



BOOK REVIEW:

*Disability, Literature, Genre:
Representation and Affect in Contemporary
Fiction*

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Cheyne, Ria. *Disability, Literature, Genre: Representation and Affect in Contemporary Fiction*. Liverpool UP, 2019. ISBN: 978-1789620771.

Ria Cheyne's *Disability, Literature, Genre: Representation and Affect in Contemporary Fiction* is a significant work of scholarship that not only manages to bring together two fields – cultural disability studies and genre (or popular) fiction studies – but also succeeds at doing so through the lens of affect theory, a movement that (much like the two aforementioned fields) has really only gained traction in recent years. Cheyne's specific application of affect theory is centred on how depictions of disability function within the “ways in which texts from a particular genre create (or attempt to create) affects anticipated by the genre community” (4). As part of the Representations: Health, Disability, Culture and Society series, Cheyne's book reflects the mission of the series to publish the most current and original interdisciplinary scholarship. Working against “a set of largely unquestioned assumptions about the relationship between narrative, disability, and emotion”, Cheyne aims to “increase engagement with forms of representation ignored or neglected by disability studies” – speaking to scholars and practitioners in the humanities as well as the sciences (15, 21). Not only has there been no previous study dedicated to the relationship between genre conventions and disability representations, Cheyne also more broadly offers an unprecedented addition to genre fiction scholarship as a whole with her use of affect theory.

Through concentrating on five popular genres – horror, crime, science fiction, fantasy, and romance – Cheyne makes a compelling case for why genre fiction in particular lends itself to this type of affect analysis. Her primary rationale is that the conventions that guide genre fiction are intentionally designed to induce specific emotions, manufactured affective responses that set genre fiction apart from other mainstream literary fiction. With each popular genre, there are certain conventions that readers expect, and those patterns, she observes, are all tied to specific emotions. Since the “feeling drives the reading”, genre fiction inherently provides affective encounters, and thus serves as an excellent means for examining affective responses to disability representations (2). Consequently, while *representation* in a diversity context has become a somewhat overused and often empty phrase, Cheyne approaches disability representation from a more innovative, constructive position. Going beyond just reviewing how certain texts represent disability, she considers the “ways disability is experienced and encountered” by those consuming the texts (8). Cheyne doubts if anything is gained from simply deeming a text good or bad based on its portrayal of disability, and so she asks us to think more deeply, and more productively, about a text by exploring how transformation might occur through affective engagement.

Drawing upon disability-studies scholar Rosemarie Garland-Thomson’s use of the term *misfit*, Cheyne pays special attention to what she deems “fictional misfits”, moments where depictions of disability don’t quite align with a reader’s expectations, and, as a result, prompt critical reflection (18). It is in these moments, she suggests, that dualistic evaluation methods (such as classifying a representation as “good” or “bad”) are neither useful nor productive for “often the feelings disability generates are complex and difficult to parse” (1). Even if the representation is negative, Cheyne proposes that how it makes the reader feel might produce a positive effect by prompting them to reflect on their own understanding of disability, to confront their own prejudices, and to undergo a transformative experience. Such affective encounters, Cheyne contends, are the result of reflexive representations, which “encourage the reader to think or feel disability anew, challenging, destabilising, or denaturalising assumptions about disability or disabled people” (162).

Considering that examples of reflexive representation exist throughout Cheyne’s book, her introduction “Affective Encounters and Reflexive Representations” provides a thoughtful and comprehensive presentation of her chosen terminology and key ideas. More than simply an overview of the book’s contents, her carefully structured literature review, which effectively weaves together multiple fields and methodologies, establishes a strong foundation for what follows. Her first chapter, “Horror: Fearful Bodyminds”, centers on how the horror genre is designed to produce fear – an emotional response common in a disability encounter. Accordingly, Cheyne observes that the “cultural association between disability and fear” has caused scholars of both disability studies and horror to shy away from any serious examination of disability in horror (33). Furthermore, she states, “Disability must be understood as representing something else, and therefore erased or rendered invisible, for the genre to be legitimised” – a seemingly compulsory act of “[m]etaphorising the monster” to elevate the horror genre (34). However, as Cheyne demonstrates in her close reading of works by Stephen King and Thomas Harris, reading

disability as disability allows for a more reflective and transformative reading experience. King's *Duma Key*, Cheyne observes, relocates the site of horror away from the disabled body, while Harris's Hannibal trilogy makes it impossible to label any character using simplistic dualisms like good or bad, normal or abnormal, thus producing an "affective confusion where what the reader thinks they know is called into question – including their beliefs about disability" (50).

