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Authentic Representations of Youth Who Stutter: An Analysis of Children's and Adolescent Literature

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AUTHENTIC REPRESENTATIONS OF
YOUTH WHO STUTTER:
AN ANALYSIS OF CHILDREN'S AND ADOLESCENT LITERATURE

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"It's important to have diverse characters in books because books give kids mirrors and windows. Books create empathy. If we don't have diversity, if we're only showing things from one perspective, how are we creating empathy? It's important beyond just children's books — it's important period."

-Angie Thomas
Author of *The Hate U Give*

INTRODUCTION

Books can be found in every classroom across America, no matter the grade level or subject. Books from fiction to autobiographical accounts are used constantly to help supplement course content presented by teachers. Not only can texts help teach children and adolescents their core subjects such as mathematics and science they can also model social skills and help to explain complex systems such as race and gender. Indeed, with the rise in social media, teachers are even sharing book recommendations on platforms like TikTok to recommend books of this nature. Such accounts like @typebteacher, run by a third-grade teacher in Washington State, are based on sharing books that can help teach children about racism, breaking down gender norms, and classism, and moreover, spark conversation.

While issues including race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation have been studied widely within children's literature, there is currently a lack of research in texts that cover the topic of disability within adolescent and children's literature (Adomat 1). While the aforementioned topics are highly relevant and should be discussed in classrooms, disability is an equally relevant topic. According to the 2020 United States Census, approximately 5% of the population under the age of 18 has a disability; not only that, but this percentage has increased by .4 percentage points since 2008 (U.S. Census Bureau). Both seen and unseen disabilities are likely to be prevalent in any given classroom. Furthermore, "during the elementary school years, children begin to notice differences in people and develop opinions about others" (Wilkins, et. al.).

This essay seeks to explore a common childhood disability of stuttering and its coverage in texts for both the child and young adult. After a review of the literature and my own analysis, I have researched the availability of texts who center their narrative on a character who stutters and analyzed how those characters are presented. Additionally, there were a handful of tropes that were common across many of the texts included in this study.

OVERVIEW OF STUTTERING

Stuttering is a type of fluency disorder that affects people of all ages and may get worse or better over time. It is common for all people to have some level of disfluency in their speech such as repetitions, prolongations, or blocks. Everyone at one time or another has found themselves adding an "um" or "uh" into their speech. Some combination of these disfluencies will find their way into the everyday speech of a person who stutters to a degree that it is abnormal. The most familiar form of stuttering often seen in media figures, such as Porky Pig from Looney Tunes, is the repetition of a sound, part of a word, or whole words ("Stuttering").

Stuttering is not only characterized by these speech bumps but also by secondary physical behaviors that may include blinking, jaw jerking, movements in the head and hands, and other tensions (Krader, et. al. 23). There are often feelings of fear of speaking or negative feelings towards verbal communication and anxiety (Krader 26, “Stuttering”).

There are three classifications of stuttering: neurogenic, psychogenic, and developmental. Neurogenic stuttering is an acquired disorder of speech meaning its onset occurs after an event such as a traumatic brain injury (TBI) that impacts the central nervous system. Other causes of neurogenic stuttering are medication side effects, tumors, and infectious diseases (Krader 24). Psychogenic stuttering develops after an episode of emotional or psychological trauma. Both neurogenic and psychogenic stuttering are more common in adults. Finally, developmental stuttering is the most common form of stuttering and is far more common in children, specifically boys, who also have a lower recovery rate compared to girls (Krader 24, “Stuttering”). The majority of this article will be focused on this type of stuttering.

According to research within the last 10 years, the average onset of stuttering is 33 months old and, “95% of the risk for stuttering onset was reached by age 4” (Krader 24). Risk factors other than being male include, family history of stuttering, an onset of stuttering after 42 months old, and the presence of other speech and language errors (Krader 24, “Stuttering”). The majority of children with developmental stuttering will grow out of it within one to two years of its onset with a lifetime incidence rate of approximately 5% (Krader 24). Many children who stutter are referred to a speech-language pathologist (SLP) for assessment and treatment.

DISABILITY REPRESENTATION IN CHILDREN’S AND ADOLESCENT LITERATURE

Although disability in literature is not as widely studied as one may think, those who have studied it closely agree that, “Children’s literature not only helps students develop reading and language skills, but can also influence students’ attitudes and perspectives” (Wilkins 233). Indeed, diverse literature that includes characters with disabilities can help students develop peer acceptance, gain multiple perspectives, learn about stereotypes, injustice, and prejudice, and gain familiarity with individuals who are different from themselves (Adomat 1, Rieger & McGrail 18). The books chosen by teachers to be highlighted in their classrooms play a critical role in shaping the students’ opinions on disability and those with disabilities.

One of the most important concepts that is addressed within these texts is the “Us versus Them” mentality. When classrooms are inclusive it creates an unhealthy environment, which is primarily driven by a lack of familiarity and understanding (Rieger 18). Studies show that when children are exposed to diverse texts that show a positive portrayal of children with disabilities the students gain more favorable attitudes to their peers with disabilities (Wilkins 235).

A deeply important aspect of engaging with these texts is having the support of a teacher or another knowledgeable adult. The presence of an educator can provide reflection questions and push the child or adolescent’s analysis of a text. Julia Wilkins and colleagues executed a qualitative study in third and fourth grade elementary classrooms during read aloud sessions covering books centered on characters with disabilities. The researchers found, through pre- and

post-class surveys that students had a negative attitude towards students with disabilities. They reported that, “reading books about children with disabilities and talking about their feelings towards the books did not result in positive changes of attitudes about the disability” (Wilkins 235). This study points out the vital role teachers play in debriefing a text with their students to assist in developing more positive perspectives of people with disabilities. In a similar study by Donna Sayers Adomat in second and third grade classrooms, after read aloud time and discussion with the teacher, “the children were able to become better informed and... deepen[ed] their understandings [of disability]” (Adomat 14).

