to passive. Joy starts off as central to the plot, insistent about her abilities and resistant to the mocking of others. However, after multiple instances of discrimination and the reduced support of her friend, Joy is unable to continue fighting for herself and this inability becomes the central turning point of Julie’s character development. Julie becomes the hero by figuring out a better use for detention time, changing the minds of the popular girls and winning the election. Joy’s role in the text, therefore, is primarily to recenter the abilities, ingenuity, and goodness of Julie more than to demonstrate anything about disability beyond the implicit lesson that making fun of disabled people is wrong. As Jacqueline Foertsch argues, in the context of children’s historical fiction that represents polio, the representation of Joy also tends “less to confront or critique than avoid ableist attitudes” (27). The mean girls’ taunts are represented as stemming from individual ignorance and fear of difference rather than from systemic ableism. Unlike Speaking Rain, Joy only appears three brief times in Julie’s BeForever Mystery book as the name of one of Julie’s friends at school, without speaking lines or mention of her disability. Joy does not appear in Julie’s BeForever Journey book at all.

### *Implications of Secondary Disabled Characters*

Together, the representations of Speaking Rain and Joy reveal several things about the role of disability in American Girl historical fiction. First, the texts actively and commendably resist two trends Foertsch notes in children’s historical fictional representations of disability: cure narratives and the emphasis on overcoming through proper positive attitude. While both Speaking Rain and Joy are represented as generally upbeat, they do have difficult experiences which they do not

overcome purely with positive thinking. They also are not cured by the end of the books and in fact there is no discussion whatsoever of cure or treatment in the texts. The cure and overcoming trends have been widely criticized in disability studies, yet a surprising number of children's books continue to perpetuate these tropes in the name of happy endings. The fact that AG avoids these trends is important and commendable.

A second key aspect of the representations of Speaking Rain and Joy is that they are not main characters. They are primarily secondary figures whose role is to be saved or assisted by the central American Girl character who learns a lesson, grows, and benefits from the relationship—though this is decidedly less true for Speaking Rain in *The Ghost Wind Stallion*. This representation of disabled characters aligns with what Pat Thomson refers to as the “second fiddle” trope in which a disabled character “exist[s] only to promote the personal development of the main, able-bodied character” (n. pag.). More recently, in a 2008 survey of award-winning children's fiction in the United States and Canada, Beverly Brenna notes that this trope has continued seemingly unabated. She writes that the role of characters with disabilities “appears to be supporting the protagonist's learning growth, without an exploration of their own potential to develop throughout the course of the story” (Brenna 100). In the BeForever line, Speaking Rain and Joy primarily support the development of Kaya and Julie, respectively, though Speaking Rain does develop and grow somewhat across the classic Kaya stories and more so in the BeForever Kaya Mystery, *The Ghost Wind Stallion*.

Finally, both Joy and Speaking Rain are presented in isolation; there are no other people with disabilities around them, no community, and no shared experiences of disability or discrimination. The main American Girls experience issues of race, class, and gender as collective concerns which affect many people; for example, Cécile and her grandfather together experience racism in a candy shop and Rebecca attends a Labor Day union protest after seeing the dangerous working conditions experienced by multiple men in her family. Disability in AG historical fiction, however, remains highly individualized and thus stands apart from the broad, communal way that gender, class, and race are represented in the BeForever line.

The implication of these shared issues across the representations of disabled secondary characters in AG historical fiction is that people with disabilities are not major historical players and disability itself is

not a social justice issue which has existed in different ways across time. Whereas Addy, Cécile, and Melody each experience racism, Kirsten, Kit, and Rebecca each deals with poverty, Samantha and Julie encounter sexism and feminist political activism, and Samantha and Rebecca witness the effects of poor working conditions, only Joy in Julie's final story in 1974 allows young readers to begin to understand disability as a marginalized identity category impacted by discrimination in a different historical era. Here, it is clear that while AG attempts to show how gender, race, and class have impacted people at different points in history, disability is not considered such a "timeless" concern.

