

“You really are a wonder, Auggie. You are a wonder” - Isabel, August’s Mother

The story "Wonder" follows a young boy named August's first year at a mainstream private middle school. August, who has a craniofacial disorder, which resulted in multiple surgeries by the time he was ten years old, was homeschooled by his mother until he was medically safe enough to attend school. The novel, written by R.J. Palacio, allows the reader to experience August's first year at Beecher Prep Middle School through the point of view of 6 different characters, painting a picture of how loved ones can also be impacted by disabilities and differences that don't fit the norm. Though from the first page narrated by August, we know that he's just like any other kid on the inside, it takes a few of the characters a little more time to see beyond the young boy's appearance. Ultimately, through providing insights on the life of a student with physical impairments, it is a story of compassion and acceptance, the story of how if we see with our hearts, we know we're all more alike than we think we are.

“So sending him off to middle school like a a lamb to the slaughter” - Nate, August’s Father

August's first weeks at the school were quite difficult; many stared at him, and very few tried to befriend him; in fact, the only student who befriended him without being told to was a young girl named Summer. In the chapters discussing his first weeks at school, we see how August becomes the victim of name-calling, teasing and bullying. His peers go as far as creating a game called the Plague, in which anyone who touched him without washing or sanitizing their hands right away would catch the Plague. While all his peers saw August as different, we know through his inner dialogue that he knows he's just like any other kid on the inside and wants

nothing more than to have a normal experience at middle school, making friends, hanging out and learning at school. These chapters shed light on what children are like in middle school, the peer pressure, wanting to look cool and be a part of the popular group and the fear of the unknown.

The transition to a mainstream school from being homeschooled was difficult for August and his parents. From these chapters, it is evident how having a child with a disability impacts the parents. His parents were torn between homeschooling and protecting him from the "sheep slaughter" or sending him to school in the hopes that it would be beneficial. We see the parents fulfil multiple roles, from being the parent to the nurse in the flashbacks to his surgeries to the counsellor who has to respond to the question, "Why do I have to be so ugly, Mommy." The parents were just as worried as August was; it is clear that they love their son and want what is best for him, but the question is, do they know what's best for him? Can they genuinely know if the school isn't good for him if they don't give it a try?

"He's just a kid. The weirdest-looking kid I've ever seen, yes. But just a kid."- Summer, August's friend

With time, August's experience at school improves; he makes friends who begin to see him for who he is, a kid with a love for star wars and a great sense of humour. Jack and Summer become good friends to August based on shared interests; while other children were caught up in the pressure to be popular and act older than their age, the three of them still enjoyed playing games. This critical shift in the storyline shows that children who are different or may have special needs are children at the end of the day, and though they may have different needs, all

children have the same basic needs of safety, belonging and friendship. In these chapters of the story, we begin to see the kind of compassion and kindness that can change someone's life. These pages are crucial for young readers who may have students in their classroom who don't look or act exactly like them; it teaches them understanding and acceptance. More importantly, the chapters written from August's point of view give the reader a sense of how difficult it must be to be judged, bullied and treated unfairly. Summer and Jack both learned to see past August's physical appearance or his eating mannerisms that resulted from his abnormalities and countless surgeries. Once they saw what was inside him, they accepted what was on the outside.

“As for your other concerns regarding our new student August , please note that he does not have special needs . He is neither disabled , handicapped , nor developmentally delayed in any way , so there was no reason to assume anyone would take issue with his admittance to Beecher Prep - whether it is an inclusion school or not.” - Mr. Tushman, August’s Principal

One of the most significant difficulties of educating children with special needs is the role non-disabled peers and their parents play in accepting and welcoming the child into their school; this is evident in this novel when a student's mother reaches out to the school to complain about August's admission and the "pressure" she felt the principal had put on other children to befriend Augie. When determining a student's eligibility for special education based on IDEA, a common exclusionary clause in many categories is that the suspected "disability" must impact learning. This clause tends to fit with the quotation above, in which the principal assures the parents that August is neither disabled, handicapped, nor developmentally delayed in any way. While this was an appropriate response to a parent who was concerned about August's admission into a school that is not an "inclusion school," August did have some needs specific to his condition

that were not met by the school, regardless of whether or not they had impacted his academic standing.