Before taking a dive into disability literature with a focus on stuttering it is important to discuss what makes an authentic character in children’s and adolescent literature. A widely cited resource for teachers to analyze a disabled character’s integrity is the “Images and Encounters Profile: Checklist to Review Books for Inclusion and Depiction of Persons with Disabilities or Chronic Illness” by Joan Blaska as seen in **Table One**. This framework will be referenced in the following section to help analyze the characters in the novels selected who stutter to determine their effectiveness in accurately portraying stuttering. This checklist will also help to inform if this book should be recommended for the academic classroom to be utilized as a potential teaching tool.

When considering this checklist, researchers Rieger and McGrail suggested an additional criterion be added: humor analysis. Rieger and McGrail suggest like other children, those with disabilities have the ability to laugh and laugh at themselves and that this is an aspect that makes their character authentic to readers. In fact, they describe, humor is a popular, and effective, aspect of storytelling and can, or should, be used in disability narratives. Thus, humor analysis will also be considered when exploring texts depicting characters who stutter.

EXPLORING STUTTERING IN CHILDREN’S LITERATURE

A Boy and A Jaguar

I have selected four books within the genre of children’s literature that appealed to a variety of readers. Specifically in Children’s literature, two picture books, one graphic novel, and one chapter book were selected. The first, and possibly most well-known, is Alan Rabinowitz autobiographical picture book *A Boy and A Jaguar*, winner of the 2015 Schneider Family Book

<p>Table One: Images and Encounters Profile: Checklist to Review Books for Inclusion and Depiction of Persons with Disabilities or Chronic Illness</p>

- | |
|--|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Promote empathy, not pity 2. Depict acceptance 3. Emphasize success rather than (or in addition to) failure 4. Promote positive images 5. Assist children in gaining an accurate representation of the disability 6. Demonstrate respect 7. Promote an attitude of “one of us” rather than “one of them” 8. Use person-first language 9. Describe the disability or person as realistic (not sub- or superhuman) 10. Illustrate characters in a realistic manner |
|--|

(Blaska)

Award. The text was illustrated by Catia Chien. The book tells Alan's story from the time he was in grade school through his midlife years. Barnes and Noble cite the target age range for this text as four to eight years old.

In an interview with NPR Alan describes being, "born with a debilitating stutter" (NPR Staff). In the book, Rabinowitz writes of himself as a child, "I try to explain, but my mouth freezes, just as I know it would. I am a stutterer. If I try to push words out, my head and body shake uncontrollably" (Rabinowitz 2). Young Alan was taken out of general education classes and undergoes a variety of treatments. He describes speaking to animals as the only way for him to speak fluently; in his own words, "I tell them my dreams. I tell them that I want to be able to speak like everyone else" (Rabinowitz 6). He finds his love for jaguars at the zoo with his father and grows up to study animals and later advocates for the preservation of jaguars in Belize. Alan's stutter does improve over time however, he writes in adulthood, "I can speak, but nothing has changed on the inside. I still feel broken" (Rabinowitz 12). In the end of the story, Alan encounters a wild jaguar in the very nature preserve he worked to create, and he concludes his story with, "We are both whole. We are both at home... 'Thank you,' I whisper" (Rabinowitz 26).

Rabinowitz wanted to write this story to connect with other children who feel misunderstood; not only those who stutter but also those who feel unlike others. He explains in his NPR interview, "I wanted this book to speak to all of those children because I don't think adults realize, unless you've gone through it as a child, what a lasting mark such pain leaves on a young person" (NPR Staff). One of the most important things to note is that this author is in fact a person who stutters. This fact alone gives the author immense credibility in telling a story centered around a character who stutters, in this case, himself.

Considering Blaska's checklist, Rabinowitz's book captures nearly every criterion set forward. The book promotes empathy, acceptance, highlights Rabinowitz personal successes in life, accurately represents stuttering in both speech and secondary physical behaviors, depicts a realistic person, and illustrates realistic characters. Although Alan is ridiculed by some, primarily school folk who do not understand him, he is also accepted by others like his parents and later colleagues. Rieger's added checklist item of humor is not captured within this book, however, humor in this book with little dialogue would not be very appropriate or fit the overall empathetic tone of Rabinowitz's writing. That being said, some of the images do include some light aspects of humor. For example, the two-page spread on pages 4 and 5 shows Alan with his many pets, a hamster, gerbil, green turtle, chameleon, and garter snake, and shows Alan with all of his animals wrapped around him with the chameleon balanced on his head.

When Oliver Speaks!

When Oliver Speaks! is the first text in this analysis that features a person of color as the main character. Similar to *A Boy and a Jaguar*, this text is a picture book designed for young kids, eight to twelve years old according to the Barnes and Noble website, and is co-authored by a young man who stutters, Saadiq Wicks. Wicks, at the time of publication, was the founder and

director of the nonprofit Llet Me Finish, an organization whose mission is to bring awareness to stuttering, especially in children. Wick's co-author, Kimberly Gavin, is also a woman of color. Additionally, all of the characters in this picture book are illustrated as people of color. This is a significant detail as it provides representation for a different identity than that of *A Boy and a Jaguar*. This text opens the discussion more for identity intersectionality. Oliver is a person who stutters, is a person of color, who wears glasses, and is perhaps from a one-parent household. When characters are written in a complex way with multiple identities allows for more children to relate to and identify with the main character.

