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Review: Ria Cheyne. *Disability, Literature, Genre: Representation and Affect in Contemporary Fiction.* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2019). ISBN: 978-1-789-62077-1, 224 pages. Hbk £22.50

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‘Disability makes us feel’ (1) is the punchy opening statement of Ria Cheyne’s *Disability, Literature, Genre: Representation and Affect in Contemporary Fiction*, which indeed healthily summarises the core endeavour of the book. Part of the ‘Representations: Health, Disability, Culture and Society’ series edited by Stuart Murray and Robert McRuer, it is a stimulating study which brings together a diverse number of contemporary examples from different kinds of genre fiction and examines representations of disability through their relationship with affect. Cheyne’s text delivers an insightful analysis of the conjunction of disability studies, genre studies, and affect studies, and it builds a convincing connection among these three pillars. The book is quite comprehensive; several contemporary examples from five types of genre fiction are carefully selected to lay bare how the representations in these texts challenge, disrupt or alter the way disability is commonly perceived and represented. It is an ambitious undertaking to extend the already complex theoretical discussion; yet Cheyne manages to pay equal, in-depth attention to each in her examination of the representative examples she has selected. She suggests that these texts dislocate conventional ways of representing or presenting disability within genre fiction, thereby destabilising how disability and affect are imagined in relation to one another. Moreover, she is careful to include a variety of disabilities across genres rather than prioritising one form of disability over the other. Thus, disability is discussed through the book in its varied representations, from mental to physical. Her book would appeal to both the lay person and academics who might be interested in the cross-section of disability, genre fiction, and affect.

The book is composed of an introduction, five chapters (each of which is dedicated to one specific genre – horror, crime, science fiction, fantasy, and romance), and a conclusion. It also has a comprehensive annotated bibliography of disability in genre fiction, detailing the books’ genres and the disability(ies) represented in them. Wide ranging footnotes guide the reader for further explanation and reading should they need it. The fact that Cheyne focuses on multiple genres rather than picking one sets her book apart from its counterparts, and it allows Cheyne to explore disparate genre characteristics and their interaction with representations of disability.

The introduction, ‘Affective Encounters and Reflexive Representations,’ maps the need for a combined, interdisciplinary approach by declaring both disability and genre fiction as ‘affective encounters’ (1). Cheyne clearly lays out her aim and frames her scope, which is ‘to demonstrate that a disability-informed approach can offer new and transformative insights into the workings of the genre; to establish genre fiction as a key site of investigation for disability studies; and to demonstrate the value of an affective approach to both disability and genre’ (2). In other words, she promises to

navigate different waters by amalgamating three distinct yet intricately related fields of study in an innovative way to investigate how they inform and are informed by one another, thus anchoring her book's overall objective.

From the onset, she contends that 'the affects invoked by disability intersect genre affects in multiple ways: from enhancing desired affects and thus the reader's pleasure, to creating an affective conflict or confusion which, while it may also be pleasurable, may disrupt or unsettle disability associations' (1). She also highlights contemporary genre fiction's reflexive nature, which, she argues, help alleviate readers' engagement with their own reading processes. Contemporary genre fiction, in Cheyne's argument, is always already concerned with its own creation and construction process as well as with its own history. Therefore, it contains both a critique and a commentary on its own existence. This allows a meaningful and engaging discussion on the way readers configure disability and the way they reflect upon their own reaction to disability in general.

A good portion of Cheyne's argument is devoted to how to reconcile disability, genre fiction, and affect on a foundation that would do justice to each. She explicitly delineates what she means by the core concepts of her investigation. She first draws attention to how genre fiction is 'fiction that works to produce an anticipated affective experience by means of characteristic tropes, devices, icons, or storylines' (3-4), thereby laying out the inherent relation between affect and genre fiction. It is these characteristic tropes, devices, icons, or storylines that provide the ground for dismantling the conventional representations of disability through the examples she examines in her book. She then explains her understanding of disability as 'a complex attribute arising from the intersection of bodyminds with the natural or built environment, social expectations, systemic barriers, and cultural norms' (9). Lastly, Cheyne draws her definition of affect – or rather the impossibility of pinning down a singular definition of affect – from various critical sources such as Dan Goodley et al. and Deborah B. Gould. Her discussion may get jargon-heavy at times, but she makes sure she delivers proper explanations either in the body text or in the footnotes.

