

Message Received: An Examination of Disabled Voice, Choice, and Understanding in Susan  
Glickman's *The Discovery of Flight* and Lynn Coady's *Watching You Without Me*

by

Jenna Dobbelsteyn

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## **Author's Declaration**

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

## Abstract

This thesis examines how disabled voice, agency, and understanding are represented in two Canadian novels: Susan Glickman's *The Discovery of Flight* and Lynn Coady's *Watching You Without Me*. Using a framework that I call the "Pendulum of Understanding," I explore how characters with physical and intellectual disabilities are listened to (or not) by those around them, and how this affects their narrative presence and autonomy. Through close reading and the lens of disability studies theory, I argue that while both novels attempt to centre disabled characters, the type of disability significantly impacts how voice is facilitated and understood. Libby, a physically disabled character with access to assistive technology, is given narrative space and agency. Kelli, who has an intellectual disability, is often filtered through the assumptions of others. This comparison reveals a broader discomfort with voices that require a form of intellectual facilitation, and a tendency to either neglect or assume understanding. Ultimately, this project calls for a more nuanced, ethical approach to imagining disabled voices so that knowledge and humility are balanced to achieve appropriate understanding.

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## Table of Contents

Author's Declaration.....	ii
Abstract.....	iii
Acknowledgements.....	iv
Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1 - People, Places, and The Pendulum of Understanding .....	5
Chapter 2 - The Allowance of Understanding in <i>The Discovery of Flight</i> .....	32
Chapter 3 - Unavailable Understanding in <i>Watching You Without Me</i> .....	60
Chapter 4 - Final Thoughts .....	87
Works Cited .....	94

## Introduction

In not-so-recent years, “to invoke disability as a category of critical analysis [was] . . . a fairly radical endeavor” (Samuels 58). Samuels wrote these words in 2002 about her “present time” (58), and now, by 2025, the topic of disability studies has transformed from a niche interest to a vital area of study for scholars, academics, and policy makers alike. The shift of disability from a neglected topic to an included one reflects the growing recognition of disability as a complex social and cultural construct. This highlights its importance in shaping both individual and collective identities. Though disability has only recently become an object of critical discussion, this does not mean that disability has not existed in the earliest literary works of Western cultural history. In fact, many of the earliest texts include depictions of disability, whether in the form of physical impairment, cognitive difference, or mental illness. The same can be said for the many writings of the Canadian literary canon, where the representation of disability has long been shaped by a complex interplay of cultural, political, and historical factors. Maria Truchan-Tataryn notes that “[d]espite the ubiquity of images depicting disability in the narratives that have contributed to the shaping of Canadian national identity, images of unconventional bodies have not drawn critical attention” (ii). This lack of critical engagement with disability in Canadian literature speaks to a larger trend in which disability has been sidelined, both in terms of its representation and its social significance. Though the reality of this neglected attention has changed in recent years, the Canadian conversation remains rooted in its focus of the disabled body and fails to adhere to the nuance and separation required when addressing the treatment of intellectual disability in a text. Of particular interest is the notion of voice, and more specifically, how the disabled voice is described and represented through the

lens of agency, communication and expression. The tracking of the disabled voice in Canadian literature shows that the conflation of the body-mind often leads to a flattening of complex disability experiences, preventing a full understanding of the lived realities of disabled individuals. While the combination of the body and the mind is an important notion in the case of some conversations, a blanket integration of the two within academic criticism and social policy threatens to leave essential nuance and minutiae unexplored.

The incorporation of disability studies into literary criticism has allowed scholars to engage more deeply with the ways in which bodies and minds are portrayed in texts. Literature has often examined issues of voice and agency in relation to their impact on how characters behave, how other characters relate to them, and how their narratives unfold. The way a particular voice is conceived and perceived in a story is often filtered through religious, racial, economic, and cultural influences, as well as the presence of disability. Literature in itself is the representation of imagined voices, and there was a time when representation without input from the community being represented was a nonconcern for authors and the community. Now, the general principle of “nothing about us without us” (“Nothing”) reigns supreme within disability rights groups and advocacy organizations worldwide, emphasizing the importance of people with disabilities participating in the discussion of social policies that affect them.

Despite the general acknowledgement that active participation of people with disabilities is necessary within the creation of their representations, does this mean that members of other populations should stop imagining another’s perspective? I argue not, as active imagining with due diligence and nuance yields the growth of empathy and understanding of another’s experience. That said, when imagining any external experience, particularly the experience of intellectual disability, the impact of representing voices that may never be fully understood by

those creating the representation must be considered. What are the implications of imagining a voice that can never be confirmed as accurate due to an impossible-to-penetrate shield of the unknown? What if the person being represented remains unconcerned with what authors have to say about them and remains totally at the liberty of those held responsible for their well-being? There is still the inevitable truth, that, no matter how hard the disability studies field attempts to adopt a fully social modality of theory, there are certain people whose input on the accuracy or inaccuracies of a literary representation of how their minds work are currently inaccessible, and societal barriers have nothing to do with it.

To address this complex and nuanced issue, I will examine how the representation of the disabled voice in two contemporary Canadian novels exposes the way society imagines the voices and communication of people in the disabled community. The formatting of this project will be as follows: in Chapter 1, I will discuss the background and motivation for this project. Within this discussion, contextual information in relation to the social model of disability studies and my dual positioning of this project will be outlined. I will then define the terms and concepts used throughout the project and will argue that physical and intellectual disability should be occasionally separated in criticism. Then, I will explain why examination of disability in Canadian literature should exist as a separate, yet semi-permeable entity in relation to the examination of literature in the United States and provide a brief overview of the existing analysis on disability in literature published and distributed in Canada. Once adequate background is established, I will position two Canadian novels, *The Discovery of Flight* by Susan Glickman and *Watching You Without Me* by Lynn Coady, within the framework of my discussion on the representation of voice. Chapters 2 and 3 will act as a dual analysis in which the implications of parents and carers, familial religion, the time period in which the novels were

both written and set, and the narrators will be discussed in relation to the amount they listen and attend to the voice of the disabled character. Chapter 2 will focus on *The Discovery of Flight* and Chapter 3 will focus on *Watching You Without Me*. Finally, in Chapter 4, I will highlight key differences between the novels and how they relate to the type of disability represented in each and discuss the role of the author in establishing appropriate understanding. Potential for future research and discussion on the topic of the disabled voice will be discussed, as well as any final conclusions.

## Chapter 1 – People, Places, and The Pendulum of Understanding

### *Background and context*

One of the most fundamental aspects that separates human from animal, the thing that maintains the humanity and dignity of a person, is the acknowledgement from another that we are human. The recognition in another's eyes that '*Yes, we are the same despite the world of differences between us*' is a cornerstone of human interaction. Without it, an individual's existence can be overlooked and their worth diminished. The concept of *ubuntu* communicates this notion well. It is "a Xhosa word [that] means, loosely, 'a person is a person through other persons'" (Ratsoy 38), suggesting that humanity is not an isolated condition but one that is realized through our relationships and interactions with others. In a similar vein, communication theories, whether in professional development courses, educational programs, or family counseling, emphasize the required elements of successful communication within relationships, in the workplace, at school, or in the home. These theories state that in order for communication to successfully take place, the message, whether spoken, written, or otherwise communicated needs to be sent clearly by the communicator or message "sender" (Wrench et al. 2.2), and the message needs to be properly interpreted by the intended audience or "receiver" (Wrench et al. 2.2).

Throughout the experience of sending and receiving messages, there are many opportunities for a breakdown in this process to occur. The message sender could ineffectually, through no fault of their own, communicate their meaning. They could be clouded by emotion, or trauma, or some other barrier in language, which means that their message requires extra effort for it to be teased out by the intended audience. That said, a break down on the side of the

intended audience is more likely, and their interpretation of the intended message could be skewed due to a mishearing, or the result of events and other “noise” (Wrench et al. 2.2) that take place between the sending of the message and its reception. The receiver’s headspace could be biased, they could have placed mental emphasis on the wrong words, or they could simply have not been listening. What implication then does the introduction of a disability have on this system of communication? More often than not, the person with the disability, whether physical, intellectual, or sensory, is expected, like in so many other scenarios, to conform to the way society communicates so that others may understand them. This disregards the possibility that societal capacity to understand may be the real barrier to communication.

Sarah Gibbons, in her dissertation “Disablement, Diversity, Deviation: Disability in an Age of Environmental Risk,” problematizes this expectation and discusses autism and communication. She argues for the “depathologization of communication” and writes that “the onus for effective communication should not only rest on autistic people, but on society as a whole” (Gibbons 137). This shift in responsibility would require a fundamental rethinking of societal presupposition regarding communication, and it would challenge the long-standing notion that it is the responsibility of the disabled person to adapt. Hall also argues for a shift in responsibility. She writes, “Like Titus or the Philomela myth, the poems by Luczak and Koppers suggest that eyes, ears and hands need to be re-trained to read differently: they insist on diverse embodied and multisensory approaches to communication and voice” (Hall 129). This is a call to move beyond simplistic interpretations of communication and instead embrace a more inclusive and dynamic approach to understanding others. In essence, communication becomes a two-way process that requires patience, attention, and openness from all parties involved.

Though there is an agreement for a shift in communicative responsibility, especially in relation to neurodivergence and intellectual disability, society as a whole needs to remain attentive and diligent while wielding the power that accompanies such a responsibility. It is crucial that society recognizes its duty not just to listen but to truly attempt understanding. In this context, listening and attending become acts of power, and those who are in a position to listen have the responsibility to do so with respect, compassion, and purity of intent.

Real world examples of communication breakdown with the disabled community can be seen very obviously in the Netflix documentary *Tell Them You Love Me*. This 2023 documentary covers the story of former university professor Anna Stubblefield, who claimed the communicative autonomy of a young man with a physical and intellectual disability through the highly controversial facilitated communication method. Facilitated communication (or FC) “was first developed in Australia by Rosemary Crossley” and is a “method [that] involves providing emotional and physical support for individuals who type to talk, in the form of physical closeness and a light touch from a supporter that is ideally faded over time” (Gibbons 172). While undoubtedly successful and necessary for some individuals, this method is not fit for all people. In the particular case covered in *Tell Them You Love Me*, Stubblefield would hold the young man’s fingers into a point and physically assist in directing that point to the letters of an electronic communication device. After years of this communication partnership and several successfully completed university courses by the young man with the assistance of the professor, his family became increasingly skeptical in the legitimacy of his communication. Frustrated that they could not elicit the same type of responses from the young man that Stubblefield could, they began to question the authenticity of the young man’s efforts and the professor’s intentions. Stubblefield later revealed to the young man’s family that she had engaged in a “consensual”

sexual relationship with the young man, one which she claimed he incited via facilitated communication on his communication device. Later in the film, a strong advocate against FC provides his own assessment of the young man and claims that he does not have the cognitive capacity to function with a “level of abstraction” to know that the fridge and the picture of a fridge are the same (*Tell Them You Love Me* 01:15:00-01:16:00), let alone the ability to consent to romantic relationship. Anna Stubblefield maintains that she did no wrongdoing and that the man communicated his desires on his own, and the young man’s family maintain that Stubblefield has a “wicked mind” (01:45:48) and took advantage of him.

This documentary has problems besides the actual details of the horrific story it tells. An example arises when one considers the conclusion raised by the family and the assessment personnel in the film. They claim that the man in question does not have the ability to consent, yet this argument is placed against the action of the film itself whereby the film prominently features footage of the young man and facilitates the telling of a very personal and intimate story. If what they say is true, then by their own definition, the documentary should not exist. In addition to this problem, the medical personnel draw conclusions about the man’s capacity through their limited, Western window of examination. Though by no means are these methods comprehensive or inclusive of the many, impossible-to-determine strands of intellectual understanding, they claim and are given final authority, both within the film and broader society at large.