Furthermore, in the opening pages to *When Oliver Speaks!*, the authors make Oliver relatable and humanized before introducing that he stutters. The authors introduce his interests of basketball, using his imagination, reading, watching shows, and disagreeing with his siblings. The text goes on to break down some of the aspects of stuttering like disfluency and anxiety. Oliver's anxiety is presented as avoiding speaking in class and going to the nurse for stomach pains. In the end, his mom helps him gain the courage to carry on with his "All About Me" presentation for his class. Oliver expresses to his mother, "I-I hate my stutter" (Garvin 22). This is how stuttering is represented in dialogue in all of the texts considered in this analysis. In response his mother approaches the problem with empathy and attempts to reframe Oliver's stutter by saying, "I understand how you feel, but it's your stutter that makes you the awesome and fearless kid you are... Your stutter is as much a part of you as your eyes, your ears, your nose and your heart. Do you hate those other parts of yourself" (Garvin 23). The book ends with Oliver starting his presentation by introducing himself as a person who stutters. Readers do not get to read about the class's reaction, but it is implied that it is positive.

Oliver is presented as a normal kid with multiple intersecting identities which makes him very relatable. The story includes humor and a very accurate representation of a stutterer. All factors considered this text meets the expectations outlined by Blaska as well as the addition by Rieger. Oliver is a complex character with various interests and an identity that goes beyond his disability. His character grows throughout the story and his stutter is not cured, but rather is an accepted part of himself that is not presented as needing to be fixed, a theme that will be represented in many texts.

Gabriela

In 2017 American Girl Corporation released the doll and accompanying book *Gabriela*; the book later grew to be the first book in a trilogy. Gabriela (Gabby) McBride was the "Girl of the Year" during her release year, in other words, a limited-edition doll. The book is a chapter book, consisting of twenty-four short chapters told through Gabriela's perspective. Barnes and Noble list the target age range as eight to twelve years old. The author, Teresa E. Harris, is not a stutterer and did not struggle with stuttering previously unlike the other two authors considered so far. However, in the "Special Thanks" section at the end of the book, Harris first thanks Leana Barbosa, M.S. CCC-SLP for her contribution of speech therapy knowledge that she brought to the book.


Similar to Oliver, Gabby is a black child and is also our first example of a female stutter. As previously discussed, stuttering is more common and prolonged in males but affects all kinds of children. Gabriela represents various intersecting identities. Not only is she a person of color with a disability, but she also has a unique home structure where she lives with her parents and cousin, Red, whose mother is serving in the military overseas.

Gabriela is a young, artistic girl who with the help of her friends saves the community arts center where she dances and participates in a spoken word poetry group. Through her story she learns how to speak up through the empowering act of poetry reading and writing. Although her stutter is a large part of her character, Gabby's stutter is not necessarily the primary focus of this text. Rather, the author chose to focus on the storyline of saving the Liberty Arts center and make her stutter just a part of Gabby's character.

Gabby's stuttering is well represented through the book through dialogue and in the reader's access to her inner thoughts. When she describes her stutter to the reader she says, "it was like my words started to second-guess themselves. Like they weren't sure if they wanted to come out and when they finally did, I started stuttering like crazy" (Harris 5). Throughout the book, one of Gabby's primary struggles is with her best friend, Teagan, when in conversation Teagan does not allow Gabby to finish what she is saying while she stutters and jumps into the conversation to speak for her. Near the middle of the book, Gabby cannot take it anymore and bursts out to Teagan, "Why-why-why do you have to do that all the time? ... Y-Y-You act like you have to ssssave me, like I can't talk for myself. It's... it's... annoying!" (Harris 91). This outburst later leads to a good discussion about how Gabby feels. This scene is a good representation of a common problem people who stutter face: being interrupted or not being trusted to finish their thoughts. This form of listener impatience is highly common and counterproductive. The Stuttering Foundation recommends not interrupting as one of their core six tips for speaking with a stutterer as seen in **Table 2**.

One of the best things that this text does is representing a variety of stuttering disfluencies. In many of the texts a stutter is limited only to the repetition of single sounds such as the first sound in a word (example: s-s-s-snake). In the scene where

Table 2: Stuttering Foundation 6 Tips For Speaking With Someone Who Stutters



Tips For Speaking With Someone Who Stutters

Stuttering may look like a problem that can be easily solved with simple advice, but for many adults, it can be a chronic life-long disorder. Here are some ways that you, the listener, can help.

- 1** Don't make remarks like: "Slow down," "Take a breath," or "Relax." Such simplistic advice can be felt as demeaning and is not helpful.
- 2** Let the person know by your manner that you are listening to what he or she says — not how they say it.
- 3** Maintain natural eye contact and wait patiently and naturally until the person is finished.
- 4** You may be tempted to finish sentences or fill in words. Try not to. Use a relatively relaxed rate in your own speech — but not so slow as to sound unnatural. This promotes good communication.
- 5** Be aware that those who stutter usually have more trouble controlling their speech on the telephone. Please be patient in this situation. If you pick up the phone and hear nothing, be sure it is not a person who stutters trying to start the conversation before you hang up.
- 6** Speak in an unhurried way — but not so slowly as to sound unnatural. This promotes good communication with everyone.

Gabby speaks up to Teagan, this style is represented in that blurb, when Gabby says, “Y-Y-You” (Harris 91), but she also repeats a whole word, “Why-why-why” (Harris 91), and finally in this passage Gabby holds out a sound for longer than normal when she says, “ssssave” which is implied by the lack of hyphens. In fact, earlier in the book she represents a fourth stuttering behavior when she changes what she is saying either because she is struggling to get the word out or anticipates a stutter. Gabby is speaking to her mother when she says, “I... I was just... just checking to see is anyone in the houses, um, anyone else had elec- light. If anyone else had lights” (Harris 18). As readers, it is clear that mid-sentence Gabby abandons the word “electricity” and choses instead to substitute it with the word “light.”