Another important aspect of her argument is the delineation of the suspicion of/aversion for affect in disability as well as literary studies. While the former has not really disregarded the impact or importance of emotive reaction, the way it dealt with it has been limited and limiting. As for the latter, there has always been a sense of wariness towards texts that are explicitly sentimental or emotional because such explicitness has come to be associated with a somehow lower literary quality.

This has much to do with ‘affective fallacy,’ coined by W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley, to whom Cheyne herself refers in her argument, as this theory has had such an impact on the way texts have been evaluated within academia. The fact that genre fiction is geared explicitly towards creating certain affects has been regarded as a devaluation of its literariness.

Although she never mentions Hans Robert Jauss in her discussion of affect and genre fiction, there are definite parallels between her discussion and Jauss’ conceptualisation of ‘horizon of expectations,’ the addition of which may have enriched the overall argument of the book. Generating certain affective responses relies on the assumption that readers are familiar with both the conventions of a particular genre and the conventional representations of disability either within fiction or in real life. By selecting examples that frustrate such conventionalities, Cheyne illustrates how the frustration felt by the reader is not necessarily negative. On the contrary, she sees this as an opportunity to have a meaningful discussion about the ways disability can be configured within genre fiction, both of which she regards in positive terms rather than seeing them as the marginalised other of their binary counterparts.

The selection of genre fiction instead of literary fiction is significant here, especially due to the perceived close ties of the former with affect. This does not, however, mean that Cheyne is unaware of the challenges of her focus, nor does it mean that she presents a naïve reading of the exemplary texts she examines. Indeed, focusing on genre fiction and this close relationship with affect enables Cheyne to adopt an innovative regard whereby genre fiction is not ‘a simple prescription for either individual or structural disablism’ (166) but a truly novel ground for a deeper engagement with disability and affect. Similarly, one original aspect of her book is the specific attention paid to affect and how it can be conceived together with disability and within genre fiction. She presents how representations of disability within genre fiction can challenge the perceived inferiority of people with disabilities, and how ‘the *representational habits of genre fiction* may shore up or encourage disability attitudes’ (166) (emphasis mine).

Cheyne manages to find a unique and compelling angle to steer each genre discussion and an affect related to that genre, namely, fear, anxiety, wonder, enchantment, and joy, respectively. It is also notable that chapters in the book are not repetitive in their theoretical framing. Chapter 1 titled ‘Horror: Fearful Bodyminds,’ for instance, starts by referring to what can be called a reciprocal suspicion between disability studies and horror. Horror has contributed greatly to the calcifying of several stereotypical representations of disability. Disability, on the other hand, has been used not for its

own sake, but for ‘representing something else.’ However, Cheyne asserts that there is room for critical engagement, which she demonstrates through Stephen King’s *Duma Key* and Thomas Harris’ Hannibal Lecter series. While King’s novel employs a series of disability representations only to later dismantle them, Harris’ series is more focused on the blurred line between sanity and insanity thereby debunking any attempt to ‘encompass the complexity of the human mind’ (50). Her selection of these texts enables Cheyne to elaborate on the production of affect, which in horror’s case is fear, while reading about the representation of varied disabilities within horror fiction.

Chapter 2 titled ‘Character and Closure: Disability in Crime’ is a detailed analysis of affect produced in crime fiction (i.e. anxiety) through representations of disability. As the title already suggests, the chapter zooms in on the three types of characters found in crime fiction, namely, the investigator, the perpetrator, and the victim, and explores how and to what ends each can be configured as persons with disabilities. After an affect-based comparison between crime and horror fiction, she analyses Jeffrey Deaver’s *The Bone Collector* and Peter Robinson’s *Friend of the Devil*, both of which have quadriplegic protagonists who nevertheless generate different affective outcomes. Her selection of texts in this chapter particularly problematises the association of disability with disorder and the demand for closure in crime fiction by offering the reader alternative ways to think about conventional characterisations.