Though the problems with the documentary are evident, both the film and its criticisms reveal a serious issue for the disabled community. It reveals the many ways in which vulnerable individuals can be exploited and is evidence that in our world, there are current atrocities occurring in Western society where those who require some form of facilitated communication

are taken advantage of. Though this story is on the extreme end of someone taking advantage of power dynamics, minute, less-extreme-but-equally-harmful exploitations of those with alternative communication methods occur every day, showing society's failure to understand the complexity of alternative communication methods. In some ways, particularly when dealing with intellectual disability, "[p]resumption of [c]ompetence" (Donnellan qtd. in Dolmage 142) is not the "least dangerous assumption" (Donnellan qtd. in Dolmage 142) after all. Perhaps it is more dangerous to assume an understanding of a situation that we have no right to assume. The Stubblefield example shows a still-present ideology that certain methods of communication are attended to more than others, and that society is still full of people who instead of purely listening, watching, and feeling what another person is communicating to them, their own understanding or meaning is accepted and seen as more legitimate or valuable than others. It should be noted that when discussing facilitated communication, there is perhaps the tendency to look only at the official "facilitated communication" mentioned in *Tell Them You Love Me* and not the broader facilitated communication that happens on a daily basis between those who use alternative means to communicate and those who are close to them. If there is a person who uses only songs to communicate the emotions they are feeling, those who support them will naturally begin to know, though never fully understand, what each song means based on their accompanying behaviour and other non-verbal indicators of emotions (smiles, tears, facial expressions, etc). Those who use technology to type with their eyes, hands, or feet will sometimes need their computers or applications to physically be set up by others, which is also a form of facilitation. Within the use of official facilitated communication as well as during the informal, daily facilitation that many people require, there are serious ethical implications of a breakdown within this facilitation. Society in general needs to be dedicated to finding ways for

communicative facilitation of any kind to maintain the dignity and humanity of all those involved, and the outcome of this case is a stark reminder of the need for more nuanced, ethical approaches to communication with disabled individuals. What though, is the solution?

An avenue into the examination of why such grave misunderstandings as the Stubblefield case occur is to look at the issue of representation. Many articles and books about disability within literature focus on the issue of representation and discuss whether these representations are accurate, empathetic, or empowering, and what sort of messages they put forth into the collective imagination. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines *representation* as “[t]he action or fact of portraying a person or thing, esp. in an artistic medium; depiction.” In literature, representation of a societal group can be found in how a character speaks, acts, or is described within a narrative. Garland-Thomson’s article “Disability and Representation” notes that literature necessitates representation of some kind, and that this representation can shape our cultural understandings of disability. She writes:

To deal in images and narratives – whether they come from literature, art, film, or popular culture – is to focus on issues of representation. I mean here representation in its broadest sense, as a saturating of the material world with meaning. In this sense, disability is a story we tell about bodies. It is a received yet pliable story that changes over time and across place. Representation structures rather than reflects reality. The way we imagine disability through images and narratives determines the shape of the material world, the distribution of resources, our relationships with one another, and our sense of ourselves.

(Garland-Thomson, “Disability and Representation” 523)

While discussing representative issues is an important topic within the field, to focus *only* on representation is to ignore a particular nuance present in the conversation. There is the necessity

to look beyond this term. Many scholars of disability studies agree in different words that the examination of disability in a subject, or the study of representation of disability in a fictive or non-fictive media, should “move beyond just ‘policing’ cultural representations of disability” (Dolmage 101) and that academics should instead look at how disability is used in the narrative. Michael Bérubé hosts his own discussion of representation in his book *The Secret Life of Stories* but notes his resistance to using the term *representation* throughout his argument. He writes:

I say “deployments” (and I will use the ungainly term more than once) rather than “depictions” or “representations,” because I will argue—no, I will show—that disability and ideas about disability can be and have been put to use in fictional narratives in ways that go far beyond any specific rendering of any disabled character or characters.

Representations of disability are ubiquitous, yes, even or especially when you are not looking for them; but narrative deployments of disability do not confine themselves to representation. (2)

While I agree with Bérubé’s resistance to a narrow view of representation, I believe it is possible, and important, critically to engage with literary representations of disability. This engagement is particularly important in areas where society is still attempting to make sense of communicating with each other in a way that upholds dignity and humanity when some form of external facilitation is required in the communicative process.

Gibbons highlights, in relation to autism, that though there are many negative-coded stereotypes of representation in relation to communication, “[people with autism] also often face stereotypes concerning savantism and genius” (138). There is a common trope in literature featuring intellectual disability that Bérubé calls the “first person gambit” (“Narrative” 474), where the author speculates the inner monologue of the character in question. Commonly-

referred-to examples of this method in literature include the famous Benjy Compson from Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, the narrative positioning of Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, and it is also utilized by authors like "Moon" (Bérubé, "Narrative" 474) and directors like "Nolan (in *Memento*)" (Bérubé, "Narrative" 474). The implication of this technique, particularly in relation to characters who are nonspeaking or minimally verbal, is that it supports the widely held misconception that all individuals have a secret, hidden consciousness locked away that needs to be channelled through the right avenue or by way of the right person. It cannot be denied that this is the case for some, but this type of speculative thinking, as seen in the Stubblefield case and other cases of facilitated communication, is sometimes more harmful than beneficial.

Rather than policing literary representation and labeling books as being 'good' or 'bad,' I aim to simply identify the patterns of how the facilitation of voice and communication of disabled characters are represented in two novels in Canadian literature. By examining these representations in a nuanced way, I hope to offer insights into the complex dynamics of communication, identity, and power in the context of disability. While there will be sections of this discussion that outline moments of failure and success in these two novels, it is not my objective to provide answers as to how one should carry forth the information found in this project. It is my sincere hope that with the exposition of the treatment of narrative voice, readers will gain new perspective that will inform the ways in which they interact with all people, cause them to examine who they listen to, and help them to develop a new way of understanding.

*Social vs. Medical Model of Disability Theoretics: An Alternative Positioning*

This thesis will be positioned within both the social model of disability studies and the medical model of disability. A general, simple definition of the social model of disability studies is that users of this approach examine the ways in which the structure of society is responsible for the disabling of individuals. This approach challenges the medical model, which holds the diagnosis or disability itself is responsible for the presence of barriers. Kerry Cormier notes the emphasis on social focus of disability within the field of disability studies, writing that “[t]he field of disability studies examines the intersectionality of cultural, sociological, and political factors in preventing access to opportunities for all people. This paradigm promotes seeing disability not as a medical issue but as a social one” (Cormier 91). The demedicalization of disability in the field necessitates the examination of the ways in which the barriers that exist for people with disabilities are manmade, and how “[a] misfit occurs when the environment does not sustain the shape and function of the body that enters it” (Garland-Thomson, “Misfits” 594).

There is much discussion on the implications of the “classical denials of the body” (Dolmage 70) in relation to the function of the mind, particularly in terms of how disability is understood within various frameworks. The relationship between the body and mind has been the subject of much debate throughout the years, and contemporary disability studies often challenge the tradition of viewing them as separate or opposing forces and hold that the body and mind exist “always together” (Dolmage 67). While this philosophy exists with good purpose (i.e.: to resist the notion that the mind can and should exist without the body’s inherent weakness, especially those weaknesses that are exacerbated by disability), the disabled body is disproportionately more explored as a topic of criticism within disability studies, even when the medical model is discarded. Within this conversation, intellectual disabilities are often attached to physical disabilities without its own distinguished conversation or left out all together.

Dolmage acknowledges that there are “tensions created by this grouping” (20) but that different disability types are “united by the experience of stigma and oppression” (20). That said, while the social model of disability studies helps to address these tensions in many ways, it fails to fully address the complexities that emerge when considering intellectual disabilities in contrast to physical disabilities.

A basic reality of the world is that physical disability and intellectual disability are different, not only in the medical model of examining disability, but in the barriers that society imposes on them. The medical model, through focusing on diagnosing and treating specific impairment, often frames disability as an individual problem to be fixed or corrected. Alternatively, the social model argues that the barriers in place for those with disabilities are purely man-made and can be dismantled through proper societal practice. The stark division between these models creates a tension that is especially pronounced when discussing intellectual disabilities, which cannot always be neatly addressed through environmental or social change alone. To help ease this tension, by I will draw on the medical lens by deliberately distinguishing between discussions of physical and intellectual disability.

The social model of disability studies, with its heavy focus on physical social barriers, is the most widely accepted scholarly lens through which to frame discussions of disability, but the reader must acknowledge that the social implications for those with intellectual forms of disability are unavoidably different. Michael Bérubé’s work offers an important critique of the social model’s limitations, particularly in relation to intellectual disabilities. He writes, “[n]othing is gained by denying that some disabilities entail diminishment in function” (“Secret Life” 57). MacDonagh agrees and writes that “to argue that some people do not need more help — often significantly more help — than others in managing their day-to-day affairs . . . would be

absurd and dangerous” (272). These acknowledgments of differing modes of functionality by Bérubé and MacDonagh show that while social barriers are significant for many people, there are also inherent, unavoidable differences associated with certain disabilities, and these differing limitations yield differing social outcomes. In this way, ignoring the differences between disability types like the social model suggests, particularly when examining literature, serves to ignore the sheer scope of barriers that are built into certain societal systems, even if true limitations exist. I am not arguing to backtrack on the social model framework, but I do believe that a degree of segregation of disability types is occasionally required in critical examination so that not all disability types are assumed to have the same social barriers as one another.

The characters present in *The Discovery of Flight* and *Watching You Without Me* undoubtedly present diminished function in one way or another with varying levels of facilitation involved in their communication styles. Though Libby in *The Discovery of Flight* has certain cognitive faculties that establish successful communication without external intellectual interference, Kelli’s unnamed intellectual disability in *Watching You Without Me* affects her ability to process, communicate, and interact with the world around her. This changes the way in which the reader and other characters understand Kelli’s true meaning when she speaks and moves.

Michael Bérubé and Alice Hall discuss the tension that exists in conversations about narrative and intellectual disability at length, and Hall notes that many other scholars acknowledge this tension too:

“Like Osteen, Ralph Savarese argues that the “discomfort” with which disability studies has taken up questions of cognitive difference is connected to the fact that the social constructionist models of disability fit more easily with physical disabilities in which

“disabling” environmental factors and social attitudes can be clearly located outside of the individual with impairments” (Hall 94).

In the case of some characters, particularly those with intellectual disabilities, their environmental and societal influences have little to do with the barriers they face. There is no easy answer to how intellectual disability should be represented in literature, but as shown in the example of *Tell Them You Love Me* detailed above, an effort needs to be made to attend to this nuanced and difficult discussion. Hall continues:

There is, therefore, a tension between attending to the dangers of speaking for certain groups in a collective sense, and the need – critically, politically, aesthetically – to find a way of talking about cognitive difference, in the academy and in society in general. (95)

Bérubé agrees with Hall’s sentiment and writes that “[t]hose who cannot represent themselves *must* be represented” (emphasis mine, “Secret Life” 69). The consensus between these theorists is that society should not forgo the opportunity and necessity to include as many diverse stories within its fictive representation as possible, but that nuance must be attended to and applied with tact. The total denial or inattention to differences in diagnosis/disability type threatens to deny the chance for this nuance to be adopted.

With the insights from disability scholars who have written about disability in Canadian literature, disability in general media, and disability rhetoric acting as my guides, I will examine these two novels and discuss what their representations of disabled voices communicate about character interactions, the value of voices, and what, if any, lessons can be taken forward into a society that is seeking to value many different forms of voices. By stepping away, even momentarily, from a purely social model of theory, I hope to address the unique communication

needs of individuals with intellectual disabilities while still acknowledging the importance of societal responsibility.

### *Definitions*

Within this project, the term *intellectual disability* refers to a disability or deficit of the mind, encompassing limitations related to cognitive functioning, reasoning, and understanding. On the other hand, *physical disability* refers to a disability or deficit of the body, ranging from mobility differences to limitations in physical coordination and dexterity. These disabilities can exist together, manifest in a variety of ways, and influence daily activities, often requiring accommodations or modifications to enable a person's participation in current social contexts.

In recent years, the term *neurodivergent* has gained significant traction within both academic and social discussions. While its popularity has increased, it is important to recognize that there is a specific connotation with this term. Those who identify as neurodivergent move through the world in ways that differ from neurotypical individuals, meaning they may process, respond to, or interact with their environment in ways that are distinct to them as an individual and divert from mainstream social norms. However, a central aspect of this term suggests that there is still an underlying level of typical functioning that can be expected of neurodivergent individuals, as well as an emphasis on self-advocacy. I avoid using this term and opt instead for intellectual disability so as not to overstep into areas that may conflict with the autonomy or self-representations of those who identify as such. My goal is to respect the space and agency of neurodivergent individuals and to avoid making assumptions about their needs or experiences beyond what they choose to communicate or advocate for themselves.

For the purposes of this project, I will also make use of the terms *non-verbal* and *minimally verbal*, distinguishing between these two groups as they are often conflated but carry important differences. The term *non-verbal* will be specifically reserved for Libby in *The Discovery of Flight*, as the sounds she produces do not form words with defined meaning, either colloquially or as listed in the dictionary. Libby may vocalize or make sounds, but her utterances do not constitute what is conventionally referred to as speech. In contrast, *minimally verbal* will be used to address Kelli in *Watching You Without Me*, who, while still using spoken words, has very limited verbal communication but can still speak and form short sentences depending on the situation. Kelli typically relies on a small set of spoken words or repetitive speech, such as echolalia, to express herself. Despite this vocal ability, Kelli often requires interpretation or assistance from external characters in order to convey her needs or desires. This distinction is essential for a nuanced understanding of how different communication methods play a role in character interactions and external influencing factors.