Harris skillfully accomplishes creating an authentic character based on Blaska’s checklist. Gabby is well supported in the book by family members, friends, her speech therapist, and other adults in the book, even strangers. Gabby is always included in activities, both speech-based and nonspeech-based. While she does come across some mistreatment by being frequently cut off when speaking by her friend Teagan, the act is presented in a way that implies Teagan was not doing it in a malicious or demeaning way and the author uses this as an opportunity to model what not to do when speaking with people who stutter. This interruption also provides an opportunity for Gabby to communicate with her friend when, later in the book, she sits down to explain her perspective and set boundaries with Teagan. Gabby is a realistic and successful character in the book who grows through her journey making her a well-written,

multidimensional character.

Table 3: Sample Panel of *Jacky Ha-Ha: A Graphic Novel*



(Patterson 49)

Jacky Ha-Ha

Jacky Ha-Ha: A Graphic Novel is a comic adaptation (see example panel in **Table 3**) by Adam Rau and Betty C. Tang of Parents’ Choice Award winning book, *Jacky Ha-Ha*, by James Patterson and Chris Grabenstein. The original text was published in 2017 with a listed age range of 8 to 12 years with the graphic novel following not long after in 2020 for ages 8 to 14. The book tells the story of Jacky Hart. The authors open the story of Jacky as an adult preparing for the Oscars and sharing the story of her childhood with her two daughters. The remainder of the book is set in 1990 (with the exception of the text’s ending) during a monumental year of Jacky’s life. Jacky’s personality is exuberant, comical, independent, and highly relatable. Not only does this book cover Jacky’s struggle with her stutter, but the authors also highlight family troubles, racism, anxiety, and being a kid in the school system.

The start to Jacky’s story begins when her mother is sent to Saudi Arabia with the Marine Corps leaving behind Jacky’s father, her six sisters, and of course Jacky

herself. From there Jacky begins school; this is where we learn of Jacky's reputation as a disruptive student. Jacky is a class clown and often finds herself sent to the principal's office or detention. This is also half of how she got her nickname. When she first began grade school, Jacky was bullied and as students would ask, "What's your last name?" she would respond, "Ha-Ha-Ha-Ha-Hart" (Patterson 26). Jacky described her stutter as, "more of a stammer, except when I'm excited or p-p-panicked" (Patterson 26). To turn around the teasing, Jacky decided to embrace the nickname and embody it by becoming a jokester. After continuing to get in trouble, even after the start of the new year, the principal decides to give Jacky the choice between joining the school musical *You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown* or continuing with detention. After choosing the musical, Jacky meets a life changing teacher, Ms. O'Mara. Ms. O'Mara matches Jacky's wit and gains her trust and respect. Jacky begins to turn her behavior around in school and the principal then takes things a step further by having Jacky compete in the school's American Legion Oratory Contest that becomes coached by Mrs. Jordan, who Jacky does not care for, and Ms. O'Mara. After a series of unfortunate events, Jacky's mostly absent father decides that Jacky cannot compete in the oratory competition or the school musical. He tells Jacky, "I have friends in the American Legion. I don't want you publicly embarrassing this family again" and Jacky thinks to herself, "He means my stutter. I know it" (Patterson 145). Ms. O'Mara steps in to convince Jacky's dad to allow her to participate in her activities. In the end, Jacky receives first prize in the oratory contest with minimal stuttering and she succeeds in her role as Snoopy in the musical. Finally, the book concludes with Jacky winning the award for Best Actress in a Motion Picture as an adult.

This text highlights the importance of mentors, particularly teachers for young children. Jacky is also supported in this book by her friends, Grandmother, and sisters. Her relationship with her father is difficult but after some communication later in the book, the two settle some of their differences. Although the book does not mention it explicitly, the authors also show some of the coping mechanisms that people who stutter use when bullied. In certain scenes, both relating to stuttering and not, Jacky's anxiety is described as a devil. Jacky describes, "As nice as Ms. O'Mara was to me, there was a little devil inside me that didn't think I deserved such good treatment. And when people tried to get close to me my instinct was to push them away. Hard" (Patterson 128). Jacky often acts out through her behavior which started when she was a young child facing bullying for her stutter. Additionally, no one in this book tries to fix or get rid of Jacky's stutter, instead they work to find ways to empower her voice through activities like the musical and orating competitions.

Jacky's character is well written when considering Blaska's checklist. In particular, this story tells of a very relatable child who has some trouble at school and at home. She is funny without being self-deprecating. This is also a story about success. Both in her youth and through adulthood, Jacky finds success in the arts and within her personal life, with her friends and later with her loving family. This book is humorous without missing the serious nature of bullying and the trials Jacky faces through her journey. *Jacky Ha-Ha* is a novel that could be enjoyed by young children as well as by parents and guardians reading it with them.

EXPLORING STUTTERING IN ADOLESCENT LITERATURE

The Adventures of Abigail

Four books were also selected for analysis within the genre of adolescent literature. All four are chapter books ranging from less than 140 pages up to just over 300. The first of these texts is *The Adventures of Abigail: Rhythm of the Iceberg* by Yolanda Boone. The book was independently published in 2018. Boone is the first author considered thus far that is both a person who stutters and a Speech Language Pathologist and also a woman of color. Boone has been a practicing therapist for 16 years. *The Adventures of Abigail* is her first book. This text is not listed on the Barnes and Noble website; however, the target age can be assumed to be around 11 to 16 years old

The book follows the story of eighth grader Abigail Brewer as she learns to explore her voice through journaling after she is assigned to do so by her SLP, Ms. Plewitt, and through poetry after a course assignment by one of her teachers, Ms. Scott. Like Oliver and Gabriela, Abigail is a person of color. Throughout the book Abigail faces teasing but also finds a community with her closest friend Taylor, her grandparents, and her teachers. Abigail is enrolled in a performing arts elective at school where she is introduced to poetry. This project combined with her journaling assigned by her SLP, Abigail finds her voice and learns new ways to process, talk about, and empower herself through writing and performance. Abigail describes her stutter in many sections towards the beginning of the book. When thinking about her new journaling assignment she says, “I believed I was pretty, smart, funny, and so much more, but I had a stuttering problem that was magnified when I was given the assignment” (Boone 8). Abigail also uses driving as a metaphor for how it feels to stutter, “... it was just a little bump in the road that was made smoother if I travelled at a more comfortable pace... Lately, the speed bumps were everywhere, and it was hard for me to pace myself when I was the only one who was asked to drive with caution” (Boone 10). Similar to Jacky in *Jacky Ha-Ha* and Gabriela in *Gabriela*, these three characters all find new ways to express themselves through the arts.

