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## The Audience of Siblings

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The Audience of Siblings

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## Introduction

Literature has the unique ability to create an environment where one can address specific issues and hard questions in a comfortable way and at a relevant level. Children's literature specifically plays a valuable role at a crucial time in the development of children and through this is privy to being used to explore the issues that most children deal with. In reference to the importance of children's literature acting as a mirror for children, Sims Bishop stated that "literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection, we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience" (Bishop qt. Kiefer, 2014, p.16). For many children though, there is a significant deficit in the number and quality of books that they can see themselves and their situation in. This is especially true about the siblings of children with special needs. In a unique and often complicated situation, the siblings of children with special needs may look to children's literature and find that most characters do not experience what they do, reinforcing emotions of isolation and hostility. An even greater tragedy though, is the discovery of a book that they may be able to relate to, only to face disappointment by the presentation of children with special needs or their siblings. This literature review will analyze a sampling of fifteen children's books in order to determine how they approach the audience of siblings of children with special needs, with special emphasis on picture books because of their transcendency and the importance of early emphasis on understanding for the sibling.

## Literature Review

It is important to mention that finding a sampling size of fifteen children's picture books with an intended audience of specifically siblings of children with special needs was

exceptionally difficult. Most were unavailable at any surrounding library or bookstore, leading to the conclusion that it would be unlikely for any child to happen upon a book like this; research and parental intervention would be required to access most of these books. That said, the fifteen that are analyzed here all depict a protagonist that has a sibling with special needs and are evidently written with the audience of siblings of those with special needs in mind. Besides this though, each of the books vary greatly in their approach to this unique audience through variations in each's presentation of the child with special needs and of the sibling of the child.

### **The Presentation of the Child with Special Needs**

The nature of the audience of siblings of children with special needs is specifically dependent on the existence of the child with special needs. In this way, their role in each of these books is imperative and if the description of the children is inaccurate, not only does that lessen the book's credibility, but it also inhibits the ability of the sibling, who is well aware of what is accurate and not, to relate to the characters.

**The Balance Between Ability and Inability.** The debate between 'can' and 'can't' is one of pessimism and idealism, especially when it comes to children with special needs. Holly Robinson Peete's *My Brother Charlie* presents ability as more prominent, noting that that the character with special needs, Charlie, can name all the presidents, has a special way with animals, can play the piano, and is very protective of his twin sister, yet mentions Charlie's only inability as speech. Another prime example of ability trumping inability is in *We'll Paint the Octopus Red* by Stephanie Stuve-Dobson. This story focuses almost exclusively on what a family's new baby, born with Down Syndrome, will be able to do with his sister, including activities like kickball, nursing cows, painting with a plastic octopus, or going on an African

safari. The only disclaimer that this book gives is that the new baby might be a bit slower at these activities, and even goes as far as to say that there is probably nothing that the new baby, given patience and help, could not do. On the other extreme of this presentation though, is the pessimistic view, which most of the stories fall into, shown through the same author's *The Best Worst Brother*. With a sibling that only speaks ill of her brother with Down Syndrome, the story focuses on how messy, mean, and stubborn he is. It is not until the end of the story that redemptive characterization of her brother is expressed, which is quickly reversed, humorously, but reversed nonetheless. *I Have a Sister My Sister is Deaf* is also an example of how inability prevails in many books, using phrases like "she will never be able to sing" and focusing on things within the hearing world that she marginally compensates for (Peterson & Ray, 1977, p.4). Finding the balance between showing ability and inability is difficult, but when children with special needs are presented, the balance needs to be shown realistically. Of the fifteen, Shaila Abdullah's *A Manual for Marco* accomplishes this best, as the speaker describes her brother with autism as talented in math, having a very good memory, and being physically strong. In a similar way, she also explains that he hides her belongings, cannot eat many foods, and has difficulties with change. The depiction is a very healthy presentation of the balance between the reality that children with special needs have so many amazing abilities, but also have significant disabilities that hinder aspects of daily life.

**The Accuracy of Behavior Descriptions.** Behavior is one of the most noticeable deviances of a child with special needs, and therefore, is one of the most important to get correct when describing children with special needs when addressing their siblings. In the sampling, the majority of the books depict the behaviors of the children moderately well; of the eight books that specify a diagnosis of autism, all mention difficulty with speech, only three do not mention

sensory sensitivity, half mention stimming (repetitive behaviors), and many other typically autistic behaviors are mentioned or explained in the books. *Ian's Walk* by Laurie Lears beautifully illustrates typical behaviors related to autism by describing the walk that Tara and her brother, Ian, go on. In detailed paintings, Ian visually stims on the ceiling fan in a diner, experiences sensory overload in a flower market, and lays on the sidewalk listening to and observing the ground. These behaviors are presented as peculiar, but also as introspective and endearing. The book, *My Brother Autism and Me*, also accurately describes autistic behaviors, but does so in such a way that ostracizes the child with autism, pointing to the seeming foolishness of lining up toys or flapping arms. The books that do not address autism also describe behaviors, such as stubbornness, sensory overload, intellectual deficits, or physical difficulties related to children with other disabilities. In *My Brother is Special* by Murray Stenton, the narrator describes his brother, Ethan's, uninhibited love for everyone, propensity to fall asleep at random times due to medication, and obsessive-compulsive tendencies, all derived from his cerebral palsy.