For the purposes of this project, the term *voice* will serve as an umbrella term, encompassing a range of meaning depending on the context in which it is used. The first definition is the denotative meaning of the word *voice*, which in the *Canadian Oxford Dictionary* is defined as “sound formed in the larynx etc. and uttered by the mouth, esp. human utterance in speaking, shouting, singing.” Another form of *voice* that I will frequently address is the many forms of non-verbal communication that extend beyond verbal speech. These may include non-verbal forms of communication, such as gestures, body language, facial expressions, sign language, or any range of assistive technology device that facilitate communication. A third layer of *voice* I will explore is best described by the term *narrative agency*, where the character says or does something that has impact on the course of the narrative or exhibits a life choice that is

adhered to and respected by other characters, specifically defined by Van Laer and Orazi as “the ability to control the development of the story characters and plot, with lasting changes to the narrative world” (95). A character exercising narrative agency may make decisions or take actions that alter the direction of the story, ensuring that their presence and impact are felt by other characters. This form of voice is crucial, as it underscores the importance of each character’s contribution to the larger narrative, even when their verbal communication may be limited or unconventional.

Another phrase I will often utilize is *The Pendulum of Understanding*, a personally coined term used to highlight the notion that within communication, there is a broad range of understanding that a message receiver is capable of. This pendulum does not apply to the message sender but instead focuses on the reception of a particular message and the ability of the receiver to maintain a level of understanding that is appropriate for the context they find themselves within. For the sake of this metaphor, picture the message receiver as the bob of the pendulum, which can swing itself back and forth between three distinct zones: neglected understanding, assumed understanding, and appropriate understanding. Before highlighting what appropriate understanding looks like, it is important to first highlight the two danger zones that exist within the pendulum of understanding. These danger zones are much more clearly defined than appropriate understanding, which is more nuanced. One extreme side of the pendulum is neglected understanding. This side represents the total lack of understanding of the voice or message of the message sender, whether that is due to the message receiver’s biased dismissal, a clouded personal experience, a lack of attention, or a complete lack of knowledge or intellectual capacity in relation to the communication methods utilized by the message sender. I should note here that within this danger zone, blame and fault do not necessarily apply (though there are

certainly situations where intentional wrong-doing and discrimination would result in neglected understanding). Those who engage in neglected understanding ignore signs and messages from the message sender, whether those signs are subtle or obvious, and the message sender is left without attention.

The other danger zone in the pendulum of understanding exists as the opposite extreme, and this comes to pass when full understanding is assumed. A more dangerous space, assumed understanding is the notion that the message receiver believes they perfectly understand the needs, desires, meanings, and experiences of the message sender based solely on their own knowledge of the situation. Unlike neglected understanding, assumed understanding attempts to attend to the needs of another, but the message receiver is so *certain* of their own knowledge that whether the message sender is able to show signs of communication or not, the message receiver will act according to their own agenda. In other words, it is an assumption of knowledge that is in fact unattainable. This extreme, like the neglected understanding, does not necessarily mean that the message receiver should be blamed. While some may assume understanding due to a growth of pride and inability to admit wrong-doing, others may just as often be engaged there when a culturally imposed ignorance is in place, or they are so clouded by their own bias that acknowledgement of the unknown is impossible. Assumed understanding occurs when there is a lack of attention to the daily humbling required in reminding oneself that they do not always know best based on their own lived experience.

There is also appropriate understanding. Appropriate understanding occurs when the receiver finds a balance between acknowledging one's own experience and knowledge, while, at the same time, *never* assuming full knowledge over a situation. It is the acknowledgement that total understanding will never occur when communicating with another, regardless of their

ability. When appropriate understanding is achieved, the receiver then acts under this acknowledgement of the things they know for sure and the things they can never know, and there is harmony. For any type of communicative facilitation to be ethical, appropriate understanding is required. Understanding becomes a moment-to-moment assessment of what the other needs, with the message receiver growing comfortable with the unknown. If a perfect balance between the receiver's acquired knowledge and acknowledgement of ignorance of the sender's full experience comes to pass, those who inevitably need help to survive unharmed will remain unharmed. Though a utopic concept, I will generally use these terms with the hope that appropriate understanding, a facet, in my opinion, of *ubuntu*, will some day be a universal experience for all people.

Throughout the course of this project, I acknowledge that there will undoubtedly be moments when the terms I use fail to perfectly communicate the precise meaning I intend or may carry unintended negative connotation. In the last ten years, there has been ongoing debate and evolution in the way society approaches language when addressing members of the disabled community. These discussions involve the weighing of the use of "identity-first" language in place of "person-first" language, as well as the nuanced differences between terms such as "disability" and "difference." Questions also arise about how best to describe various forms of disability. Do we say mobility disability? Physical disability? Cognitive or intellectual? Developmental? The terminology is constantly in flux. I am sure that in the years following this project, accepted terms are likely to change and morph even more. It is for this reason that I humbly acknowledge the inevitable imperfection of my terms with the understanding that language is not static but continually adapts to reflect the changing landscape of social awareness and understanding. I also wish to note that there are some instances where for the sake of

grammatical flow, I will opt for the use of “disabled character” over “character with a disability” despite my personal preference, based on my experience, for the latter. My philosophy is that I will use person-first language unless the person to whom I refer prefers something else. That said, I recognize that writing, like any form of communication, requires balance and flexibility, and trust that my audience will appreciate the intention behind my word choices as they arise.

### *The Canadian Discussion*

To gain a general understanding of how a country imagines disability, one must first look to its history. Deborah Stienstra finds it critical to note that the concept of “disability” as a societal acknowledgement entered this land with its colonial invaders, writing:

While concepts of disability and impairment were and are not part of many Indigenous languages [36,52], the practices of marking difference based on bodily impairments and assuming a devalued body together with the medical model of disability came as part of colonial systems and practices. (6)

In other words, valuable bodies and minds were only those who contributed to the project of productivity and were categorized on the basis of “productive and reproductive capabilities” (Stienstra 6). Not only did people with disabilities themselves disrupt the capitalist machine as it began to take hold throughout Canada’s industrial establishment, but those who provided daily support to those with disabilities were unable to contribute productively to the machine’s fabrication. Society needed a place for people with disabilities to go if their families were expected to support themselves, and by “1876 on the shores of Lake Simcoe near Orillia, Ontario” (Burghardt et al. 94), Canada’s first institution for the disabled had opened its doors. Dubbed the “Asylum for Idiots,” this institution was “initially considered a progressive

development from earlier asylums due to its designation as a facility solely for the ‘feeble-minded’” (Burghardt et al. 94). Burghardt notes that “[o]ver the next 150 years, Canada’s institutional system expanded significantly,<sup>1</sup> reaching its peak in the post-World War II years when the internal population of the Orillia asylum alone reached almost 3,000 residents” (94). During this time in our country, cases of neglect, experimentation, sterilization, abuse, and discrimination dominated the institutional landscape, and many Canadians turned a blind eye or were simply unaware of the horrors taking place in the facilities that claimed to care for our loved ones. One could say that it was a time of extremely neglected understanding.

Though many tend to speak of institutions as a past problem in Canadian reality, this is not the case. New Brunswick, Newfoundland, Ontario and British Columbia had closed “all of their *large* institutions for people with intellectual disabilities” (emphasis mine, “The Right Way” 2) by 2009, and though 2009 is shockingly late when considering that critics and activists began their fight throughout the “1950s and 1960s” (Galer, “Disability Rights”), at least these provinces have actually closed most of them down. In contrast, some Canadian provinces still place value in the institutional system. Manitoba and Nova Scotia are still home to institutional facilities (“Module 1”), though Nova Scotia has recently made strides to close their remaining institutions despite being “one of the last provinces where it is still common for people with disabilities to be housed in institutions” (Gillmore “Inside”). Even with these moves towards change, much debate exists in Canada over the value of places that provide acute care for those who need more comprehensive supports. Barken writes that “Doris Martin, a policymaker, discussed how institutions ‘are required in the continuum’ for people with the most complex care needs, stating that ‘we do need all levels of support’ in Nova Scotia” (60). Those on the other side of the debate argue “the view that people should not be institutionalized simply because they need more

intensive care” (62). Some think that community-based housing models rectify many of the problems posed by larger institutions, and the popularity of smaller group/care homes is growing throughout the country. Though better in some ways, these homes are often still subject to intense policy and red tape according to provincial guidelines, and some find reason for criticism in these regulations:

Critics of licencing practices feel that ‘community homes’ merely reflect the institutions they aim to replace, albeit with fewer residents. . . [w]hen the staff spends so much time and energy following rules developed at a bureaucratic level, they are often unable to prioritize the needs and interests of the people living in a group home. (Barken 63)

The question of care and housing is not one that is easily remedied. No matter what side of the current debate one falls on, the discussion is founded on the question of what is best for the individual and moves toward appropriate understanding, which is leaps and bounds better than functioning within neglected understanding and only serving what is best for the colonial-capitalist machine.

While progress is taking place, the impact of such a history does not disappear once the institutional doors close. What remains in Canadian society is the overshadowing of a history where those in positions of authority have made broad generalizations about what is right for a community of individuals who are as different as a year’s worth of falling snowflakes, with each person changing and evolving into different forms throughout the course of their lives. What remains is an embedded lack of control for those who are disabled, either due to neglected understanding or assumed understanding, and the generally held sense that “the abled know what is best for you” has a tight, wide-reaching grip on our nation’s impression of voice and agency.

## *In Literature*

Much of this project will rely on the critical writings of American scholars as they analyse and interpret American texts. While these writings are a valuable asset, it is important to note that the historical differences between the United States and Canada in relation to disability, though subtle, are present, and thus necessitate an examination of literature that is independent and unique from the discussion of American literature. Though American and Canadian culture are in communication with one another, the manifestation of ideals presents differently.

The institutional history in the United States of America is shockingly similar to Canada's in terms of institutional popularity and modernity's subsequent, slow deinstitutionalization. DeLano writes that "[m]ental institutions in America predate the reality of an American nation . . . [t]he earliest hospital for the mentally ill, the Publick Hospital for Persons of Insane and Disordered Minds, was founded in Virginia in 1773" and that the "first modern institution for disabled people was founded by Samuel Gridley Howe in 1848 in Boston, Massachusetts" ("A History"). The United States is also trending towards closing their "large, state-run institutions" ("Near Zero"), and the system is largely reliant on smaller group/community homes, just as we are in Canada. Though these similarities exist between the two countries, the difference exists at the legal level. Barnartt notes:

For one thing, the legal conceptions of both "equality" and "disability" used by the two countries are quite different (Oakes, 2005). Specifically, disability in Canadian federal law is dealt with under "human rights" whereas the American system deals with it under "minority rights" (Blomley and Pratt, 2001). In Canada, equality for people with disabilities is explicitly included at the constitutional level in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms (Bickenbach, 2001: 570). Discourse around disability in Canada is often based

upon notions of citizenship or citizenship rights (Rioux and Prince, 2002), but this is not the case in the US (Tyjewski, 2006). (“Social Movement”)

This difference highlights that in Canada, disability has been a community endeavor since the implementation of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms in 1987. In contrast, America implemented the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990. In some ways, the consolidation of all federal policy in relation to specific acts of discrimination against disability into one streamlined document is valuable for ease of search and access. That said, the separation of disabled protections into a separate document maintains that they are a population which is adjacent, rather than a part of, the general coverage of federal rights.

Small differences in culture and constitution as noted above can have major implications, particularly in the manifestation of a cultural imaginary. For this reason, though Canadian narrative and theme share much in common with the literature of America, there deserves to be a separate and unique examination of disability’s presence within Canadian literature.