Because this book is written by an adult who has both struggled with this disability and helps to treat stuttering, there is a unique perspective highlighted by Boone. *The Adventures of Abigail* is the only text that talks about an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). The American Speech-Language-Hearing Association describes an IEP as a piece of documentation required by The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Part B for every child who receives special education services. This document describes what services will be provided, for how long, the goals, accommodations, and other details about the student’s education needs. The book also references the website for the Stuttering Foundation of America, a non-profit organization whose mission is to, “provide free online resources, services and support to those who stutter and their families, as well as support for research into the causes of stuttering” (Stuttering Foundation). When referencing this resource in the book, Abigail is looking at a list of famous people who stutter or used to stutter including Ed Sheeran, Derek Jeter, Charles Darwin, Emily Blunt, and others (Boone 188). This is one way Abigail finds to normalize herself and it is likely Boone included that resource both to introduce readers to the Stuttering Foundation and to normalize stuttering to readers along with Abigail.

It should be noted that both the author and the book are very religiously based. This does not take away from the message of the book; however, readers should be aware of this as a central theme before reading. For example, the first note in the dedication is, “To Christ, my Lord and Savior” and in the finale of the book Abigail thinks to herself, “I knew it was nobody but Jesus! It wasn’t going to be a good day, I thought. It was going to be a God day, so I was ready!” (Boone 217). Abigail’s final poetic performance is based on God’s love, God’s armor, and the Lord as a savior. The story of David and Goliath is used throughout the book as a metaphor for the person who stutters as David overcomes the brute Goliath, as the stand-in for the stutter itself. Again, the book still represents stuttering accurately, but it should be known to readers that this text is very religiously based.

One criticism of this book is likely based on the fact that this is the author’s first book. Although the storyline is good and it follows the common themes of other books considered thus far, it was sometimes difficult to read because of the author’s writing style. The use of exclamation points was to a level of being distracting. For example, in the 3-page long chapter 15, every paragraph but one ends in an exclamation point along with a handful of other sentences in each paragraph. Another author choice that was somewhat distracting, was the attempt of the author to make the text relatable to a young audience. For example, every chapter title includes a hashtag. There is nothing wrong with this, but it does date the book and may make the book more easily dismissible by the target age group.

All things considered, the character of Abigail is well written as a person who stutters. The book meets the criteria set by Blaska. Abigail finds success through her story and is a good representation of someone who stutters, largely thanks to the fact that the author is an SLP as well as a person who stutters. The book is accepting and inclusive in its language and overall message. The ability to read what Abigail is writing in her journal about her stutter opens the reader’s view of what is happening in Abigail’s life beyond the external into the internal.

I Fled

The shortest book in the adolescent literature category is *I Fled* by Don Barnett. Barnett is a person who stutters who wrote this book in a semi-autobiographical style; he writes in the author notes at the beginning of the book, “The sequence of events reflects many of my experiences with severe stuttering during my teen years”. The book is broken into 2 parts, Part One: How Not to Help a Boy with a Stuttering Problem and Part Two: How to Help a Boy Who Stutters. Altogether, the book is sixteen chapters. While *The Adventures of Abigail* bridges the gap between children’s and adolescent literature, the book *I Fled* should only be read by older children.

This story follows the story of Willie Madson in 1950s North Dakota and later, Colorado. Willie is severely bullied and unsupported by his teachers which prompts his decision to run away to start a new life, in a new state, under a new name. Willie describes his stutter as starting in 6th and 7th grade as a mild one, “but the harder I tried to control my stutter, the more it happened” (Barnet 2). From then on, he was bullied by peers and teachers; Willie describes, “My stuttering was the only characteristics my classmates would ever recognize about [me]” (Barnet

5). Of his teachers, he tells readers, "...the weakest teachers just stood there until I finished my daily embarrassment" (Barnett 3). No one recommended therapy of any kind. Willie's biggest struggle comes when a teacher intentionally picks on him named Miss Lorbonnet. She yells at him in front of the class not to stutter continuously as he tries to read aloud a passage from the textbook. Eventually, Willie cannot contain himself and he throws the book at his teacher. The principal and other teachers paint Willie to be a violent menace and suspend him from school. Although his parents are very supportive as well as the school nurse, Willie makes up his mind to run away. Willie concocts a detailed plan with food, supplies, and a goal of reaching Denver, CO through any and all resources available. He keeps in contact with his one and only friend but not his family. Willie is resourceful and makes his way to Denver, takes on a new name, and lives in a car for a short while before securing a steady job at a hotel and enrolling himself in the local high school for 9th grade. There, he meets a teacher, Mr. Murray who also used to stutter and together they begin something similar to speech therapy. Willie finds a love of reading and begins to get straight A's and gains confidence as the teachers and administrators at his new school are faithfully supportive of him. Willie fights therapy for a short while but later begins to see improvement and even joins the debate team. He balances a busy schedule between school, extracurriculars like baseball and debate team, and work. In the end of the story, he saves the hotel where he works and lives from a fire and secures a college fund as a thank you. He finally explains things to his parents who have continued to look for him for almost two years, but Willie decides to stay in Denver for his own mental health. By this time, he has also accepted his stutter as a part of himself but also as something he can improve.