### *Maryellen*

In August 2015, American Girl introduced Maryellen Larkin, the first American Girl character to be released exclusively under the BeForever line and the first American Girl main character who could be considered disabled. Maryellen is a white, blonde, middle-class girl growing up in a large family in 1954 and "when she was younger, she had had polio. She was all better now. Really, the only reminder was that one leg was a tiny bit weaker than the other, and her lungs were extra sensitive to cold" (Tripp, *Taking Off* 14). A character who had polio is a prime opportunity for American Girl to finally engage with disability in its historical fiction, and yet disability is arguably even more avoided and occluded in the Maryellen books than in those that represent Speaking Rain and Joy. I argue that the representation of Maryellen, rather than counteracting some of the problems I identified with the representation of disability in previous AG historical fiction, actually exacerbates these very issues.

First, the physical and mental effects of polio on Maryellen in the texts are discussed only briefly—if at all—and almost consistently in conjunction with assertions that suggest disability is something to be overcome or overlooked. Examples of these types of statements from the first book include: "Sometimes Maryellen worried that Mom babied her because of her leg. But Maryellen never let her leg slow her down" and "Maryellen flushed as she always did when anyone mentioned her polio. She *never* let her weaker leg slow her down" (Tripp, *The One and Only* 25, 63). In the BeForever Journey book, *The Sky's the Limit*, Maryellen's polio is mentioned only once in two of the fourteen potential unique storylines readers can choose, meaning that there is a significant chance that readers of this book may never learn about Maryellen's

disability at all. Readers who choose to go on a road trip with Maryellen's family hear Maryellen state: "Three years ago, I had polio. . . . It weakened my lungs. My dad doesn't want me to get winded from riding my bike too fast" (Tripp, *The Sky's the Limit* 131). Readers who choose to stay in Daytona Beach hear Maryellen explain: "When I was little I had polio. It hurt terribly, and even now that I'm better, one of my legs is weaker and sometimes I get out of breath. . . . I'm also afraid that people will assume that I'm weak because I had polio . . . I hate that" (Tripp, *The Sky's the Limit* 36). In all of these instances, it is clear that readers are supposed to understand polio and its effects as being in the past and having only a minor impact on Maryellen today. Therefore, while Speaking Rain's and Joy's narratives generally avoid the trope of overcoming, in nearly every reference to Maryellen's polio, there is an emphasis how determined she is to not allow her experience with polio to affect her or how others perceive her. In the newest Maryellen book, the BeForever Mystery *The Finders-Keepers Rule*, Maryellen's polio and its effects are not mentioned at all.

Additionally, in book 2, *Taking Off*, the first third of the text revolves around the invention of the polio vaccine and Maryellen's shock to find out that some people refuse to be inoculated. In response, Maryellen decides to put on a show to encourage people to get vaccinated. The discussion of polio in this portion of Maryellen's narrative includes the narrator's statement that "Maryellen remembered very well how much polio had hurt. Sometimes in her dreams she had polio again, and the heavy, dark, frightened feeling of being lost in pain and worry came back" as well as Maryellen's direct dialogue with her friend who refuses to get the vaccine in which Maryellen, "in horrified disbelief," exclaims: "Are you kidding? . . . Finally there's a shot to protect you from a really terrible disease, a disease that can cripple you or even kill you, and you're afraid to get it?" (Tripp, *Taking Off* 14, 15). While the former narration gives a short glimpse into Maryellen's experience with polio, Maryellen's latter statement provides readers some indication—though vague—that polio could be disabling. Maryellen's skit about Dr. Salk's discovery of the vaccine makes the most explicit connection between disability and polio by stating that polio "hurts millions of people, especially children, and makes them very sick and sometimes, they can't ever walk again" (Tripp, *Taking Off* 56). American Girl, however, does not take this opportunity to make the relationship between disability in the past and in the present explicit.

"Inside Maryellen's World," the historical information section in the back of the book, states: "Families feared polio almost as much as

the atomic bomb. The disease, which usually struck children, often started like the flu, with fever, aches and weakness, but it could last many months and could *cripple* or even kill the patient” (Tripp, *Taking Off* 180; emphasis added). The choice of the word “cripple,” (a term appropriate for Maryellen to use in 1954, but inappropriate for contemporary use)<sup>10</sup> rather than a more clear and detailed description of the physical effects of polio as potentially disabling, obscures the historical relationship of polio and disability and thus of Maryellen as disabled or not. As a result, while many in disability studies would identify Maryellen as a character with a disability, it seems less likely most children reading the books would identify Maryellen as disabled and fewer still would identify clear connections between disability and ableism in the past to disability and ableism today as readers can do with Joy’s narrative.