While there are many examples of critical, academic writings on disability in general that are being produced in Canada, like in the *Canadian Journal of Disability Studies*, numerous books, articles, and dissertations, few address the rich canon of disability representations in the fictive literature produced in Canada. The few criticisms present are exceedingly helpful in placing Canada within the broader conversation of disability in literature, though they themselves acknowledge the rarity of their positioning. Shane Neilson makes the gap plain as he writes, “Canadian context lags far behind the American one in terms of the prominence of disability justice issues within the Canadian literature (dis)community” (Neilson 212). This gap is so prevalent that a comparison between Canadian literature and American literature’s analysis

of disability in literature is not yet possible. Maria Truchan-Tataryn also notes this gap in her book *(In)visible Images: Seeing Disability in Canadian Literature, 1823-1974*:

It is of note that even though *As For Me and My House* is the most critically analyzed text in the history of English Canadian literature, I have not encountered any work that acknowledges or examines the character of Peter Lawson, the “boy who limps” (37).<sup>102</sup> This elision manifests the critical neglect of disability that contributes to “literature’s complicity in the historical devaluation of people with disabilities” (Mitchell and Snyder, Narrative 17). Furthermore, this critical oversight produces the paradox “of disability’s definitive invisibility in the cultural imaginary” (16). (Truchan-Tataryn 150)

Despite this gap, Truchan-Tataryn notes that the attempt at rectification is presently being established, and that “Canadians engage in an ongoing process of questioning and adjusting national precepts—legitimizing voices from the margins and, ideally, decentring power establishments” (250). There can be no expectation that neither Canadian imaginative representation of disability nor its critical analysis of disability in narrative will ever be perfect, but work is constantly being done to establish a method of viewing the imaginary in a way that lifts voices up rather than tears voices down.

The relevance of this topic within Canadian academia is that though authors have done work in Canadian disability studies to examine “whether Canada is a caring nation in name only or also in practice” (Muredda 5) with mixed results, there is always space for more conversation. The writings on disability in Canadian fictive literature are few, and even fewer are the critical analyses of how the disabled *voice* is represented in literature. It is vitally important for every country to track its cultural imaginary in order to properly address one another with the knowledge and acceptance of the other’s humanity and the unknown while communicating, thus

achieving appropriate understanding. Since the dawn of disability studies and its examination within literature, academics and laypeople alike have been positively influenced by the realization that many barriers faced by those with disabilities are in place due to an exclusive pattern of societal organization. Despite these positive changes, discussions of disability's representation must be continued. A halt in the discussion of disability's representation in literature assumes that because these discussions have been started, and many authors who deploy disability are doing so in attempt to right the wrongs of the literature of the past, that these positive changes are now a commonly adopted way of seeing the world. This is not the case, and the subject cannot be abandoned if humanity is to move forward respectfully, even in a progressive country like Canada.

Within the context of this project, I use the term "Canadian literature" loosely. Though the institution of Canadian Literature-with-a-capital-L exists as a system of discussion, theme, and genre in the study of narrative, for the sake of this project, I will designate as Canadian literature texts that are produced and published within Canada's borders. I acknowledge that within this geographic definition of Canadian literature, Indigenous literature exists as a separate, rich body of texts with its own themes, implications, and discussions. Though Indigenous novels are not present in this project, the examination of Indigenous literature will remain ever-present as a potential point of comparison for future projects on the topic of disabled literature and voice. The novels chosen for this project are purposeful, specific, and act as a mirror to one another in the topics of parents and care, religion, setting, narration, authorship/deployment, and differences in disability type (physical versus intellectual), and any exclusion of alternatively diverse groups of people is unintentional.

## *The Novels*

This project will focus on the novels *Watching You Without Me* by Lynn Coady and *The Discovery of Flight* by Susan Glickman. Lynn Coady “is a Canadian novelist, journalist and TV writer, originally from Cape Breton Island, NS and now living in Toronto” (“About”). Her work is the subject of numerous articles and she is revered as “a unique voice” (Steeves) in the Canadian literary scene. Her impressive biography lists numerous nominations and awards throughout her writing career. A common thread throughout Coady’s works is “wry humour” (Gillespie 20), which she uses to examine “the absurdities and hypocrisies of life in Maritime Canada” (Gillespie 20). *Watching You Without Me* is the most recent of her numerous published works. Like Coady, Susan Glickman has won numerous awards for her writing. She “grew up in Montréal” and “is the author of eight books of poetry” (“Bio/Contact”). Along with her poetry, she has written four novels and numerous critical essays. Her “contemporary” (Panofsky) writing is often found “catalyzing historical events . . . in an effort to amplify [her] understanding of the cultural past and the Canadian present” (Panofsky). Glickman “now works only as a freelance editor specializing in academic books” (“Bio/Contact”) after many years teaching across multiple university settings. *The Discovery of Flight* is her fourth and most recent novel.

Each of these novels provides a unique depiction of the voice of a disabled character, and each novel focusses on a different type of disability. *The Discovery of Flight* features the voices of two sisters. Libby, the older sister, is described as “paralyzed . . . from birth” (Glickman 1), though extensive time is spent ensuring the reader knows that Libby is “smart” (1) and has the ability to communicate independently through her assistive technology. Sophie, the younger sister, is typically abled, and uses physically normative ways of communicating. The narrative flips back and forth between the perspectives of the two sisters, with Sophie’s version existing as

a school-assigned journal and Libby's version existing through her fiction novel, which she writes to mirror her relationship with her younger sister. The readers are given access to multiple versions of Libby's voice, both through the narration of Libby through Sophie's journal, and through Libby's own perspective.

Alternatively, in *Watching You Without Me*, older sister Kelli is described as "mentally handicapped" (Coady 11) and looks like an "an adult woman fully possessed of her faculties as far as any passersby [can] tell" (29). Younger sister Karen is the jaded, sarcastic, and wounded narrator through whom Kelli's perspective is filtered. While Kelli is minimally verbal and can communicate some thoughts and feelings through audible words, she has little impact on the direction of the plot other than what is a result of her disability. Much of Kelli's perspective is filtered through Karen's inference, and the reader receives Karen's interpretation of Kelli's words and feelings, shown to be complicated by their intimate relationship and Karen's bias.

What connects these characters is their use of 'atypical' or 'alternative' methods of communicating their wants and needs, the need for personal support, their parental and religious influences, the role of their younger sisters as a filtering narrator, and the deployment of their authorship. Though these novels are different from one another, the nuanced ideas of voice and perspective present in both novels make them the perfect pair in the discussion of the disabled voice in a recent, Canadian context.

The aim of this project is to examine what, if any, imbalances exist between the level of appropriate understanding given to non-verbal characters with physical disabilities in comparison to non-verbal or minimally verbal characters with intellectual disabilities within these novels. The examination in literature is the key to unlocking a type of collective imagination within society. Though a disparity will exist between the views and assumptions of the characters and

the views and assumptions of the authors themselves, much will be revealed by the deployment of disability within the novel, in the images that are perpetuated, and through the words used in relation to communication, voice, and understanding. I want to see if there is a world, even an imaginative one, where appropriate understanding for the disabled exists. Is understanding more often neglected or assumed? How do other characters talk to the characters with disabilities? Do they attend to their non-verbal cues in communication? How do they think about what the character with disabilities say to them? Are they allowed choice by other characters? Are they allowed choice by the author? Does disability type change this balance? All of these questions serve as pointers to the ways society is still falling short in how it listens, who it listens to, and the barriers placed on voice, and it is my hope that once they are answered within the context of these important novels, readers themselves can also attend to the multiple facets of humble listening required for appropriate understanding.

## Chapter 2 – The Allowance of Understanding in *The Discovery of Flight*

Now that the background and context have been established, a comprehensive analysis of the novels can begin. In this chapter, *The Discovery of Flight* by Susan Glickman and its treatment of a physically disabled voice will be analyzed. Within the novel, the topic of agency and voice is an avenue for critical analysis when considering the barriers that maintain either neglected understanding or assumed understanding for characters with physical disabilities. These barriers can be imposed by the character's parents and their relationship with the Canadian care landscape, the religious philosophy of their upbringing, the time in which they were raised, and the attitudes and behaviours of the narrator. Though there are certain aspects of these potential barriers that would cause concern to those reading this novel through a disability studies lens, what enables these figures and facets to uplift Libby's voice rather than stifle it is the presence of her own perspective. Without Libby's confirmation of how she feels about her parents and their care, religious philosophy, the time in which she lives, and the filter of the main narrator, the reader would not be able to ascertain whether or not Libby was truly uninhibited without falling prey to assuming the thoughts and feelings of another.

### *Parents and Carers*

In life, a commonality we all face is the influence of those who care for us on our own thoughts, patterns, behaviours, and attitudes, ranging from extremely positive outcomes to the outrageously negative. For some, this influence may come in the form of a guardian or guardians without blood relation, but for many, biological parents exist as a strong and primary source of influence throughout the course of life. Within homes of persons with disabilities, there will

often be visiting carers, nurses, or respite workers who may also introduce different attitudes towards the value of certain voices. Regardless of who provides essential support to another, it must be acknowledged that many caregivers want what is best for the individual they are caring for. That said, best intentions can sometimes negatively influence voice and agency through neglected understanding, assumed understanding, or flawed facilitated communication. For Libby, her parents are the first and strongest influence on her voice and agency as she grows up and develops a sense of self. Though, like every parent, they make mistakes, assume understanding, and let their care burn-out impact the environment of their home, they play an integral role in the development of Libby's voice. Libby confirms these details through her own opinion about her parents, which is shown within her life-mirroring novel.

Though Libby's parents wrongly assume that they can read her thoughts as a baby, they eventually uplift her right to choose and encourage her interests throughout the course of her life. This shows appropriate understanding. Early in narrator Sophie's introduction of herself, her family, and Libby, she shows that her parents briefly fall prey to assumed understanding, a problem in which a character assumes knowledge of another's thoughts, particularly when there is a physical or intellectual barrier in communication in place for the character whose thoughts are being assumed. Sophie highlights this trope of telepathy when she notes, "[o]ur parents say that even when [Libby] was a baby they could always tell what she was thinking, because she would look at them so intently" (Glickman 1). This assumed understanding, when established early in life, runs the risk of continuing past infancy and barricading Libby's actual thoughts and preferences. Sophie does not specify how the rest of Libby's young childhood develops in terms of choice and voice, though she recalls:

Once she started going to school, Libby learned to communicate by blinking whenever the teacher pointed to pictures like a glass of water (meaning “I’m thirsty”), a book (meaning “I want a story”), or a clock (meaning “What time is it?”), or whatever. So Mum and Dad made their own symbol sheets at home with pictures, like all of her different sweaters so she could choose which one she felt like wearing, or a bowl of soup, or a bathtub, or our dog, Baxter. (1)

A gap exists in the novel between what the reader knows of Libby’s voice at home with her parents before starting school, but due to a moment of appropriate understanding by those who support Libby at school, her parents establish a line of communication through which Libby can express her agency. They continue to promote her choices and interests as her life progresses through this ethical line of facilitated communication. When it is discovered that Libby is “as obsessed with birds as [her dad] is” (34), the family makes a point to “hike along rivers to look for ducks and geese, cormorants and herons” (36). The love of birds is a place of bonding for Libby and her father, who buys her “a giant coffee-table book with beautiful photos of birds of prey for her birthday” (36). Libby’s mother also encourages Libby’s love of birds and hawks and buys her a “DVD of an old movie called *Ladyhawke*” (41). The movie becomes a family staple, showing that her parents value Libby’s opinions and interests though they initially assumed understanding before she started school.

Another potential parentally imposed barrier on voice and agency that could exist for a character with a physical disability, one that is commonly shown in popular media, is the notion of the protective parent. The protective parent can exist both in the space of neglected understanding, where the parent outright ignores the multifaceted needs of their dependant, and through assumed understanding, where the parent wrongfully assumes the dependant’s desire for

protection. An example of this can clearly be seen in Jon M. Chu's recent movie *Wicked*, where Nessarose, a character who uses a wheelchair, is hovered over by her father for her entire life. She arrives at college and is embarrassed in front of her new classmates due to her father's coddling, though she wishes he would let her be. This protective parenting can be necessary for the needs of the child or person in question, and though there is a broad range of influence between necessary protective parenting established through appropriate understanding and *over*protective parenting, any amount can lead to an inhibition of voice, choice, and agency for the person, even if their safety is the primary concern. Michals notes that this trope is far reaching in children's literature, where "J.M. Barrie's Peter Pan is the most famous embodiment of the adult's dream of the child frozen in time" (Michals). When a child is considered disabled, or even when a disabled adult is considered an "eternal child" (Michals), this trope extends to establish a person's "need for an able-bodied protector" (Michals). Libby's parents do show some examples of protective parenting the novel. Sophie writes in her journal about her parents' love of the outdoors and tells of their many canoe trips within Ontario's provincial parks. According to Sophie, they "assumed they'd keep on doing it for the rest of their lives" (32), though once Libby arrives, "they were afraid of being stuck somewhere way out in the bush without a hospital, in case anything bad happened" (32). Once the novel progresses and Libby's health starts failing, the protective measures increase. While reflecting upon this, Sophie writes, "My father hasn't offered to take [Libby] birdwatching for a while either, because the weather has been cold and wet and she seems even more fragile than usual" (68). Though these protective measures keep Libby from experiencing full agency, especially in relation to immersing herself in nature, the family ensures that she still is able to access nature before her illness begins to take hold. Sophie notes:

Still, we are able to take Libby into the woods with a special wheelchair with huge all-terrain tires that can roll over ice and snow and rocks and roots and pretty much anything. It cost a fortune but everyone chipped in to get it for her, including Uncle Martin, and it has changed our lives, especially hers, to be able to enjoy nature and not be stuck inside all the time watching other people do stuff she can't do and talk about places she hasn't been. (32)

It is important to the family for Libby to experience life and the world to the fullest, and though their protective measures limit some agency, they have put the effort in to achieve appropriate understanding and maintain her agency before her health begins to decline.