In Chapter 3 ‘Wondrous Texts: Science Fiction,’ Cheyne situates ‘wonder’ at the centre of her discussion, different from other scholarly engagements with disability and science fiction. Wonder, an umbrella term that covers a variety of emotions evoked by the science-fiction reading experience, has the capacity to generate distinct affective and reflexive responses in the reader. Cheyne also expertly integrates a discussion of ‘supercrip’ into her analysis of science fiction texts and why this concept is problematic, especially in relation to how certain characters with disabilities can evoke certain emotive responses. Peter Watts’ *Rifters* trilogy, Cheyne argues, does not provide clear-cut, easy answers to how and what the readers (should) feel towards a particular event or character, which results in what she calls ‘affective disorientation’ (103). Similarly, she points to Lois McMaster Bujold’s *Vorkosigan Saga*, which deliberately confuses the sanity/insanity binary and upon which she initiates a discussion of meta-affect.

In Chapter 4, Cheyne focuses on George R. R. Martin’s ‘A Song of Ice and Fire’ series and Joe Abercrombie’s ‘First Law’ trilogy to exemplify representations of disability which provide metanarratives on disability through the enchantment created by fantasy fiction. The argument on meta-affect and metanarratives is enriched by

the represented disabilities ranging from congenital (like dwarfism exemplified by Tyrion Lannister), acquired (usually as a result of punishment as exemplified by Jamie Lannister, for instance), to temporary (such as Arya Stark's blindness); they allow, Cheyne contends, a critical contemplation on the cultural and social ramifications of disability representations.

The optimistic ending or closure expected from a romance novel is seemingly at odds with the connotations of disability. In her last chapter titled 'Desirable Futures: Romance,' Cheyne challenges the notion that the disabled body is conceived neither as a desirable body nor as a desiring one in romance fiction through Mary Balogh's 'Simply' quartet along with several other examples from Christina Dodd to Julia Quinn, which is indeed a deviation from the more structured focus on two specific examples in the previous chapters. Throughout the chapter she skilfully points at the potential role romance fiction can play in making prejudice against disability and people with disabilities more overtly felt (160). Finally, in her conclusion, Cheyne concentrates on what she calls 'reflexive representations' and argues that they inspire to rethink, reformulate, and reflect upon one's feelings and assumptions about disability through deviations from 'disability tropes and icons conventional to a particular genre' (162). Reflexive representations not only trigger an affective reaction but also an affective reaction about one's reaction, which Cheyne calls 'meta-affect.'

Ria Cheyne's book offers a fresh way of looking at the representation(s) of disability in genre fiction in relation to affect, something disability studies has been somewhat reluctant to critically engage so far. This investigation is conducted across multiple genres; ranging from horror to romance, the genres in the book are explored by multiple examples to show various ways of configuring disability as well as thinking about the way one feels about those configurations. The extent of her scholarly research is quite evident, but what is specifically laudable is the range of examples Cheyne provides. She certainly taps into texts that deviate from conventional representations of the disabled bodymind while managing to include popular examples from well-known authors in each genre. Even when the examples are supposedly conventional representations, she proposes alternative ways of engaging with them, especially in relation to the way they make one feel about their feelings, thereby gearing the discussion towards meta-affect.

Ultimately, Ria Cheyne illustrates the multifaceted and complex ways disability can and should be construed, both in the writing and reading processes, and how nuanced and varied affective responses can be. Instead of propounding monolithic readings or interpretations of disability, she opens a dialogue through which representations

of disability within genre fiction are disrupted, dismantled, and deconstructed by dwelling upon affective encounters. *Disability, Literature, Genre* has the potential to become an essential reading for those who seek a detailed yet accessible investigation of multiple theoretical frameworks overlapping with one another to challenge perceived assumptions about disability.

Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