The implications of Maryellen as the first American Girl character under the BeForever line and the first to have a disability are similar to the implications of the representations of Speaking Rain and Joy. Like the other two disabled girl characters, Maryellen is also represented in isolation, without other people with disabilities or even others who have had polio depicted in the texts. Further, even though Maryellen is the main character, her disability is so consistently downplayed and she works so hard to pass as nondisabled that her texts also seem to emphasize ability, strength, and independence first and foremost. Additionally, the intense privilege of this first disabled American Girl is a clear example of the tendency toward a compensation model of disability that focuses on empowerment, strength, and independence at the cost of nuance, depth, and complexity in understanding what life with a disability may have been like during that period. In the end, I view Maryellen’s narrative not as a valiant attempt at better incorporating disability into American Girl historical fiction, but as a missed opportunity to truly engage with disability history. I argue that AG’s emphasis on marketable empowerment, diversity, and education in the BeForever line results in a refusal to deal with the difficult, uncomfortable, and troubling aspects of disability history which, in the case of Maryellen, makes her barely recognizable as disabled at all. In the American Girl brand, girls might be forever, but disability, apparently, is not. To better understand why disability doesn’t quite fit into the AG BeForever line, one must understand both the genre of children’s historical fiction and the discourses of diversity which permeate the production of products for children today.

*Diversity in Children's Historical Fiction*

Children's literature scholars Julia L. Mickenberg and Philip Nel insist that "Neither children nor literature for them can be extricated from politics" (445). There is indeed a vast political investment among educators, caregivers, youth, and scholars in increasing diversity in children's literature generally and in children's historical fiction in particular. Recent scholarship has explored the shift in contemporary children's literature to address more diverse, difficult, and controversial issues of both the past and the present including racial violence, the Holocaust, eugenics, September 11, and divorce.<sup>11</sup> Kenneth B. Kidd writes that "Subjects previously thought too upsetting for children are now deemed appropriate and even necessary" (120). And yet, near the end of their list of topics in contemporary radical children's literature, such as climate change, poverty, gender, and LGBTQ rights, Mickenberg and Nel note: "The facts of disability, depression, and mental illness are even more rare in books for younger readers, because their presence challenges cultural adherence to ideas of the normalized body. . . . [This] reminds us that publishers are more attentive to some types of 'diversity' than to others: few children's books feature children with disabilities" (465–66). Although there has been some research into disability in children's literature generally, most notably Lois Keith's *Take Up Thy Bed and Walk: Death, Disability, and Cure in Classic Fiction for Girls* and the Winter 2004 special issue of *Disability Studies Quarterly*, very little scholarly work has addressed the role of disability in children's historical fiction specifically.<sup>12</sup> To conclude, therefore, I will briefly explore some of the particular challenges of incorporating disability into the American Girl BeForever line as well as into children's historical fiction more generally. While one concern in the BeForever line is a conflict with form, another more general issue is how disability does not fit into the typical neoliberal discourses of diversity which prioritize limited notions of empowerment and emphasize sameness rather than difference.

In the AG BeForever line, fuller integration of disability would require a shift in the narrative form of the series. Until 2002 with the publication of the Kaya series, the AG historical fiction books all followed the same six-story format.<sup>13</sup> Schlosser argues that "By having each character go through the same progression of stories, American Girl sends the message that these girls, despite differences in geography and history, are not, as the catalog asserts, unique. . . . One metaplot is

obviously sufficient to tell the story of an ‘American Girl’” (4). While post-2002 historical fiction characters have less formulaic series structures, some consistencies in form remain which make the integration of disability a creative, but not impossible, challenge. For example, every BeForever Classic series has an education-themed story, but most children with disabilities were not given access to public schools until the Education for All Handicapped Children Act was enacted in 1975. If disabled girls were not attending school in a traditionally recognizable way, how might the education-themed story need to shift to include disability prior to 1975? Perhaps AG would need to take note from the *Dear America* series which published *Mirror, Mirror on the Wall: The Diary of Bess Brennan*, set at the Perkins School for the Blind during the Great Depression. However, the issue with narrative formulas and the incorporation of disabled characters goes beyond the relatively simple switches the American Girl brand has already performed, such as changing the \_\_\_\_\_’s *Surprise: A Christmas Story* books to be holiday texts more generally for characters who would not celebrate Christmas, such as the Jewish character Rebecca.