Another facet that has an impact on the treatment of voice and agency within a narrative is the type of relationship the family has with extrafamilial forms of care, as the carers can either engage in voice lifting or voice stifling. In addition, the level of support provided to the family can influence how the parents behave toward the person with a disability and other members of the family. In *The Discovery of Flight*, care does not extend outside of the home or school unless medically necessary. While this ensures that those in charge of Libby's care are those that have a history of maintaining her voice and allowing her agency, there are aspects of home and school care that pose a threat to Libby's voice. These threats ultimately do not take hold of Libby, but this shows more about what families and schools that support people with disabilities lack in order to ensure that those with disabilities live the life they want to live.

As far as the reader is aware, the facets of care included in Libby's life are her parents, her sister, supports at school, and the doctors, and the general lack of external support threatens not only Libby's agency, but the agency and wellbeing of the family unit, which threatens their capacity for appropriate understanding. Sophie explains the dynamic of care within her family

early in her journal entries. She writes that “Dad looks after Mum” and “Mum looks after Libby” (1), showing the linear relationship of care between Libby and her parents. While this arrangement sometimes works for the family, there are also times when Libby’s care weighs heavily on everyone close to her. Sophie indicates the extent of this care when she explains her family’s dynamic and various interests. When Sophie describes what her mother does for work, she writes, “She was top of her class in economics at university and thought she might do something in government finance, but these days she works from home as a bookkeeper, because it makes her time more flexible when my sister gets sick, which happens far too often” (6). In addition to her mother’s need to remain flexible, Sophie notes that the house does not provide “a whole lot of stimulation . . . what with Libby staring at her computer, and [her] mother being alternatively hyper or depressed, and [her] father basically never home . . . [o]r when he is, he’s doing physical therapy with Libby or helping Mum get her ready for the school bus” (6). Libby’s care is clearly at the centre of their household, and aside from “a visiting nurse” (160) later in the story, the responsibility of Libby’s daily care lies solely on her parents, especially once she becomes too sick to go to school due to her “many seizures” (85). The arrangement of care would not threaten to stifle Libby’s voice or agency were it not for the parents’ obvious frustration with the situation and their growing concern over the financial constraints associated Libby’s required support. Though her parents express no frustration at giving up the things they love, Sophie and Libby’s mom shows a fretful and anxious disposition once she takes “an indefinite leave from her job to look after Libby” (94) and “gets into obsessive cooking; her way of dealing with stress” (94-95). Though Sophie is not directly responsible for Libby’s care, she feels the ripples of her parents’ responsibility, writing that her parents feel that she “has enough tragedy to deal with already in [her] young life” (21) due to Libby. Further, Sophie shares about

her parents' frequent arguments, where "[t]hey're usually arguing about Libby or about money, or about whether there will be enough money to take care of Libby after they're gone" (29). The girls' parents' distress over money is so obvious that Sophie would rather "forget about [her] Bat Mitzvah" and "save [their] money because [they] will need it to take care of Libby" (75). If these arguments are loud enough for Sophie to hear and be concerned about money, it follows that Libby can also hear her parents' arguments. Imagine, for a moment (though some readers may not need to imagine), how it would feel if those who cared for you were in the next room arguing about the financial constraints and stress associated with your care when they thought you were not listening. One could assume that any trust between them would dissipate, but there is nothing in Libby's novel to indicate any hard feelings on Libby's part. That said, she does communicate the "humiliation" (38) that is associated with physical dependence, which shows the consequences of her parents' actions on her thoughts and feelings about her own existence.

Though Libby has plenty of reasons to feel stifled and quieted due to some of her parents' actions, she views the situation in a pragmatic light and recognizes that her care impacts the family. When writing about Terra's father in her novel, who, through the mirrored nature of the book signifies Sophie's father in the real world, she notes that he is very broken down and "weak" (18). His weakness and fatigue are contrasting images to her hawk protagonist Aya's father, who bravely "swoop[s] down, screeching" (38) to scare away a fox. This example shows that Libby recognizes the differing experiences that she and her sister have with their parents and recognizes the duality that full-time care often yields. Additionally, within her novel, Libby has the opportunity to share her thoughts on the roles that her parents' care and protection have played in her life. Aya reflects on her parents' role in her first few flights as a young hawk, where

her mother “swoop[s] with joy ahead of her, daring her to join the chase” (38) and her father protects her from an unexpected predator. She writes:

Aya shivers, remembering her terror, because fear is cold. By contrast, the waves of love she felt from her father then and feels from her human sister now are warm. Fear is opaque and white like snow or turbulent water; it moves fast, faster than thought. But love is golden and soft as sunlight. Love is diffuse; it is not a harsh beam focusing on her and making her shrink inside herself, but an embrace that gives her confidence to face the world. (38-39)

Aya is and continues to be a reflection of Libby’s relationship with her parents, the world, and her sister, and this instance shows that Aya (and consequently Libby) acknowledges and appreciates the ways that her parents look out for her, and that instead of acting as a barrier, their protection is an open gate into the world.

Parents, guardians, and carers will always impose an influence on the people that they support, and this influence can either amplify or silence the voices of their children. Though Libby’s parents are not perfect and have a history of assuming Libby’s thoughts, stifling her total freedom with their protection, and letting their caretaking impact the positivity of the household, they have also encouraged her choices, interests, and safety, so much so that Libby has appreciation for all they have done for her and the appropriate understanding they have shown her.

### *Religion — Judaism*

Religion is another facet of life that has the capacity to stifle the voice and agency of disabled characters. Depending on the religion and the people who maintain these beliefs, the

disabled voice can be held up higher than it should be due to a “long and illustrious heritage” (MacDonagh 270) within society where the disabled are believed to have an extra closeness to the spiritual realm. Alternatively, in other religious interpretations, the voices of the disabled can be stifled due to the “enduring myth” (Robert 18) that the disability is a punishment from God. Sophie talks at length about her Jewish religion throughout the course of the novel and often questions commonly held biblical interpretations of disability, thus establishing her resolve to uplift Libby’s voice rather than allow her religion to stifle it. Libby’s lack of spiritual involvement also shows that she is free from the attempts to stifle her voice by her family’s religion, thus showing that in *The Discovery of Flight*, religion does not succeed in impacting Libby’s voice and agency even though it assumes understanding.

As Sophie’s Bat Mitzvah looms over the horizon in the novel, she spends a lot of time reflecting on her personal belief systems in relation to disability and religion. Initially, the criticism of religion is general, and Sophie expresses that to her, animal sacrifice to God does not make sense, because God “doesn’t even have a BODY and therefore can’t get hungry, so why they would want to devour so many innocent creatures is a complete mystery” (10). She also shares that her favourite character in the film *Ladyhawke* is Mouse, “who spends quite a bit of time quarrelling with God” (69). Though Sophie’s criticisms of religion begin generally, they quickly become disability specific. She writes:

For example: the idea that everything happens to us for a reason. Try explaining that to my sister Libby! Or that we deserve whatever we get. Ditto. Or that God loves us and “only wants what is best for us.” Yeah, right. Thanks, God, for all those *wonderful* things you keep giving us like: firefloodfamineearthquakewargenocide heatdeathoftheuniversemathtesttomorrow. (10)

Sophie cannot comprehend the notion that God's goodness and will is found in everything that happens in the world, showing her rejection of the notion that those with disabilities possess a divine purpose and maintain a deeper connection with God. In addition to this rejection, as the novel progresses toward Sophie's Bat Mitzvah speech, the more she grapples with the assigned passage from the Torah that she must analyze. Within this passage, disability is framed as a punishment. She thinks:

I can't understand why God punishes Miriam with leprosy . . . but doesn't do anything at all to Aaron, who also criticizes Moses. It doesn't make any *sense*. Isn't God supposed to be just and merciful as well as all-knowing? Not that God is, most of the time, in the bible, I admit it. But this is a more blatant example of injustice than most of them. (122)

Sophie knows that she does not agree with the general teaching found within her assigned Torah portion. The fact that a woman is punished for speaking in a way that God does not like shows the capacity for religion to not only stifle voice but also shows that it attributes illness and disability to the improper use of one's voice. Sophie eventually writes her Bat Mitzvah speech and rejects the notion that God is involved in Miriam's disabling punishment:

The more I thought about my Torah portion . . . the more it seemed to me that the idea of God punishing Miriam was *superstition*, not religion. The superstition of frightened people who needed an explanation for why bad things happen. I started to suspect that what really occurred was something much simpler, like Miriam getting an infection from wandering around the desert without any soap or research about skin diseases . . . [i]n other words, frightened people, wandering in a desert tried to make random events meaningful by saying God caused them. They couldn't admit that sometimes God isn't

involved in what happens to us. Sometimes there is nothing but good or bad LUCK.

(145-146)

Sophie realizes that many of religion's suppositions about disability are fueled by superstition and nothing more. In other words, those who believe in disability as punishment inhabit a space of assumed understanding towards their fellow human, relying solely on their own knowledge of the person in question without the acknowledgement that they can never know the entirety of the situation. Sophie's public rejection of the belief that God is behind disability shows that she does not assume to have knowledge regarding Miriam's experience and thus shows the openness to the unknown that is required of appropriate understanding. In this way, Libby's voice and agency is not held back by the religion of Sophie, her main filter within the story.

Libby's perspective on religion supplies further insight into religion as a barrier to voice. Through Sophie's perspective, nothing of Libby's religious philosophy is shared. As Sophie anticipates her Bat Mitzvah, she provides no anecdotes of remembering Libby's Bat Mitzvah, nor does she indicate that Libby participates in her family's religion in other ways *at all*. This does not necessarily mean that Libby does not participate in the Jewish faith, but due to the fact that Sophie provides lots of evidence in relation to Libby's other passions (Baxter, nature, hawks, writing), the reader can cautiously infer that Sophie is very aware of Libby's interests. If religion were a passion of Libby's, it would likely be mentioned by Sophie. Luckily, the reader does not need to wrestle with the unknown. Libby's voice is indirectly provided in the story through the sections of her own narrative present in the text. This way, the reader is given hints of Libby's religious perspective through her protagonist, Aya.

Within Libby's novel, her protagonist is spiritual, but in a way that is connected to nature rather than a formal type of religious thought and superstition. In Libby's second chapter, Aya

notes the ways that she enjoys spending her time. As she watches life bustle around her, she thinks, “Even a grasshopper has a soul, a little green soul, curious and sharp as a blade of grass” (15). Libby clearly has spirituality of some kind, though she differs from mainstream Jewish thought, which does not believe that animals have the same type of immortal life force as humans and that “humans’ interests are characteristically seen in Judaism as far more important than the interests of any nonhuman animals” (Waldau 74). Further, this example shows that within Libby’s personal spirituality, all forms of life are considered equal, even down to the humble grasshopper. Her perspective on spirituality is also shown when she notes that Aya’s parents always promoted some kind of prayer, though God is not mentioned. Libby writes that Aya “was never allowed to swallow [her food] until she gave thanks” (Glickman 16). To whom did Aya give thanks? Libby never says, though she highlights the notion of “respect for others” (16) and maintains that “it is wrong to toy with the lives of others” (15). This nature-focused, equality-based value system shows that Libby is not bound by the religion of her family but has found a spirituality that uplifts her own voice as an equal.

Though there are aspects of Libby and Sophie’s familial religion that threaten to stifle Libby’s voice, and that portray disability as either a blessing or a punishment, Sophie does not accept this line of thinking and speaks out against prejudice and superstition. Additionally, Libby shows that she is not bound by her family’s religion and finds her own, natural, equality-based spirituality that uplifts the respect and understanding of all.