The reason this book is recommended for older children is the potential moral that is taken from the story. As the author clarifies in the afterword of the book, the moral of this story is not that the answer is to run away. The author describes how the 1950s were a different world and even then, what Willie did was dangerous. Don Barnett writes, "I urge any young person who is facing a similar situation to never run away from home... the young person should remain close to home and family, seek therapy and help through the assistance of his or her family, friends, teachers, school administrators, and others" (Barnett vii). This book, like others, highlights the extreme importance and impact of a mentor figure, like a teacher. However, this book also points out the harmful effects a teacher can have on a student who stutters. Barnett focuses much more on the situation with his teacher compared to those that occurred with peers. This book also represents the most severe stutter of any of the stuttering characters. In one occurrence, Willie repeats the "wh" sound sixteen times followed by the "wo" sound fifteen times and then the "sh" sound another sixteen times in the same statement and this trend continues throughout the book.

Fitting with the trend of the other characters thus far, Willie also succeeds in meeting Blaska's criteria. The character finds success through his journey, his disability is accurately represented, and although he was not framed as "one of us" in his hometown in Cawmphatic, ND, he found his community and became a "one of us" in his new home in Denver, CO. Willie is a very relatable character due to his agency, kindness, and because of his balance of struggles and perseverance with his stutter.

Winning: A Novel

Ellen-Marie Silverman creates a Bildungsroman in her novel *Winning*. She holds an M.A. and Ph.D in speech pathology and previously had a stutter herself as described in her author bio at the book's conclusion. *Winning* is the second book in the Jason Loring trilogy. The first book, *Jason's Secret*, explores the life of its main character as he enters fifth grade at a new middle school at age ten. This book is intended for children ages 9 to 12 according to Barnes and Noble. The second book, which we consider here, begins at Jason's eighth grade graduation, and follows the story of the following summer and concludes with a final chapter looking to the future when Jason is 28. Finally, the last book is titled *SheGate* that tells Jason's story in his later adulthood. Barnes and Noble does not list a target age range for the final two books. However, there is significant sexual content throughout the book which leads me to recommend it for older youth, ages 13 to 18 and over.

Winning tells the story of Jason Loring and his closest friends as they explore sexuality, definitions of success, crushes, tragedy, entering high school, and difficult home lives. The book is told from Jason's perspective although many of the major events happen to his friends. For example, his friend David early in the novel is beat up by neighborhood bullies for being gay. Furthermore, near the end of the novel the character Ben has his bar mitzvah bombed and as a result David's father, Rabbi Winters dies. Jason has his own struggles throughout the book including an abusive home life. Jason's mother died when he was young and his father and his new wife Belle are both characterized as sloppy drunks. In fact, during the course of the novel Jason has to help get his father back into rehab and Belle is in a car accident as a result of drunk driving. For the majority of the novel Jason is living in his home alone with the exception of his cat with whom he is closest with aside from his gymnastics coach. Throughout the entirety of the novel Jason hears lectures, advice, and encouragement from his coach in his head or as flashbacks. Jason's coach plays a large role in the book as someone Jason trusts and looks up to. At the gym and at school is where Jason feels safe and feels that he is with real family.

The title of the novel is inspired by Jason's obsession with winning. From winning the heart of his friend Clarissa to winning at gymnastics, chess, or style much of Jason's time and narration stems from a need to win. In chapter one, Silverman writes, "For Jason, feeling victorious was better than actually beating someone. Winning made him feel good... With winning, he lived a success induced high... [winning] made him feel safe" (Silverman 12). However, he continues that the one thing he cannot win against is stuttering. He discusses feelings of embarrassment and anxiety around it. Most often he chooses to stay quiet. In one scene he abandons a sentence thinking that he wanted to avoid more stuttering as his abdominal and throat muscles felt suffocatingly tight. Jason mentions his speech therapist at times and lessons she taught him but most often it is his coach that navigates him through these situations. While other characters thus far have used driving as an analogy for stuttering, Jason compares his stutter to traps stating, "First words, syllables, first sounds, saying your name. Booby traps for the tongue, lips, toe-nails, all of you. Jeez. Stuttering gets in the way" (71). Jason describes enjoying computer chats because they were a space he could not stutter; he also expressed a liking for talking to his cat. At the end of the novel Jason feels empowered by a conversation

with Rabbi Winters. Jason decides to reframe his thinking around his stuttering. After once describing his stuttering as a bitch (Silverman 100), Silverman later narrates, “He felt good about his speech... in fact if someone came up to him to ask if he had a stuttering problem, he would say he didn’t have a stuttering problem” (Silverman 211). He comes to learn that he stutters some of the time, not all of the time, and that does not define him. One of the most significant statements he makes is, “If it bothered someone, it was their problem” (Silverman 211) and his new personal motto becomes, “Stuttering, Screw it!” (Silverman 230). Jason does not achieve a “cure” rather he adjusts his thinking to view his stutter as part of him, not a positive or a negative trait, rather as a neutral piece of himself.

Silverman, pulling on her deeper understanding of stuttering through her professional career and as a person who stutters, successfully writes a believable stuttering character in Jason. She particularly succeeds in showcasing Jason within a close-knit community that he created with his friends. The “Fresh Air Five” as they are labelled in the book, does not see Jason as just his stutter. He is written as a character with various interests and struggles beyond his stutter and his friends see that as well. Additionally, there is a great deal of humor in the book. These characters, as newly graduated eighth graders, joke around often with each other and Jason provides humorous commentary throughout as the reader sees the events unfold through his eyes. Jason is an imperfect person and through that Silverman successfully humanizes him and normalizes his stutter.