With the rebranding of the historical fiction line, AG is setting itself up to break form even more than before, but even in the new BeForever Journey books, the format relies upon certain assumptions of ability. As discussed briefly above, in these texts a contemporary girl goes back in time and narrates her adventure in the first person, with the reader making choices for the character along the way. The reader is therefore encouraged to embody and identify with this character who, while given some specific personality traits or background information, such as being timid about leadership or having divorced parents, is generally left without explicit identity traits beyond gender.<sup>14</sup> Time travel, however, is a particularly racialized, gendered, and ability-centric science-fictional fantasy since only certain individuals can retain their contemporary rights and freedoms if they journey to the past. This issue is dealt with explicitly in the adult text *Kindred* by Octavia E. Butler, which depicts a black woman returning to antebellum Maryland, and in the German children’s historical fiction book *Dreaming in Black and White* by Reinhardt Jung, which features a disabled boy who goes back in time to Nazi Germany in his dreams. In both cases, the characters experience the clear, abrupt, and life-threatening differences between the past and present in regard to their particular identities. In these texts, time travel is used as an instructive tool to demonstrate changes in oppression over time, but in the AG BeForever Journey books, time

travel is merely the exciting and consequence-free literary device it is in traditional white-male-oriented science fiction. One can only assume that the contemporary characters do not have major physical or sensory disabilities since they seem to walk, run, see, speak, hear, and otherwise navigate the past with ease, engaging in activities such as playing basketball and riding horses. A wheelchair, crutch, or sign language user could not go back into the past as these *BeForever* Journey contemporary girl characters do without a direct and explicit conversation about the differences in social acceptance, understanding, and accessibility between past historical periods and our own. As a result, the form of the new AG *BeForever* Journey books assumes nondisabled girls as the norm and thereby ends up “interpellating the [assumed] ‘able-bodied’ child reader into a prevailing ideology of normalcy” (Kunze 315). Children’s historical fiction, therefore, must interrogate how narrative devices such as time travel as well as topic, plot, and period might exclude certain populations.

While issues of form are more applicable to *American Girl* and other series which replicate narrative forms across several texts, another reason that disability can be more difficult to incorporate into children’s historical fiction more generally is because the incorporation of marginalized people into the genre is typically performed from a neoliberal discourse of diversity. This neoliberal diversity paradigm struggles to effectively include disability in the same way it incorporates race, gender, and sexuality. As the newer civil rights group on the block, disabled people and disability studies are consistently less likely to be included in diversity discourses. Lennard Davis writes that “disability is antithetical to diversity as it now stands” (Davis n. pag.). He argues that approaches to “diversity are intended to celebrate and empower underrepresented identities. But disability seems harder for people without disabilities to celebrate and see as empowering” because it remains symbolic in contemporary culture of powerlessness and vulnerability. This celebratory empowerment of diversity discourse that Davis critiques is the same used in children’s literature, particularly the notion that “We are all different—therefore we are all the same”; yet, as Davis argues, the “peculiar sameness of difference in diversity has as its binary opposite the abject, the abnormal, and the extremely marginal”—a position which disability tends to occupy (n. pag.). In the *American Girl* brand, this discourse is made apparent in the *Truly Me* line,<sup>15</sup> which allows girls to choose their doll’s skin, hair, eyes, and nose, yet each doll’s basic body and limb shape and size remains exactly the

same. The available disability accessories in the line are accoutrements which do not alter the AG doll body, with the exception of the bald doll option, which is never pictured online or in the paper catalog with the other Truly Me doll face options.<sup>16</sup>

Anne Scott MacLeod argues against centering empowerment in children's historical fiction, since this approach often necessitates historical revisionism and the application of modern models to narratives of the past in order to tell "pleasant but historically doubtful stories" which "snip away the less attractive piece of the past to . . . meet current social and political preferences" (27). While the above-mentioned scholarship on the incorporation of histories of oppression into children's literature demonstrates how the field has continued to shift and mature since MacLeod was writing in 1998, it is important to continue to consider how neoliberal models of diversity might limit the potential of the genre, particularly in regard to disability, which is conceptually antithetical to traditional approaches of empowerment, that emphasize independence rather than interdependence. This is particularly a concern for the American Girl brand, which attempts to be both empowering and educational. The balance between education and empowerment of young readers may be particularly hard to strike when dealing with histories of oppression. As Fred Nielsen writes, it "should not be forgotten that the American Girl books are aimed at children as young as seven years old. Children that young do not need, and probably should not have, unexpurgated history" (90). Nonetheless, American Girl found a way to introduce age-appropriate representations of slavery, the New Orleans yellow fever epidemic, and the Great Depression, so why not some history of disability?