### *The Time Period — Teens in 2018*

The period in which a story is both written and set has a major impact on its philosophical leanings with regard to disability. Because *The Discovery of Flight* has a relatively

modern setting (published and set around 2018), the cultural norms in relation to disability are not entirely different from those that are still mainstream in 2025. In 2018 as today, computer-based assistive technology was widely available, and an increasing number of people are attending to the accepted language and treatment norms related to the description of disability. That said, as seen in the Stubblefield case mentioned in chapter one, access to technology does not mean that ethical understanding and facilitation always follows. Despite Libby's access to technology, her voice isn't always heard because the attitudes of the people around her mute or distort it. Though many people attend to uplifting the voice and choice of all people, some maintain a host of attitudes and behavioural patterns that have trickled down through the generational timeline and have rooted themselves in modernity. In relation to the time in which the novel is written, though no story can realistically be perfect, a story's patterns can be compared to the generally acceptable principles of disability studies to see which aspects align with modern day practices and which do not. Again, though policing is not the objective of this comparison and many authors are not expertly versed on the harmful tropes often present in narrative and representation, awareness of these harmful patterns can only be improved upon when they are discussed openly. There are, certainly, elements of the story telling and included representational tropes in *The Discovery of Flight* that create barriers for Libby's voice and agency. Despite these inclusions, Susan Glickman makes it abundantly clear that within her writing, she strives to create an inclusive space for characters with disabilities and attempts to shatter more obvious stereotypes for her readers. These examples show that while improvements have been made in relation to the voice and agency given to disabled characters in narratives, generationaly held attitudes regarding the representation and inclusion of voice can be improved.

In relation to the time period of the story, it is undeniable that expanded social awareness gives Libby access to a voice that may not have been accessible to her before the 2010s, and she therefore has greater access to appropriate understanding. A first indication that the story takes place in a time with an increased sense of social awareness is shown through Sophie's attention to descriptive language. When describing her sister's disability, she writes, "a less polite term for my sister's condition is that she's spastic" (3), before she reiterates that the word "spaz" is often used as a derogatory term that has swayed from its original meaning, and states again that it is "politically incorrect" (50) later in the novel. Sophie's awareness of lingual shifts in society is further emphasized when she writes about the word *stupid*, stating that she "look[ed] up adjectives for 'stupid' to find some that [were]n't insulting to disabled people" (10). Linton notes that with regards to language, "the shifts [in a word's meaning] serve as metacommunications about the social, political, intellectual, and ideological transformations that have taken place over the past two decades" (Linton). These examples show that Sophie, in her 2018 upbringing, is acutely aware of these shifts and the importance of words in relation to the disabled community. She behaves in a way that acknowledges that the words one chooses to use impact attitudes in relation to how people understand one another.

Sophie's social awareness is in conflict with her step-grandfather, Harold, who represents a discriminatory space of neglected understanding and maintains the voice-stifling habits that were more prevalent in previous generations. Sophie writes:

What irks me even more than Harold's accent, and the way he sniffs in disapproval whenever I use slang, is the way he treats Libby. He doesn't say hello to her when he comes into our house, he doesn't include her in conversation, and he never sits next to her. I don't think he even *looks* at her if he can avoid it. (Glickman 118)

Harold is the antithesis to Sophie's acceptance. Though it is sometimes easier to assume that Harold is intentionally ignorant, it is more likely that he represents a lasting whisper of the generation that preceded him: a time when the voice of the disabled community was only beginning to be heard, and many still held false ideas regarding communication between members of different communities and neglected any attempt at understanding. Similarly to the treatment of Libby by Harold, another example of neglected understanding is shown when Sophie recalls the behaviour of a waitress during a family trip to a restaurant. She explains that the waitress "asked my mother, 'What will the girl in the wheelchair be having?'" (199). Sophie uses this example to highlight both that the waitress a) defined Libby based on her disability and b) addresses their mother instead of Libby herself, showing that in the world, generally held comfort with addressing those who are different is still a far-off achievement.

Despite these examples that show the time in which *The Discovery of Flight* takes place is not perfect in terms of how people value the disabled voice, there are elements of 2018 that create more access for Libby than even changing attitudes can: her assistive technology. Different than formal facilitated communication, assistive communication technology is the tool used rather than the method of using it. This is not to say that if Libby did not have assistive tech that her voice would be less valuable; rather, with assistive tech, she is not so easily subject to neglected or assumed understanding. There are many opportunities for these tools to be used appropriately without the need for an extra person to filter the information through the tool, and Libby utilizes this technology on a daily basis to communicate her voice. Sophie recalls the dawn of Libby's eye-tracking computer in their home, writing that "conversations . . . improved" (2) once Libby's school used the tool and that they "finally got one at home last year" (2). Even though these technologies have been developing for many years, it takes time and financial

capability for these innovative technologies to make their way into the homes of those who choose to utilize them. That said, now that Libby does have one in the home, she can use this technology to “go on Facebook and watch videos on YouTube like any other teenager” (2). Perhaps in 2025, Facebook and YouTube would be exchanged with Instagram and TikTok, but the message remains the same. Because of this technology, Libby has agency within a major realm of her age group’s social space and is given a voice within her home.

Though Glickman spends much of the novel arguing for an adjusted, more inclusive view of disability, there are inevitably moments where authors in contemporary times fall prey to the many tropes associated with disability in literature and media. Glickman is no exception, and these tropes can just as easily show a negative depiction of voice even when the setting is used by the author to advocate for societal change. One trope the novel includes is the myth of “overcoming or compensation” (Dolmage 34). In this trope, “the person with a disability overcomes their impairment through hard work or has some special talent that offsets their deficiencies” (Dolmage 39). Libby’s novel-writing capabilities are superior to those of many other sixteen-year-olds. This writing is a way in which her talent offsets her physical disability. Another representative trope can be seen through Libby’s sibling relationship to the protagonist. Abbey E. Meyer argues that characters with disabilities are often placed “as siblings, sidekicks, and best friends” (63) of the protagonist in many representations. In this way, they “advance plotlines, catalyze growth, and inspire others” or “test morality and ethics of more prominent characters” (62), but do not exist for any other purpose in the story. Libby’s placement as the sibling to the protagonist in the story confirms the presence of this trope, and within the next trope Glickman includes, there is evidence to show that Sophie believes that she is a better person because of Libby’s role in her life.

The final and most obvious example in *The Discovery of Flight* is the myth of “kill-or-cure” (Dolmage 34), a pattern in media where “a disabled character will either have to be ‘killed or cured’” (39) and either case “will often seem to ‘redeem’ the protagonist” (39). The fulfillment of this trope does not come as a surprise to the reader, when in the novel’s earliest moments, Sophie remembers a young understanding “that [her] big sister might die” (Glickman 4). Libby too recognizes her impending mortality when she writes about “a new force . . . something darker and more powerful” (19) that comes to threaten her characters. Libby does eventually die, and Sophie shows her redemption through the trope of Libby’s “sacrificial” (Dolmage 39) death. Libby is unable to finish her novel, so Sophie writes its final chapter. She imagines that Aya, the hawk character who represents Libby, flies to her death in self-sacrifice to ensure Terra’s (Sophie’s) safety. Sophie writes:

*You saved my life, Aya, the girl whispers to the hawk, whose golden eyes are already beginning to glaze over.*

*I’m glad. Now I can die in peace. (179)*

The inclusion of this trope shows that even in a 2018 rendering of a disabled character, the *kill-or-cure* myth still exists in the media of the last decade. The inclusion of tropes generally inhibits the capacity for positive growth in the societal mindset and serves to further diminish voice even when positive representational efforts are made. As long as these hackneyed tropes continue to represent disabled characters in fiction, they will continue to delegitimize disabled voices. Like Dolmage writes, the point of this discussion is not to “police” (Dolmage 101) representation, but to continue an awareness of the harmful patterns that still make their way into modern media.

In *The Discovery of Flight*, the time period of the setting and the inclusion of tropes have an impact on the barriers that are present for a character with a disability. Though attitudes show

signs of positive change, there are some attitudes that still live in the realm of neglected understanding or assumed understanding. That said, Libby has access to technology that uplifts her voice, which in turn, makes it harder for those who still live in a biased space to ignore her agency.

### *The Narrator — Sophie*

The narrator exists as a potential barrier for the voice of a character with a physical disability in *The Discovery of Flight*. Sophie, the thirteen-year-old protagonist of the story, acts as her sister's filter throughout her narration. Like any filter, elements are, by nature, sieved out and details are left behind (such is the function of a filter). This is to say that no narrator can ever tell a story perfectly, nor can they possibly hope to assemble all the details accurately; there will always be a side of the story left out. A problem exists when one side of the story remains told without the other, particularly when there is a character with a disability involved, and especially so when they are a character with a disability that impacts communication. Sophie, like any other narrator, is imperfect. She talks more about Libby in relation to her disability than in relation to anything else, does not consider all of Libby's innermost desires, and underestimates her sister's love for her, but in relation to Libby's voice and agency, Sophie exists as a fearless defender of Libby's autonomy. Sophie highlights Libby's individuality and her personhood, all of which is confirmed by Libby herself within her novel. Their sisterly bond shows that the narrator does not neglect nor assume understanding, but instead, through Glickman's allowance of their dual voices, the sisters speak for each other and maintain a relationship of mutual care, respect, and appropriate understanding.

Though Sophie notes that her parents would embody the trope of telepathy, Sophie never claims the power herself. As mentioned in the earlier discussion of parental influence as a barrier to voice, Libby's parents felt like "they could always tell what she was thinking" (1). Though they make the mistake of assumed understanding, Sophie does not fall prey to this problematic assumption, even though she shows that she wants it to be true:

I keep trying to use telepathy to figure out what Libby's thinking, because I'm convinced that if I were smarter or more sensitive or more attuned to my astral body or whatever, we could have in-depth conversations using nothing but brain waves. My sister also believes this, so we've experimented a zillion times with both of us concentrating really hard, but so far it hasn't worked very well. (31)

Though Sophie desires a telepathic link to exist between her and her sister, she knows that it has not worked and will not. She understands on a deep level that she needs to attend to her sister's choice and voice and pay attention to what she communicates. Sophie knows that her sister is "smart" (1), acknowledges her love of fantasy books, and "leave[s] it up to Libby" (9) regarding what books Sophie reads out loud to her sister. Though Sophie finds that "reading [books] together is so much fun" (9), she does listen when "Libby doesn't want [Sophie] to read to her anymore" (68) despite "feeling hurt" (68). This shows that Sophie is willing to put her sister's needs and desires ahead of her own even though they hurt her feelings and is an example of appropriate understanding.

Though Sophie does not assume telepathy with Libby and listens to her desires, Libby *does* feel that the sisters have a telepathic connection and shows that Sophie is a reliable filter for Libby when she does not communicate herself. In chapter 3 of Libby's novel, she begins by sharing that "[Terra] understands Aya's thoughts instinctively, the same way the hawk

understands those of the girl . . . [i]t is shocking and at the same time natural, like hearing a loved one's soft voice reading you a bedtime story" (17). In this way, Libby expresses that Sophie's knowledge of her thoughts is instinctive and natural. She emphasizes their connection when she writes that "the telepathic link between the girl and the hawk becomes another law of nature even though, until this moment, neither of them had imagined that such a thing was possible" (40). These moments confirm that Libby feels a telepathic link between her and Sophie, even though Sophie thinks it is impossible. Based on Libby's confirmation, the reader can trust a lot of what Sophie claims to be true about Libby's experience in the world.

The extent of Sophie's narrative reliability and her capacity for appropriate understanding is proven by multiple examples. The first example is shown when they express their mutual feelings of a typical sister relationship. Though the sisters have a lot in common with each other, there are times when they both feel annoyed and overwhelmed by each others' presence. Sophie writes that she enjoys taking boats out on the lake at the cabin "which is the perfect excuse to get away from the twin noise and twin fuss of [her] little cousins, and the 24-hour disability network that is [her] sister" (42). Though Sophie clearly loves her sister, she also desires to have her own time that is separate from the all-encompassing presence of her sister. This feeling of overwhelm is reciprocated by Libby, who writes that "Aya quickly learns to shut her mind to Terra because the girl's thoughts are so exhausting" (43). Like any other sisterly relationship, there are positive moments and there are moments when they are tired of one another. The two sisters share these sentiments without the explicit knowledge of the other's feelings, showing that they are often on the same page and Sophie is a reliable narrator who does not inaccurately depict Libby's voice and reality.

Another example that shows Sophie as a reliable filter for Libby is how she speaks about Libby's desire to fly and be physically uninhibited. When writing about her sister's love of hawks, Sophie writes:

Whenever Libby sees a hawk, her face starts to glow like *she's* the one flying! She whispers, "Ba, ba!" and her body gets electric with excitement. She seems less frozen, somehow. It's hard to explain how transformed she is; you have to see it. A famous autistic scientist named Temple Grandin invented a hugging machine to help her cope with her disability. If only I could invent a flying machine for my sister! (35)

This example shows that not only does Sophie attend to Libby's voice through her communication device, but she listens to the physical forms of Libby's communication. Sophie shares another example of Libby's evident desire to fly when she watches *Ladyhawke*, writing that when the lady turns into a hawk, "Libby watches that scene [and] she is so enraptured it's like she is praying" (71). Sophie's knowledge of this desire is confirmed through Libby's novel and how she writes about Aya's love of flying. She writes that Aya's "body thrills to know it will soon be in motion, freer and faster than anyone else" (14). Libby's confirmation of her desire to fly, which Sophie shares within her own journal, shows that Sophie is a reliable narrator and that Libby truly does feel the desire for this ability. In this way, Sophie is helping to amplify Libby's voice.