### **The Presentation of the Sibling**

These books, while a character with special needs is crucial, are intended for and emphasize the siblings. The audience of siblings of children with special needs faces unique challenges, such as managing complex emotions and navigating relationships with neurotypical peers.

**The Emotions of a Sibling.** There are many emotions that are explored in this sampling of books, but the common themes of avoidance, embarrassment, and attempted understanding are most prominent. It is very understandable that siblings of children with special needs would

tend to avoid their situation and the emotions that it entails. Rebecca Elliot's *Just Because* is a perfect example of this avoidance, as the main character announces he doesn't know why that his sister Clemmie does not walk, talk, "cook macaroni...or do algebra;" he says it's "just because" (Elliot, 2010, p.2). *Don't Rush Me* by Chynna Laird also portrays avoidance, though less explicitly. The main character, Mia, has more than one family member with a disability and evidently struggles with her identity in that. Through many of her actions, such as deliberately dressing slowly, eating slowly, and walking slowly, Mia shows her desire for attention. Focusing significantly less on her siblings with disabilities, this story follows how Mia processes her world and meets her own needs, avoiding the issue of family dysfunction or her desires for special attention.

Embarrassment is a common emotion too and is a significant aspect of *In Jessie's Shoes*, *Ian's Walk*, and *The Best Worst Brother*. In all these, the main character is embarrassed of their sibling with special needs, whether it is because of unwanted attention they bring to the sibling, name calling, or the inconvenience that seems to follow their sibling. The emotion of embarrassment is understandable especially for siblings who are younger and receptive to other's opinions, as is expressed throughout *In Jessie's Shoes*, most notably, while Allie helps her brother get on the special needs bus, while her peers stand and mock them. This kind of embarrassment also leads to and encompasses self-pity, shown in the previous three books as well as *My Brother is Special* and *My Brother Autism and Me*. The kind of self-pity and jealousy that is presented in *My Brother Autism and Me* is expressed because children with special needs do take extra time, often receive extra help, and receive more attention.

While the emotions of avoidance and embarrassment are prevalent, the resolution of these should lean towards an attempt of understanding. Epitomized in Beverly Lewis's *In*

*Jessie's Shoes*, the transition from avoidance and embarrassment to understanding takes place as Allie experiences life, most literally, in her brother's shoes. Wearing his oversized shoes, she takes time to study the bugs and stare at the sky and learns how he is wired and how even she can enjoy the things she usually is annoyed with him for. Even more important for siblings is the understanding that they will feel all of these emotions and that is okay. Brennan and Mandy Farmer's book, *What About Me?* addresses the fact that the fluctuations are natural and that feeling isolated, embarrassed, sad, or frustrated is just as acceptable as understanding.

**How to Navigate Friendships.** One of the most difficult aspects of growing up in a home with a child with special needs is the complications in creating friendships with neurotypical peers. Because of the previously mentioned emotions of avoidance and embarrassment, many siblings are hesitant to bring friends into their atypical world. Many of the books in the sampling address the struggles of navigating friendships, such as *The Special Raccoon* and *Leah's Voice*. Friendship is explored through animals in Kim Carlisle's *The Special Raccoon*, where Renna the Raccoon brings home her friend Bluebell the Beaver to meet her sister, Brookie, who has an undefined, but significant disability. Bluebell, who claims he has never met an animal with a disability, asks Renna many blunt and slightly ignorant questions, but Renna responds idealistically and with clarity. While setting an unrealistic standard for friendship and understanding, *The Special Raccoon* still addresses the issue holistically. In Lori DeMonra's *Leah's Voice*, the protagonist, Logan, is having her first play date with Abby, but finds that Leah, her older sister with autism, causes a rift in their friendship. Abby does not like how Logan plays with them and at the end of the play date, even says that she doesn't like Leah and she doesn't want to play at Logan house again. Abby eventually apologizes after learning about Leah's autism and artwork, but not all stories end with this kind of understanding. In A

*Manual for Marco*, the narrator states that her “friends need to be comfortable around [her] brother” and if they are afraid of him, she will not invite them over again (Abdullah, 2015, p.22). Some of the stories even feature the protagonist standing up for their sibling, showing the kind of social pressure that the siblings of children with special needs undergo. In *My Brother Doesn't Want to Play*, the main character experiences friends who call her brother weird. In response, she tells them to leave him alone. While rather impractical, this response shows that relationship building does not come quickly when one is trying to protect a sibling.

### **Conclusion**

Children’s literature that caters to the audience of the siblings of children with special needs is difficult to find, often poorly illustrated, but is able to convey a variety of messages in a variety of ways. By approaching this audience with accuracy in descriptions of special needs children and with realistic relatability, books like these will make an impact on siblings, children with special needs, and families as a whole. While not all the books in this sampling are effective or accurate, by approaching this audience, the authors contribute to the exposure of this important type of literary audience and because of them, the conversation will continue.

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