Black Swan Green

Black Swan Green by David Mitchell is perhaps the most well-known of the texts across both genres of Children’s Literature and Adolescent Literature. The book was published in 2006 and received multiple award acknowledgements including the Best Book For Young Adults Award from the American Library Association in 2007. David Mitchell is a career author and screenwriter. The English author wrote *Black Swan Green* as a semi-autobiographical novel as he is a person who stutters. The book takes place in 1982 and follows a year in the life of thirteen-year-old Jason Taylor as he finds joy through writing poetry and explores love and life in Cold War England. The formatting of this text is unique in that each of the 13 chapters serves as its own short story and can be read independently from the others in addition to being able to be read as a cover-to-cover continuous text. Two chapters focus on Jason’s stuttering closely: Chapter Two titled “Hangman” and Chapter Nine titled “Maggot.” Chapter Two is the most unique so I will begin with a summary and discussion of “Maggot”.

The Chapter titled “Maggot” focuses on a string of scenes that involve both verbal bullying as well as physical. In class, Jason is asked to read aloud and he stutters in front of the class. He describes his feelings between sentences of text describing feelings of suffocating in plastic and hearing a ringing in his ears. At the end of his passage, Jason reaches a word he dares not to say in fear of stuttering too much. His teach provides the word for him: “savages.” Another classmate picks up the reading after Jason finishes and fakes a stutter as a jab at Jason. Jason narrates to the reader, “He got me. Boys were sniggering. Girls were looking round at me. My head burst into flames of shame” (Mitchell 209). At the end of the day a group of boys evoke physical violence on Jason, mocking his stuttering and being brutally slapped, punched, and

hung from a tree by his underwear. Jason decides it is only fun for his attackers if he fights back thus he takes the brutal beating and relentless teasing. This graphic chapter highlights the potential bullying and both physical and psychological torment that peers can inflict.

Chapter Two, “Hangman”, also closely discusses Jason’s stutter. While some authors have compared a stutter to driving over speed bumps or booby traps, Mitchell does something unique in *Black Swan Green* by turning Jason’s stutter into a character named Hangman. Jason describes Hangman as, “Pike lips, broken nose, rhino cheeks, red eyes ‘cause he never sleeps. I imagine him in the baby room at Preston Hospital playing eenie, meenie, miney, moe. I imagine him tapping my lips, murmuring down at me, Mine” (Mitchell 26). This personification of Jason’s stutter allows him to talk about it in a unique way. As its own character, Jason stutter is an active participant in the story. He pops up and causes trouble and Jason actively fights back against it; for example, Jason outlines, “The only way to outfox Hangman is to think one sentence ahead, and if you see a stemmer-word coming up, alter your sentence so you won’t need to use it” (Mitchell 27). Hangman has his own likes and dislikes and plays the role of the primary aggressor in Jason’s life. When secondary stuttering behaviors come up in the text, such as tensions, it is Hangman that is inflicting them. In Chapter Nine, as Jason is attempting to read aloud in front of his class he describes, “I’d just had to use the Punch Method again for “speak.” Using brute force to punch the word out’s a last resort... And if Hangman punches back harder the word gets stuck...” (Mitchell 208). Jason also discusses Hangman crushing his throat, tying up his tongue, and twisting up his face.

Chapter Two also introduces readers to Jason’s unsupportive family and helpful Speech Therapist Mrs. de Roo. While Jason’s family see his stutter as “social suicide” (Mitchell 29) and are overall described as being disappointed in Jason because of his stutter, Mrs. de Roo is a person who has been in Jason’s life for five years and is someone he trusts. Jason tells readers that he does not stutter in front of Mrs. de Roo and enjoys seeing her. Together they work on his stutter and that provides some of the support that Jason does not get at home.

Considering Blaska’s criteria, Mitchell does a superb job writing the character of Jason. He is very humanized through his experiences and easy for readers to empathize with. Since the story is told from Jason’s perspective, the reader is allowed into his mind and is privy to his inner thoughts and feelings thus promoting a sense of companionship between Jason and the reader. The book does not have much humor nor does it have a very happy ending. Mitchell takes this book to a more somber place than some of the other texts. In the end, as Jason approaches his fourteenth birthday his family begins to deteriorate as his parents begin the divorce process and he quits writing poetry. However, the book’s final sentence leaves readers with some glimmer of hope; to conclude his book, Mitchell writes as Jason is close to tears speaking with his sister Julia, “It’ll be all right’ Julia’s gentleness makes it worse. ‘In the end, Jase” to which Jason responds, “It doesn’t feel all right” and Julia’s final statement that ends the book follows, “That’s because it’s not the end” (Mitchell 294). So although Jason does not find the acceptance he is looking for or a happy ending, Mitchell concludes with the sentiment that although it may feel like the end, there is always better to come.

COMMON THEMES ACROSS TEXTS

While each text has been a unique story around a unique individual, there are cross-text themes that many writers utilized in their stories. Many of the stories have a component of a supportive adult figure that is influential in the life of the stuttering character. In some texts that person is a teacher like in *I Fled* where Willie is introduced to Mr. Murray or in *Jackie Ha-Ha* when Jackie meets Ms. O'Mara. Other texts showcase supportive parents like Oliver's mother in *When Oliver Speaks!* Jason's gymnastics coach in *Winning* and Gabriela's dance teacher in *Gabriela* also filling this supportive adult role. However, other books also chose to highlight the consequences of unsupportive adult figures like Jackie's father in *Jackie Ha-Ha* or Jason Loring's parents in *Winning* or Jason Taylor's parents in *Black Swan Green*. Overall the consensus of these authors appears to be that having a caring and supportive adult in the life of a person who stutters is influential for both self-acceptance and a sense of belonging.