Sophie is also on the same page as Libby when she speaks about Libby's difference from other people, showing that she is a reliable filter of Libby's experience. An important aspect of the relationship between Libby and Sophie is their honesty with each other and with the world, and as Sophie writes in her journal, she does not sugar coat any aspect of Libby's experience, nor does she shy away from speaking candidly about the reality that she sees in front of her, in

relation to both Libby's ability and disability. At the beginning of her journal, she shares that "Libby just looks . . . [b]ecause all she can control properly are her eyes" (1). After emphasizing Libby's cognitive ability, her love of writing, and her social capabilities (2), Sophie explains that despite her ability, her sister "isn't really like other teenagers because she's got cerebral palsy" (2). Sophie acknowledges Libby's difference without diminishing what she is able to do. She notes that "people like [her] sister can't speak clearly enough for other people to understand them, no matter how hard they try" (3), and explains that she has one clear vocalization, "ba" (3), which she uses for everything. Despite this explanation about what Libby cannot do, she expresses that "[i]t's pretty cool to see how many words my sister can make with that one simple sound" (3) and that she "never gives up, no matter how hard things are for her" (6). Sophie maintains that difference can be unique and does not sugar-coat or cloud reality. Sophie's understanding of Libby's dynamic personhood is an essential element of appropriate understanding, where nothing is gained by ignoring true difference or diminishing reality.

Libby also expresses her acknowledgment of both her ability and the ways that she is different from the other people in her life, which shows that Sophie speaks with relative accuracy regarding some of Libby's experiences. When writing about Aya in her novel, Libby focuses on the difference between hawks and humans, noting that while humans "walk on two legs the way she does, they are unable to fly" (15), emphasizing that while there are things that are similar, there are ways that hawks and humans are abled and disabled in relation to each other. Libby further emphasizes the differences between hawks and humans in relation to being physically still and observant, which is directly connected to the fact that Libby spends a lot of her day-to-day time observing others in stillness. She writes, "[r]emaining motionless helps her to see and feel things clearly . . . [t]hose who rush around, always busy, always anxious, miss so many

variations of colour and smell and sound” (13). She also writes that “[a] hawk will always be a hawk and a human will always be a human” (44). Libby’s acknowledgement of these differences does not lift any one population up over another but simply acknowledges the difference without negativity. Sophie and Libby’s mutual honesty with the reality of Libby’s differences show that they are on the same page, which confirms that Sophie’s interpretation of Libby’s opinion and reality helps her to open barriers rather than enforce them.

Though there are many scenarios that show Sophie is a reliable narrator and is not a barrier to Libby’s voice, there are elements about Libby that Sophie does not consider, and Susan Glickman ensures Libby has the space to speak on these things herself so that the readers show Libby appropriate understanding. The first example of Libby expressing a desire that Sophie does not consider is in regard to finding a relationship. Libby is sixteen years old, and many sixteen-year-olds begin showing interest in dating at this age (if the desire has not already been established). Sophie does not shy away from bringing up “S-E-X” (21), and in relation to Libby, Sophie shares that “Libby has never had a period” (21) but does not say anything else about Libby’s sexual development or potential desire for a partner. Though she considers her sister “beautiful” (69) and “feel[s] guilty all the time that Libby’s older than [her] but hasn’t experienced half of the activities [she has]” (76), Sophie thinks more in relation to activities like “making art, and going canoe tripping, and playing board games, and simple everyday stuff” (76) and not in relation to romance. In the section of Libby’s novel that immediately follows Sophie’s examination of the activities Libby is excluded from, Aya meets Shay, a “handsome” (79) young hawk that makes her “intrigued” (79). She writes, “It is too early for her to seek a mate; she will have to wait for the spring for that. Still, this male seems both healthy and intelligent, and he hasn’t his partner yet either” (79). Though Sophie is attentive to many of Libby’s realities and

acts as a mostly accurate voice for her, she does not consider Libby's desire for romance, showing that there are some things that only Libby can share about what she wants from life. These differing perspectives show that there is always an unknown side of the story, which promotes the idea of appropriate understanding's necessity in the world.

Though Sophie does not shy away from the reality of Libby's disabled experience and advocates for Libby's treatment as a person, Sophie focuses heavily on the negative elements of Libby's experience, though Libby feels positively about certain aspects of her disability. This highlights the sisters' differing perspectives of the world and shows how essential appropriate understanding truly is in communication. There is no question that Sophie loudly advocates for Libby's personhood. In the restaurant when the waitress speaks over Libby, Sophie writes that some people "talk about Libby as though she's a *thing*, not a person" (119), and when the waitress acts badly, Sophie remembers:

I turned to Libby and asked in a loud voice, "Libby, would you like some fresh-squeezed orange juice?" and she opened her eyes wide, which means yes, so I said to the waitress, "My sister would like the orange juice please, with a straw. A bendy one if possible. (119)

Sophie is, without a doubt, passionate about lifting up her sister's voice and attends to the many versions of Libby's voice, physical and otherwise. That said, Sophie often speaks of Libby's disability only in terms of its hindrance on Libby's life. She states both that she feels "guilty" (76) about her own ability and that she "wouldn't want to change places with [her] sister" (49). She sees her as a "stick figure strapped to a wheelchair" (6) who is "under an evil spell" (69). There is evidence of both Sophie's knowledge of Libby's interests and her ability to know how Libby thinks and feels about certain things, but she does not consider that Libby acknowledges the positive elements of her disability rather than only focusing on that she cannot do, especially

in relation to speaking. Libby shares a lot of these sentiments within her novel. She writes that Aya “prefers to watch humans from a distance” who are “burrowing as though they are small and helpless, quarreling and jabbering like infants even after they are fully grown” (15). When she writes that humans are “unable to fly” (15), this shows that though humans are capable of actions and behaviours that hawks are not, Libby believes there are positive elements to being different and that there are capabilities that she has that others do not. Later, in a conversation with Terra, Aya remarks:

*Until I started talking to you, my life had been lived in relative silence.*

*Don't you talk to Shay? [Terra asks]*

*Occasionally, but we prefer to look and listen. Why don't humans do that?*

*I don't know, Terra sighs. I wish we did. Most people just talk to hear their own voices.*

*Why? [Aya asks] Few of them sing very well. (100)*

This conversation between Aya and Terra expresses a reality that Libby believes to be true, which is that those without her disability do not have the same ability of observation nor the contentedness with silence. Aya's sentiment that “[f]ew of them sing very well” emphasizes her belief that there are things that humans will never be able to do in the same way that she does.

Finally, though Sophie shows that she can accurately interpret what Libby is thinking and feeling, she does not consider that Libby takes her older sister role seriously, though Sophie believes that no one is looking out for her. Sophie often discounts her own struggles and opinions throughout the novel, stating that reading “reminds [her] that there are plenty of people out there with problems, some as bad as [her family's] . . . [s]ome even worse” (7). She also states that she “feels like a bitch for complaining” (21) about things and that her “opinion doesn't count” (76). These sentiments perhaps originate from the fact that Sophie and Libby's parents “seem to forget

they have another daughter, one who isn't disabled, quite often" (21). Sophie's perception is that there are occasions when no one is watching over her or thinking about her opinion as they navigate Libby's disability within their family. Though Sophie feels this way, Libby shows in her novel that she is thinking about Sophie and recognizes the ways she wants to look out for her little sister. She writes that Aya sleeps close to Terra and her family "so that she will be able to detect any threat to the girl she now considers her sister" (54). When Terra is feeling scared, Aya comforts her by thinking, "[d]on't worry, my sister, I won't leave you" (54) and is always "watching over" (129) Terra and her travel partners as they investigate the evil in the land. Aya tells Terra that she will also "protect [Terra's] mate" (129), so the sisterly protection extends to those who Terra cares for. Though Sophie is accurate in her prediction of a lot of Libby's thoughts, desires, interests, and feelings, she does not consider herself to be an important facet of Libby's personal life. Libby shows this to be a false assumption throughout her novel and promotes the notion that appropriate understanding is always necessary when multiple perspectives are involved. In these instances, Libby acts as a voice for Sophie as well, and shows that the defence of agency and personhood is not solely implemented by the abled.

Though Libby believes her sister to be a reliable narrator for her experience and believes herself to be uninhibited by Sophie's telling of the story, there are still aspects of Libby's experience that Sophie will never be able to consider. Without Libby's reality-mirroring narrative, Sophie's assumptions would never be confirmed. Though Sophie does eventually receive Libby's novel as a birthday present and is made aware of certain aspects of her reality, a fictional novel will never exist as a perfect communication of her experience. Sophie never claims to have full knowledge of Libby's experience even though Libby communicates with her, acting as a perfect example a narrator who maintains appropriate understanding.

## *Conclusion*

In the examination of the influence of Libby's parents and external carers, religion, the time period, and the narrator, Libby is shown to have varying levels of access to appropriate understanding. Though her parents are imperfect, they spend the majority of Libby's life finding a balance between the support Libby needs and uplifting her choice, which is a balance that Libby understands and appreciates. Religion not only attempts to stifle voices but attempts to assume the divine purpose behind disability, a notion that both Sophie and Libby are shown rejecting. The time in which the novel is set shows that while there are those who still find discomfort in appropriate understanding, Libby has access that was not possible in previous decades. In terms of the time in which the novel was written, Glickman includes many problematic representational tropes that maintain harmful images of disability and disability's narrative value. That said, she is intentional in her inclusion of Libby's perspective and deploys disability in the novel to squash patterns of exclusion and discrimination. Finally, narrator Sophie is shown to be a humble and mostly reliable avenue into Libby's experience, but discrepancies do exist, which are shown through Libby's novel. These discrepancies show that when appropriate understanding is maintained by the narrator, there will be aspects of the story that are only available if the reader is given access to a differing perspective. Each of these facets, which have huge potential to inhibit the voice of a disabled character, are ultimately unrealized due to Glickman's inclusion of Libby's voice. What Glickman promotes in *The Discovery of Flight* is the understanding of a duality of experience. Libby's voice is given space to shine and speak for itself, and Libby's experience of a physical disability that inhibits her communication is shown breaking through its barriers. What remains is a promotion of a culture of listening to voices that

speak through alternative means and is a step in the right direction towards appropriate understanding and ethical facilitation. In the next chapter, *Watching You Without Me* joins the conversation and is examined under the same categories. This will provide an in-depth overview of the commonalities and differences between the understanding available to Libby and the understanding available to Kelli.

### Chapter 3 – Unavailable Understanding in *Watching You Without Me*

In chapter two, *The Discovery of Flight* by Susan Glickman was examined in relation to its treatment of the physically disabled voice by parents and carers, religion, the time period, and the narrator. It is established that within Glickman's imagination, Libby is allowed a significant voice within the narrative. Though an imperfect and trope-ridden rendition of the physically disabled experience, Glickman shows that stories exist where a variety of voices are legitimized and offered an appropriate balance between what is known and what is unknown while their humanity is maintained. This chapter will combine the facets examined in chapter two and place them within the context of intellectual disability found in Lynn Coady's *Watching You Without Me*. In this novel, intellectual disability is the avenue through which Coady discusses voice and agency. My research at the undergraduate level at the University of New Brunswick focused on the general representative problems commonly associated with disability that Coady deploys in the novel, and through the examination of these problems, a pattern emerges. Coady includes many problems in *Watching You Without Me*, but through her storytelling and framing of narration, undermines their harm and encourages enlightened social thought. Of these problems, Kelli's lack of narrative agency and voice due to her intellectual disability was examined, and those conclusions will be broadened upon within the context of this project and placed against the treatment of voice for Libby, a purely physically disabled character in *The Discovery of Flight*. Within *Watching You Without Me*, similar potential barriers exist as the ones in *The Discovery of Flight*. The parental attitudes and their interactions with the care landscape, the religious attitudes of the characters involved, the time in which the story was both written and set, and the behaviour and attitudes of the narrator all pose a threat to the value of voice in the

novel. Upon examination of these facets, the reader realizes that Kelli's voice is not given the full value it deserves and that she is often offered either neglected understanding or assumed understanding by those who inhabit these categories.