While the incorporation of the history of people with disabilities, particularly girls with disabilities, poses some similar challenges as incorporating histories of race, gender, and class, disability's outlier position within diversity discourses additionally challenges the impulse toward the empowerment of present-day readers through representations of marginalized characters in children's historical fiction. I argue for questioning what empowerment means in regard to the genre: does empowering automatically mean feeling good and heroic? Might feeling empowered also mean feeling more informed about, aware of, and connected with the past, even if such knowledge, awareness, and connection results in sadness—even horror? Brit Bennet writes that even as an adult she remembers vividly the scene in *Meet Addy* in which an overseer forces Addy to eat a worm, explaining, "At eight

years old, I understood that slavery was cruel—I knew about hard labor and whippings—but the idea of a little girl being forced to eat a worm stunned me. I did not yet understand that violence is an art” (Bennet n. pag.). I too recall reading this scene as a child and experiencing for the first time how literature can create visceral reactions and linger in memory like one’s own lived experiences. This was not a feel-good reading experience, yet it was powerful and educational nonetheless.

In their work on representations of disability in American literature and film, David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder write: “In identifying examples of an accurate characterization, social realism does not call for ‘positive images’ that would celebrate the lives of people with disabilities in a romanticized light” (23). The rhetoric of empowerment in the diversity discourses surrounding children’s historical fiction often assumes that empowerment stems from “positive” and “celebratory” images which romanticize more than they historicize or criticize. And although Mitchell and Snyder insist that “the distinction between negative and positive [images] proves a difficult one to define,” it seems pertinent to consider why certain issues like disability are more likely to be excluded or extracted from children’s historical fiction in the name of positivity (including happy endings) and empowerment (23).

Is empowerment more, equally, or less important than education when it comes to historical fiction? I am not arguing that children’s historical fiction cannot or should not be empowering; rather, I want to push on what we mean by that term and what allowing sadness, difficulty, failure, and even trauma into children’s historical fiction might mean. Can such affects and concepts be introduced with proper contextualization? What role does supplemental, nonfictional historical information play in the production and distribution of children’s historical fiction texts? American Girl used to provide such information in the “Looking Back” sections of their books with the consultation of scholars, but in the redesigned BeForever line these sections have been drastically cut—a move which suggests that for AG, empowerment is indeed more important than education. Nielsen argues that we can understand children’s historical fiction books as stepping stones to a more personalized understanding of history than what is presented in most textbooks, and American Girl books have indeed inspired interest in history in girls for nearly thirty years. Scholarly analyses of the brand, however, reveal that certain American girls’ histories are privileged over others and the history of disability is particularly absent in comparison to gender, race, and class.<sup>17</sup>

Nonetheless, I believe that it is still possible for AG to better incorporate disability into their historical fiction. This possibility is most apparent in the new Kaya book, *The Ghost Wind Stallion*, written by an author who has actually worked with people with disabilities. It can indeed be done. The incorporation of disability into historical fiction is important for girls with disabilities to see themselves represented and for both disabled and nondisabled girls to view disability with as much interest and concern as they might view issues of gender, race, and class after reading the stories of Samantha, Addy, or Kit. American Girl represents a set of complex cultural products with an uncertain and unpredictable impact given the age of the audience and the difficulty of doing an audience reception study with children<sup>18</sup> when they often do not yet have a language for the major issues with which scholars, educators, and caregivers are so concerned. The problems I have discussed here in the representation of disability in AG's BeForever historical fiction line are obviously not problems exclusive to the brand. While I acknowledge that the historical position of girls—especially disabled girls—as highly disempowered means that American Girl faces difficulty in presenting this history in an accessible manner, I argue that moving away from the urge toward empowerment and “sameness within difference” models of diversity can help expand the possibilities for representing disability in the American Girl brand in particular and in children's historical fiction more generally.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>In fact, none of the articles published on the American Girl brand, besides my own, even mention disability except for Borghini et al. in their ethnographic study of the American Girl flagship store in Chicago. In the article, the authors quote a “young disabled participant [who] astutely observed from her wheelchair, “There's no real reality stuff here. Everybody's perfect. There's no wheelchairs. No life problems” (370).