Writing this book review through the eyes of someone learning about special education, I had to look at the novel through a critical eye regarding the main character's educational experience and use it as a learning tool for myself as a future educator who may have a child August in her classrooms. I believe that with the exception of a few things done to make August more comfortable such as organizing a small welcoming committee, the school took a relatively passive role in assisting August through his first year at school. When it came to his academics and the needs he may have, we only see a teacher asking August to ask for help or repetition when August comes to school wearing his hearing aids for the first time, but we know from his inner dialogue that he began to experience hearing difficulties months before he got fitted for hearing aids, why wasn't the school more aware and in tune to his needs before?

As for August's social needs, I felt like the school missed many opportunities to discuss his condition with his peers or provide him with a safe space to address his peers. For example, in one scene, August describes a dance class in which the teacher partners him up with a girl who appears to have a "panic attack," instead of using this as an opportunity to assist August, the teacher changes the lesson and doesn't require the students to find partners. Although on the surface, this may seem like a way to help August, in reality, nothing about August's condition makes him incapable or causes him difficulties in dancing, and if his teacher intended to spare his feelings, it was too late because his peer had already reacted, what this "modification" to the lesson truly does, is protect the feelings and fears of his peers rather than help August.

In another scene, two of August's peers discuss how there were changes made to accommodate August, the change they were referring to is the yearly art project in which typically fifth-graders draw self-portraits, but when August became their classmate, students were asked to draw their self-portraits as animals, while this too, may seem like an appropriate accommodation on the surface, it is also a missed opportunity to teach students about acceptance and that what is important is on the inside, that everyone is inherently beautiful and worthy. Instead, this change reinforces the idea that August should feel bad about his looks and that his facial abnormalities should not be celebrated nor shared.

Towards the end of the novel, we find out that the school was aware of Justin, a student who bullies August throughout the year, but although the principal was aware of the bullying, we don't see any instances of the adults interfering or helping August throughout all the teasing and bullying. Although August was doing excellent academically and was on the honour roll, I believe there is far more to the quality of life of a student than what a grade can indicate. I was surprised about not seeing a school counsellor involved at any point in the transition to school and throughout his first year at school. While his English teacher did try to embed morals and values through his monthly percepts in English class, in my opinion, the school should have done more for August. The readers are aware of all the struggles August faces at school, and while it seems like the adults at the school were aware, and all had good intentions, it also seems like they were avoiding difficult conversations. All the teachers were friendly to August, but as a future educator of children with special needs, the message I took from many of these scenes is that we need to take a more active role as educators.

“Did you know the guy who created the Uglydolls based them on me ?” - August

In the novel, August makes jokes about his physical appearance many times, and while it is a good thing to have a good sense of humour, and many of the characters in the novel are fond of this character trait as well, I also think it is a real and unfortunate depiction of how people with disabilities may feel like the burden is on them to make others feel better about being around them. It seems like August has to do the heavy work of making others feel comfortable around him with his jokes; this is seen when August refers to himself as the inspiration behind the UglyDolls, comments about his face being the way it is after plastic surgery and referring to the plague game as the "black death of ugliness." I think August found a way to cope with the social difficulties at school by easing his friends with humour and a light-hearted attitude, which is a quality of strength, but I think one thing readers can learn from this is to question their own discomfort with seeing someone who looks or acts different and ask what it is they can do to make that person more comfortable rather than wait for them to make them comfortable.

“You don’t need to put me to bed tonight , Mom , ” I said . “ I’ll read on my own till I get sleepy.” - August

In the scene that takes place the night before August leaves on an overnight trip with his classmates, after having a conversation with his mother, August tells her that he did not need her to put him to bed that night. This scene is of great significance; at the beginning of the novel, we read about the nighttime ritual August has with his mother; he himself even describes it as being childlike. This scene is a reflection of the personal growth he went through in his first year at school. August becomes more independent, courageous and brave. He developed his personality

and let it shine through, he learns how to defend himself and has a positive impact on his peers. This scene confirms the hopes his parents had about sending him to school, and it shows that his and his parent's fears and the struggles they endured at the beginning were worth it. Most importantly, it shows the positive impact that going to a school can have on the life of a child like August.

***“August is the Sun . Me and Mom and Dad are planets orbiting the Sun . The rest of our family and friends are asteroids and comets floating around the planets orbiting the Sun” -
Olivia, August’s sister***

The part of the novel written from August's sister's point of view, Olivia, gives the reader an in-depth understanding of what it is like to love someone who may have disabilities or differences; it shows the reader how August's medical condition impacts the family unit as a whole. In my opinion, this was an essential chapter to include. Olivia struggles with the nuances of both being human and loving her brother; on the one hand, she is a person of her own who goes through the struggles of being a teenager and wanting the love and attention of her parents and on the other hand, she is the sister of a young boy who has gone through significant struggles and who she loves dearly.