Building upon her analysis of the fearful affects in horror, Cheyne's subsequent chapter focuses on crime and its characteristic affect – anticipation – and the desire for closure. In her exploration of disabled detectives, villains, and victims in Jeffrey Deaver's Lincoln Rhyme novels and Peter Robinson's *Friend of the Devil*, she argues that disability "enriches crime affects" in interesting and unexpected ways (55). With Deaver, for example, the presence of a suicidal, quadriplegic detective challenges the reader's presumptions about disability – such as the belief that a disabled life is not one worth living. Quadriplegia is also featured in Rhyme's novel, though producing a different affective conflict, as the disabled individual is Karen Drew, an elderly woman who is murdered. Unlike Deaver, however, Robinson strips all agency away from the disabled character in his novel, "both exploit[ing] and reinforc[ing] the association of disability with vulnerability" for anticipatory affect – thereby emphasising some of the most troubling and persistent aspects of the metanarrative of disability (67, 69).

Moving from curious anticipation to a related though different emotion, the following chapter takes up the feeling of wonder and its role in SF. Cheyne maintains that although wonder has been historically perceived as an important element of the genre, it is no longer viewed as essential. This trend of moving away from emphasising the wondrous affects of SF is further complicated, she notes, by the ways in which disability-studies scholars are hesitant to embrace the feeling of wonder due to its association with freak shows and similar displays of exoticising or othering disability. In an effort to "relocate wonder at the heart of science fiction" and of disability studies, Cheyne effectively demonstrates through her reading of Lois McMaster Bujold's Vorkosigan saga and Peter Watts's *Rifters* trilogy that a "productive wondering" can in fact occur (82, 90). In Bujold's saga, wonder is generated through the ways in which the author destabilises "assumptions about mental illness" (98), while Watts's trilogy – much like the way the *Hannibal* series functions – uses diverse mindbodies to bring the reader into a state of confusion, wondering how to feel or respond as disability is processed anew.

Cheyne's next chapter, "Fantasy: Affirmation and Enchantment", proposes that the central affects of quest-driven fantasy are affirmation (granted due to a successful mission that often includes overcoming many obstacles) and enchantment (which is achieved through the reader's immersion in the worldbuilding efforts of the author). Due to the hopefulness present at the heart of fantasy fiction, Cheyne contends that disability "disrupts the genre's affective trajectory" due to "the feelings of loss and grief associated with disability ... evidence that things might not turn out well in the end" (113). Therefore, by disrupting conventional fantasy tropes (thereby functioning in the role of "fictional misfits"), disability representations in fantasy facilitate critical reflection – as she indicates with her attention to George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* series and Joe Abercrombie's *First Law* trilogy. Although

Martin's series is filled with disabled characters, Cheyne pays particular attention to the ways in which Tyrion's character both manipulates and subverts the metanarrative of disability to his advantage. And with Abercrombie's trilogy, Cheyne looks more broadly at the inaccessibility of conventional quest narratives.

The last chapter of Cheyne's book considers how these types of "disruptive" depictions of disability in romance – a genre known for happily-ever-after endings – can be "profoundly transformative" as they encourage "disability to be *felt* afresh in ways that can destabilise habitual feelings and responses" (160, emphasis original). Through examining curative narratives in three romance novels – Barbara McMahon's *One Stubborn Cowboy*, Christina Dodd's *Candle in the Window*, and Barbara Delinsky's *An Accidental Woman* – Cheyne illustrates how "even romance narratives which feature cure can problematise intervention or position disability as part of a desirable future" (151). This final chapter reiterates that depictions of disability are able to challenge not only genre conventions but also the ways readers encounter and respond to disability long after the pages are closed.

Cheyne's conclusion presents more than just a summary of the preceding chapters: it intentionally carves out places for other scholars from diverse fields to add to the conversation. This speaks, as well, to the general strengths of the work as a whole. By regularly emphasising how her scholarship addresses gaps in existing scholarship, *Disability, Literature, Genre* feels like an invitation rather than a definitive study. Part of this appeal can be attributed, too, to Cheyne's optimistic (and often humorous) tone, along with the accessibility and readability of the work. Though each chapter can be read individually, the thoughtful transitions between them help to reinforce the work's aim. Furthermore, this collection will appeal to both seasoned scholars of these fields as well as new scholars or curious creators who wonder just where to begin with examining horror and disability – a fact that is further complemented by Cheyne's careful inclusion of both foundational and contemporary scholarship. Her attention to diverse forms of disability – both physical and mental – is also worth mentioning, and, although Cheyne focuses on a few central texts in each chapter, there are numerous genre-fiction titles mentioned throughout the pages, in addition to an incredibly helpful "Disability in Genre Fiction: An Annotated Bibliography" addendum. If there is any fault with Cheyne's book, it's that there are a few moments throughout the work that come across as repetitive – a move that can likely be attributed to the author's desire to connect the chapters both to each other and to her overall thesis. Ultimately, by successfully arguing that affect is central not only to how genre operates but also to disability encounters, one is left hoping that Ria Cheyne's call for "scholars to engage with disability and genre fiction on affective terms" will be answered (1).

Biography: Anelise Farris is an Assistant Professor of English at the College of Coastal Georgia. Her research interests include speculative fiction, folklore and mythology, and disability studies. When not working, she enjoys experimenting in the kitchen, bingeing horror movies, and spending time outdoors.