Another common theme is finding joy and community within the arts. Many of the stuttering characters highlighted in these texts used writing, dance, or art to express themselves. The majority of characters who find themselves enjoying the arts do so through writing. For example, Jason Loring of *Winning* spends a good part of the novel writing his own science fiction book, Abigail of the *Adventures of Abigail* enjoys both journaling and the performing arts, and Jason Taylor in *Black Swan Green* enjoys poetry writing. However, other characters find themselves through other artistic forms of self-expression; Gabriela enjoys both dancing and writing poetry and Jackie Hart finds herself through acting which in turn leads to her future career.

Both of these themes of the supportive adult and self-expression through the arts, plays into the general moral around stuttering that all of these texts center upon. Whether the text was designed for children or adolescents, none of the authors across these eight texts concluded with the character who stutters being "cured." Not a single character ends the book without a stutter, rather, our characters have learned to embrace their stutter, work to manage their stutter, or go on in life to find success without their stutter holding them back. In *Winning*, Jason concludes that if someone has an issue with his stutter that it is not his problem but rather the communication partner's problem. Similarly, in *When Oliver Speaks!*, Oliver comes to see his stutter as a piece of him, not a thing that is good or bad, but just part of him like his hands or heart. Willie Madsen in *I Fled*, alternatively, finds supports like Mr. Murray that help teach him to manage his stutter. Additionally, although Abigail does not always trust her SLP's activities she continues to try in every therapy session and on each assignment in an effort to gain the skills needed to improve her stutter. Finally, characters like Jackie from *Jackie Ha-Ha* represent a group of people who continue to stutter into adulthood but go on to live happy and successful lives. This concept inspired Alan Rabinowitz to write his autobiographical book, *A Boy and A Jaguar*, to shine a light on his story as someone who has a stutter but still found meaningful work and belonging even with his stutter.

TEXT DIVERSITY

One notable aspect of these eight texts is the diversity included within them. Of the eight, 6 were written by a person who stutters, two by a speech therapist, and two by career authors. More than that, however, the characters themselves showed a fair amount of racial diversity. In three of the texts, the main character was a person of color: *When Oliver Speaks!*, *Gabriela*, and *The Adventures of Abigail*. Additionally, four out of the eight books showcased unique family structures. In *Jackie Ha-Ha*, Jackie and her six sisters live with their father while their mother is deployed with the Marines. Oliver also lives in a single-parent household with his siblings and mother in *When Oliver Speaks!*. In *Gabriela*, Gabriela's cousin Red lives with her and her parents. Finally, Jason in *Winning* lives with his father who remarried after his mother died and his stepfamily including his stepmother and stepbrother.

However, there are identities that these texts did not tap into very deeply including sexuality and gender. In *Winning*, there is some discussion and diversity in sexuality. In this text, multiple characters explore homosexuality and bisexuality including the main character Jason. In terms of gender, all eight texts stick to the binary of male and female both in main characters and in supporting characters. As previously discussed, stuttering is more common in males which could be why five of eight books had a male main character. Overall, there is more diversity than I expected when searching for texts particularly in the areas of race and family structure. The authors themselves also showed a good level of diversity in race and ability. There certainly could be more diversity in all areas within the literature but, I was impressed by the diversity available in such a small sample.

CONCLUSION

Stuttering affects a wide range of individuals and can have various causes. Developmental stuttering among children is common and thus should be discussed with both children and adults. As we enter deeper into the 21st century, greater diversity in literature is expanding. While topics of race and gender are moving quickly onto the shelves and into the hands of readers, disability topics are being introduced more slowly. While there are books on the topic of stuttering for both children and adolescents, the quantity available is not as expansive as other topics. The texts considered in this analysis do a good job of writing characters who stutter largely because many of the authors are people who stutter, are speech therapists who work with stutterers, or are authors who consulted with experts. Joan Blaska provides a thorough set of criteria to help judge the authenticity of the representations of characters with disabilities that was utilized in determining the authors' ability to successfully write characters who stutter and portray the disability.

Across the texts that were included in this study, there were a handful of themes that were consistent. Firstly, having a supportive adult figure whether that be a parent, teacher, coach, family member, or therapist is highly influential for a person who stutters. This adult figure can help the child find self-acceptance, confidence, or skills to manage their stutter. Many texts also highlighted some of the bullying or the potential lack of acceptance from peers. However, a supportive adult can help mitigate the bullying or help the child find outlets for their emotions or

perhaps even a community where they feel accepted. In the eight texts analyzed here, many of these outlets or communities revolved around the arts. The characters who stutter in these books largely enjoyed writing, dance, and performing. These outlets are often free for self-expression and overall contributed to a sense of belonging and success for the main characters of the books. Finally, a common theme across texts was in the end, the character who stutters was not cured, rather, they began to see their stutter in a new way. Characters who began their book hating their stutters found a way to manage it or see it in a new way as some not inherently good or bad but instead as something neutral.

Looking to the future, more research should be conducted on texts that portray characters who stutter to analyze the authenticity of the characters and to explore the diversity represented in such texts. This study analyzed texts centered on a main character who stutters; however, it would be useful to include texts that have supporting characters who stutter as it is likely that the reader would not get a view into the character's thoughts or emotions related to their stutter and it is possible that those authors who use characters who stutter as supporting characters may not be stutters themselves or have consulted experts to aid in writing those characters. In other words, supporting characters who stutter are potentially not as well written as they are not the focus of the book. Additionally, we should ask why there are not as many texts available about characters who stutter and about children or young people in general who have other disabilities. It is highly important to showcase intersectionality to youth and to discuss it with them in order to raise empathetic and accepting adults. Texts should represent the diversity of the human race and we should be asking how we can continue to incorporate greater diversity into literature.

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