The chapters written from Olivia's perspective show the reality how what it is like to be the "normal" sibling and how somehow "lucking out" and being the normal one comes with its own set of difficulties. In a heart-rending scene, Olivia watches her mother stand in front of August's door and wonders if her mother ever stood behind her bedroom door making sure she's okay; this scene symbolizes the struggles Olivia faces in feeling like because her brother has gone through so much, anything she goes through is nothing in comparison, in feeling the need

to be self-sufficient and the "good" and "understanding" child. In another scene, Olivia, who needed her mother's attention and care after going through a difficult time with a life long friend, describes how "Olivia's mom" is put away when "August's mom" is needed. These scenes show how when one has a sibling with special needs, they may feel compelled to do their best not to burden their parents, and may feel guilt over the difficulties they face in life when compared to their siblings; I think giving Olivia's character a voice in the novel is essential to shed light on how a family is impacted.

Not only is Olivia impacted in the home, but socially her life has often been changed by being August's sister; Olivia mentions how people would not attend her birthday parties because they did not know how to approach or deal with August. She dislikes being known as the sister of a boy with facial abnormalities but gets angry when people make comments or give her brother certain looks. It is difficult for Olivia to find the balance between having her own life and becoming her own person and being August's loving and fiercely protective older sister. Not at any point in the novel do the readers doubt Olivia's love towards her brother, but they do get insight into how difficult it must be for her and how no matter how mature or understanding she is, she still has needs of her own.

“Then at one point I turned my head to suck the ice cream out of the bottom of my cone, and that’s when I saw him: August. He was sitting right next to me. I knew it wasn’t cool, but I kind of went “Uhh!” When I saw him because I honestly got scared.” - Jack, August’s Friend

The scene in which Jack describes his experience the first time he saw August at the ice-cream store, years before August was enrolled at Breecher Prep, is an important scene to address in this book review. In the novel, it shows how people often react to August with fear without

really knowing anything about what kind of person he is; it shows how difficult it must be for August to go out in the community. I think this reflects what it might feel like for many people with visible disabilities who receive snap judgments based on first impressions of appearances. But beyond the plot of the novel, this is a critical scene to discuss because it is the basis of why the novel was written. In several interviews, R. J Palacio mentions that the inspiration to write *Wonder* came from an experience she had at an ice cream store with two of her sons when they saw a little girl who looks very much like she describes August in her book. Her kids reacted to the girl, similarly to how Jack and his younger brother react to August. (NCTV17, 2012)

While I believe that this book was written with utmost of good intentions and she attempted to correct an experience she had with her own sons, I think it is important to question how accurate her portrayal of August is when she is not someone who herself experiences craniofacial abnormalities or has a child with one. I think she can speak to the experiences of the kids who befriended or bullied August and think about how they may react to a child with these differences, but I am concerned about her portrayal of August. In the novel, we can tell that the author has done her research about the condition's genetic aspect. Still, neither through the novel nor through interviews are we made aware of her involving a child with craniofacial abnormalities in the writing of her book. The 2004 motto for the UN International Day of Disabled Persons slogan was "Nothing about us, without us." Although this novel has had positive impacts on people and has taught kindness and acceptance, I think it is a disservice to the community of people who have craniofacial differences, R.J Palacio can be the voice of kindness and compassion, but I don't think it is her place to be the voice of and speak to the experience of someone with a craniofacial abnormality.

“I wasn’t sure why I was getting this medal, really. No, that’s not true. I knew why. It’s like people you see sometimes , and you can’t imagine what it would be like to be that person , whether it’s somebody in a wheelchair or somebody who can’t talk . Only , I know that I’m that person to other people , maybe to every single person in that whole auditorium . To me , though , I’m just me . An ordinary kid . But hey , if they want to give me a medal for being me , that’s okay . I’ll take it . I didn’t destroy a Death Star or anything like that , but I did just get through the fifth grade . And that’s not easy , even if you’re not me” - August