<sup>2</sup>I only include in this discussion the main books in the American Girl BeForever historical fiction line. I do not include any short story collections or the stand-alone friend stories which focus on the best friend of one of the central historical characters—both of which are out of print.

<sup>3</sup>The accuracy of the historical information in the “Looking Back” sections—at least in the early AG books—is debatable; Daniel Hade notes several errors in the Kirsten series (156–57).

<sup>4</sup>Some of the BeForever Mystery books are new, while others are reprints from an earlier line of historical fiction mysteries.

<sup>5</sup>In chronological order by era the historical characters are: Kaya (1764; released in 2002), Felicity (1774; released in 1991 and archived in 2011), Caroline (1812; released in 2012 and archived in 2015), Josefina (1824; released in 1997), Marie Grace and Cécile (1854; released in 2011 and archived in 2014), Kirsten (1854; released in 1986 and archived in 2010), Addy (1864; released in 1993), Samantha (1904; released in 1986, archived in 2009 and rereleased in 2014 with the launching of the BeForever line),

Rebecca (1914; released in 2009), Kit (1934; released in 2000), Molly (1944; released in 1986 and archived in 2013), Maryellen (1954; released in 2015), Melody (1964; released in 2016), and Julie (1974; released in 2007).

<sup>6</sup>See, for example, the “Looking Back” sections of *Meet Kaya*, *Happy Birthday, Felicity!*, *Caroline Takes a Chance*, *Troubles for Cécile*, and *Happy Birthday, Kit!* In the BeForever texts in which these original stories appear, only the issue of disease (in connection more with death than disability) remains in Kaya’s texts. The other potentially disability-related issues have been cut from the Kit and Caroline BeForever books, while Felicity and Cécile were archived before the launch of the new line.

<sup>7</sup>Both M’dear and Sam in the Addy series are characters who could be included in my analysis as my use of “major” appearance is somewhat subjective. While neither has a primary role in the plot of any book like Speaking Rain and Joy do, they both appear in multiple short scenes with speaking lines. I have chosen to focus on Speaking Rain and Joy as the major secondary characters with disabilities because their actions directly impact the plot.

<sup>8</sup>Both of these scenes in the Rebecca series represent missed moments for more robust engagement with the history of disability and ableism.

<sup>9</sup>Note that my citations—with the exception of the Maryellen books and the Kaya BeForever Journey and Mystery books—will draw from the original texts in terms of titles and page numbers. Readers using the BeForever versions of the texts will find the stories appear verbatim, but with different pagination and chapter/story titles than those that appear in my analysis.

<sup>10</sup>Interestingly, American Girl explains the historical differences between the words colored, Negro, black, and African American in a prefatory statement at the beginning of *No Ordinary Sound*, the first book about Melody Ellison, the second character to be released under the BeForever brand (Patrick, *No Ordinary Sound* n. pag.).

<sup>11</sup>See for example, Barker, Kidd, Grzegorzcyk, Gervay, Stewart, or Harris.

<sup>12</sup>A notable exception is Mary J. Couzelis’s article on the relationship of race and disability in the history of eugenics in Joseph Bruchac’s *Hidden Roots*.

<sup>13</sup>The original story narrative and title format for the six-story series was as follows: Meet \_\_\_\_; \_\_\_\_ Learns a Lesson; \_\_\_\_’s Surprise; Happy Birthday, \_\_\_\_!; \_\_\_\_ Saves the Day; and Changes for \_\_\_\_.

<sup>14</sup>I write “explicit” here because in the *A New Beginning: My Journey with Addy*, Addy and the contemporary girl character are mistaken for runaway slaves. While the text does not explicitly state that the character is African American, the fact that people in the past refer to the narrating character as “colored” encourages readers to imagine her as such.

<sup>15</sup>This line has previously been called American Girl Today, Just Like You, and My American Girl.

<sup>16</sup>For more on American Girl disability doll accessories, see Schalk.

<sup>17</sup>Brookfield’s study of adult women who grew up with the American Girl brand provides an interesting perspective on the potential long-term impact of the brand.

<sup>18</sup>See Acosta-Alzuru and Kreshel.

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