Since beginning my master's degree in special education, I have sought out the unfiltered and direct representation of people with disabilities on social media. Alex Darcey, who goes by the Instagram handle @wheelchair_rapunzel, first introduced me to the term "inspiration porn," in which she explained why she didn't want to be seen as an inspiration to people. The term was originally coined by the Australian comedian and activist Stella Young in a 2014 Ted Talk titled "I'm not your inspiration, thank you very much." In her talk, she shares images that have become rather popular of individuals with physical impairments doing a sport with a caption along the lines of "what's your excuse?" Stella then says, "I use the term porn deliberately, because they objectify one group of people for the benefit of another group of people. So, in this case, we're objectifying disabled people for the benefit of nondisabled people. The purpose of these images is to inspire you, to motivate you, so that we can look at them and think, "Well, however bad my life is, it could be worse. I could be that person." Stella then describes how she believes in the social model of disability, in which people are more disabled by the barriers placed on them by society than those caused by the condition itself. (Young, 2014)

When looking at August's dialogue, though he is still a young child, we can tell he shares some of the beliefs Stella mentioned in her TedTalk. When receiving an award during the

graduation ceremony, August mentions how he thinks he received the reward because he is different, that he knows he is "that" person to other people, but that at the end of the day, he knows he's an ordinary kid who got through fifth grade which must have been difficult for all kids. Furthermore, in the first pages of the novel, August says, "The only reason I'm not ordinary is that no one else sees me that way," this quote reflects the social model discussed in Stella's TedTalk. Augie showed bravery and strength. He faced bullies and challenged himself to get out of his comfort zone and attended school for the very first time. I don't think these characteristics should go unnoticed, but the use of individuals with disabilities to inspire others is one perspective amongst others that should be taken into consideration when looking at this novel in its entirety. Throughout the book, characters are told to count their blessing and be grateful. Jack describes becoming friends with August as the "bravest" thing he's done and describes August's friendship with Summer in the same manner. It shouldn't be considered bravery to befriend someone like August; it should be the norm, and August shouldn't live in a world where living with his physical appearance is considered brave either.

After learning that the book wasn't written from the perspective of someone who has lived experiences with craniofacial abnormalities, I wanted to learn about what thoughts a person with a lived experience has of the novel. In a Teen Vogue article titled "What "Wonder" Gets Wrong About Disfigurement and Craniofacial Disorders", Ariel Henley writes, *"But here's a lesson for everyone: the mere existence of individuals with facial disfigurements or differences is not inspirational. We are so much more than the props we've been turned into, designed to make non-disfigured individuals feel better about their lives. Our stories matter, and our experiences matter, and to portray our lives and struggles as nothing more than a source of inspiration*

encouraging those without craniofacial disorders to feel better about themselves, is a great disservice to everyone in the cranio community.” (Henley, 2017) While this article was written in response to the movie trailer, which is based on the novel, I think her perspective mirrors some of the sentiments in Stella's TedTalk. I believe that this story may be harmful to some individuals who belong craniofacial abnormalities community because it is written by a person who is not from the community and has been claimed as "inspiring" by people who are also not in the community. Stella's TedTalk and Ariel's article are only two opinions, and they may not be representative of the entire community of people with disabilities, but they are worth considering as valid opinions and gives a voice to the people who should be telling their own stories.

“Courage . Kindness . Friendship . Character . These are the qualities that define us as human beings , and propel us , on occasion , to greatness” - Mr. Tushman, August’s Principal

Wonder teaches acceptance, compassion, kindness and looking beyond our differences to see the similarities we have at our core. It is a story of friendships, of overcoming hardships and facing fears. Although I find some problematic areas in the representation and portrayal of August's condition in the book, the novel still has its importance in teaching the young readers who pick up this book how to show kindness and support an individual like August, who may end up in their classroom one day. Reading this book has helped me understand what it feels like to be someone like August, who lives with constant stares and comments. It made me aware of the difficulties and struggled both medically with the number of surgeries he's had to endure and socially with trying to fit in and belong. It has also helped me understand how a condition can impact the entire family; the novel did an excellent job portraying the different characters and

points of view. The characters felt relatable and easy to connect to, which is important for students who read this book. When I asked two eight-year-olds who have watched the movie if they would be friends with August, they both said they would, and their mothers thought it was important for their children to watch the film.

Although the book had some points where I found myself needing to be critical, I think it does serve a purpose and positively impacts those who read it. Before Wonder became a bestselling novel and a highly rated film, not many people were aware of August's condition, and not many children would have known how to support and befriend a child like August. Though I would like to see more representation from people who have lived experiences, I think Wonder is a good place to start.

References:

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