### *Parents and Carers*

Lynn Coady includes many levels of disability care in *Watching You Without Me*. Throughout Kelli's life, she is cared for by her two biological parents, by a single mother after her father's death, by an aging single mother with home care assistance, and finally by her younger sister after her mother's death. Along the way, the reader is given evidence of varying barriers to Kelli's voice and agency, particularly through the effects that different levels of understanding have on Kelli's autonomy. When her mother is the primary caregiver, Kelli is given autonomy and agency through her mother's devoted attention to her needs and interests. As Irene ages and her devotion to independent care no longer becomes sustainable, Irene begins to plan alternative means of care for after her death. Different care workers and many external agencies with varying standards and intentions begin to enter her home. When these intentions reach their most threatening, Kelli's voice is largely neglected, and her agency is taken away. Finally, after their mother's death, Karen moves in with Kelli, and though she sometimes allows Kelli room to speak and has knowledge of her preferences and idiosyncrasies, Karen has her own issues as a caregiver, and her biases impact her understanding. For these reasons, Coady shows that while parents and carers have the potential to empower the intellectually disabled voice, age and menacing carers place a barrier on Kelli's voice in *Watching You Without Me*.

If there is one message that the reader learns about Irene, Kelli and Karen's mother, throughout the course of Coady's narrative, it is that she is incredibly devoted to Kelli's

wellbeing. Though this devotion negatively impacts Karen, a topic which will be covered later in this chapter, there is no room to doubt Irene's pure intentions in relation to Kelli's care. Karen, the narrator of the story, holds nothing back in her criticism of her mother, showing that Irene did have flaws. She recognizes that while her mother "was nice in the tradition of many a Nova Scotian lady of her generation and upbringing" (Coady 8-9), she could also be "irredeemably racist in that same nice-lady way" (9). She also notes her mother's rigidity with certain facets of her upbringing, like in her "standard of cleanliness" (32) and her sardonic expectation of Karen to give up her "precious young life" (36) to help more with Kelli's care. Karen does not maintain any false interpretations of her mother's weaknesses, and the same can be said for Karen's explanation of her mother's strengths. She remembers that in relation to Kelli's care, Irene was "Superwoman in a salon perm" (41). Karen recalls the careful records and plans Irene kept "inside a chewed-up-looking file folder called *Kelli's World!* (with a heart above the *i*) which [she] had maintained over the past few decades" (3). Kelli's wellbeing was of the utmost importance to Irene, and, like Libby's parents in *The Discovery of Flight*, she also maintained the things Kelli liked to do, uplifting her voice and showing appropriate understanding. Karen recalls a trip with Irene to Woolworth's store when she was only sixteen, twenty years before the setting of the novel. She notes:

The cushion Irene was there to purchase was, of course, for Kelli. Irene was concerned about Kelli's stool by the window — it did not have sufficient padding as far as my mother was concerned, not when you considered the vast stretches of time Kelli was prepared to spend on it watching the comings and goings of the street. (135)

This example shows that Irene wants to ensure Kelli's comfort when doing the activities she enjoys, like sitting on her stool in the window. In addition, Irene would had to have known that

Kelli liked watching people on the street to have put a stool in the window in the first place, which highlights Irene's attentiveness to Kelli's interests. After Irene dies and Karen returns home to live with Kelli, she shares that "once Kelli's planted on her stool by the window after breakfast, it takes some cajoling to get her out" (19). Throughout the course of Irene and Kelli's life together after Karen moves away, Irene ensures that Kelli's stool is still in place, showing her enduring dedication to the things which bring Kelli joy, and thus exhibiting appropriate understanding.

As Irene's health declines and eventually fails, the external sources of care threaten to stifle Kelli's voice and neglect understanding. Though Irene spends much of her life ensuring Kelli's wellbeing, her health begins to spiral after a ten-year battle with cancer, declining to a point where she is no longer able to support Kelli's needs herself and external carers begin to come into the home. Some of these carers are good at ensuring Kelli's needs are met without using their own wants and desires to cloud their approach. Karen notes that after moving back home with Kelli, she cannot grow accustomed to "the flurry of hot and cold running caregivers [her] mother has put in place once she received her ultimate diagnosis" (5). Some allow Kelli to display her "charming way of being 'done' with her home care friends . . . muttering *Bye-bye now, bye-bye now* without so much as a backwards glance" (13-14) before returning to her stool. One woman exclaims, "Oh, am I dismissed? . . . as she drie[s] her hands and wink[s] at [Karen]" (14), showing that this worker knows Kelli's routines and allows Kelli to do what she wants without forcing a grandiose, emotional goodbye. In other cases, some workers neglect understanding and place their own desires onto their interactions with Kelli. Trevor, a home care worker who comes to the house to walk with Kelli, is the eventual antagonist of the story, and he

shows his manipulative power early in the novel when Karen sees that he had “initiated a new ritual” (14) with Kelli. Karen shares:

And when I say new, I mean unprecedented. Before Kelli could charge up the stairs,

Trevor inquired: “No hug for Trebie?”

Kelli does not hug. She has never hugged. She lets herself be hugged, certainly, although not for long . . . hugging, like eye contact, was never Kelli’s thing. So I watched as Kelli hugged Trevor. As far as hugs went, it was definitely Kelli, meaning perfunctory . . . more of a performance of a hug. She extended her arms straight out and kind of bopped them against Trevor’s upper arms as Trevor put his hands about her soft, expansive waist and gave it a squeeze. (14)

Trevor’s behaviour totally ignores Kelli’s messages, and his initiation of the hug shows that he neglects understanding and places his own desires in front of Kelli’s typical routine. This example is only the beginning of what Karen discovers to be a multi-year dictatorship that existed between Trevor and Irene before her death, with Kelli’s needs functioning as the means through which Trevor exerted his control. When Trevor first begins offering his off-schedule help to Irene, “[s]he resisted him . . . as long as she could before finally picking up the phone and croaking out a request for help” (201). As her illness takes hold, she relies more heavily on Trevor. Irene buys a new television for Trevor to use when he is at the house with an “outsized cable package that went with it, that offered all the sports channels” (184), along with a new barbeque (185). Though Karen initially thinks Irene does this “[i]n gratitude for all he’d done” (185) to help with Kelli’s care before she died, as Karen gets to know more of Trevor’s manipulative patterns, she sees that Irene likely felt pressured into these purchases. Even the neighbours notice that something is amiss with their relationship, and the token neighbourhood

watchman, Noel, tells Karen that he “[n]ever liked the look of the prick” (283) and that when Irene was alive, “he was always hanging off her . . . [n]ever giving her a moment’s peace” (284). Karen recalls being shown photos of Trevor, Irene, and Kelli where Irene “looked shrunken beneath his arm” (337). Karen eventually realizes that Trevor “wouldn’t let [Irene] do anything” and “kept her fucking prisoner” (348-349). If Irene, who has long been Kelli’s trusted caregiver and advocate, is silenced by Trevor, then Kelli, by proxy, is silenced.

His success in holding Irene emotionally and mentally hostage before her death gives him confidence to attempt to control Karen in the same way after she moves in and becomes Kelli’s primary source of support, further threatening to silence her agency and voice. When he takes Karen and Kelli to look at potential care homes for Kelli to live in, Trevor forces them to “cram into the cab of his pickup truck” (25). When Kelli continues to share that her “[k]nee sore” (26) due to the close quarters of the truck, Trevor brushes off her pain and insists that “[she’s] good” (26), which shows that he neglects her voice and causes her pain. Trevor also tries to control where Kelli will live and attempts to sabotage a care home’s reputation in Karen’s eyes by causing a resident to go missing (291). Trevor’s control attempts escalate to a point where he calls adult protection on Karen, but the plan backfires and Karen receives more support rather than an enemy in the system. Finally, Trevor breaks into Kelli and Karen’s home and literally holds them hostage. Though this serves as an extreme and criminal example of exerting control over another person, Coady makes her point that the presence of a manipulative carer can yield extremely destructive results. The result for Kelli is that she is shown neglected understanding.

Though Karen will be discussed as a narrator later in this chapter, it is also necessary to highlight her patterns as a caregiver. While she does genuinely want what is best for Kelli, there are times when she neglects understanding and exposes Kelli to emotionally harmful situations.

An instance that shows Karen's genuine desire for Kelli's wellbeing can be seen in her criteria for an appropriate future care home. Karen recalls her first visit to Seaside Care Facility, the place that Irene had arranged for Kelli to move into after she died. She notes that she was "troubled" (21) by her visit to the care home, with its style of care falling "somewhere between a home and a hospital" (21), threatening to turn Kelli "into a patient as opposed to just Kelli, the person she had always been" (21). She also notices the unkempt nature of the care workers' hair, noting that her "preoccupation with the hair at Seaside wasn't just a nitpick — it was a visual gauge of overwork" (24). These reflections show that while she thinks it a "fine thing that Seaside provided care for [those who need it]" (21), it is not the right style of living for Kelli. Karen is dedicated to ensuring that Kelli lives in a place that would fulfill her and make her happy. Another instance of Karen exhibiting this dedication to Kelli's wellbeing is when Kelli gets sick. While at the pharmacy, Karen tries to remember her mother's solutions to Kelli's colon problems. She thinks, "What did my mother do when this stuff happened?" (75) and, "Would my mother give Kelli Imodium?" (76) These questions show that Karen knows her mother "wasn't big on pharmaceuticals" (76) and found alternative methods that worked better for Kelli. Karen wants to maintain Kelli's wellbeing through Irene's established care habits, though this is likely more related to Karen's need, even after Irene's death, to live up to the standards that she maintained.

Though Karen attempts to maintain routines of health and wellness that Irene established as best for Kelli, Karen struggles to uplift Kelli's voice in other areas of her care. One such instance occurs when Karen, Kelli, and Karen's real-estate agent friend, Jessica, tour around Halifax looking for a new place for the sisters to live. On the way up the elevator to look at a high-rise condo, Karen remembers that "Kelli ha[s] an issue with elevators" (125) once Kelli

yells as it begins to rise. When Karen explains to Kelli that it is “just an elevator” and “[she’s] been in elevators before” (126), Kelli says, “‘El-vaer’ . . . the way someone else might say ‘maggots’ or ‘sex offender’” (126). When Jessica asks if Kelli’s okay, Kelli says, “No,” though Karen immediately follows with, “She’s fine” (126). Jessica expresses that she’s willing to accommodate Kelli’s dislike of elevators and “can cross high-rises off the list” (126). Karen says that elevators “won’t kill her” (126), to which Kelli responds, “Kill her” (126). Karen would likely account this statement to Kelli being in “parrot mode” (8), though a keen reader knows at this point that of all Kelli’s words in the novel, only fifteen percent are made up of a direct echo of another character. Otherwise, Kelli’s responses are relevant and independent of influence, but Karen often does not pay close enough attention to see this relevance. Another example of Karen dismissing Kelli’s voice occurs when Kelli hears a noise in the middle of the night. Karen notes that after a neighbourhood incident where a garage was vandalized in the middle of the night, Kelli often believes that the noises she hears at night are due to “‘bad guys in Misser Gill’s garage’ — because that was how [Karen] explained the incident to her” (307). When Kelli again wakes Karen up due to “[b]ad guys” (307), Karen tells Kelli that she “[doesn’t] think the bad guys are out” (308) and attempts to get her back to bed. Though Karen dismisses Kelli’s concerns, they prove valid when she discovers that Trevor has broken into their home and is sitting downstairs in the dark, ironically revealed to be the same person who vandalized Mr. Gill’s garage. Karen’s automatic assumption is that Kelli’s concerns are unfounded, showing that while Karen is listening, she lets her bias neglect her understanding of Kelli’s words.

When considering parents and carers in *Watching You Without Me*, Coady features instances of dangerous manipulation and bias to highlight how easily someone with intellectual

disabilities can have their voice dismissed, even when they have parents and carers in their life who maintain appropriate communication.

### *Religion — Catholicism*

In *Watching You Without Me*, the Catholic religion is widely examined in relation to disability and voice. Though there are certain philosophies within the Catholic church that seek to emphasize the humanity, importance, voice, and agency of Kelli, there are ways that the interpretations of these messages by other characters ultimately hinder Kelli's wellbeing in the context of the story. An imperfect uplifting of Kelli's humanity occurs when Irene introduces Kelli to her religion class, but the selflessness that Irene preaches to the children ultimately harms Kelli's agency by exposing her main facet of support to carer burn-out. Later, Kelli's voice is compared to a prayer, showing that her vocalizations and interests are seen as just as important as anyone else's, but in this way, the trope of the holy innocent is maintained. Due to these reasons, though religion can sometimes function to uplift the voice of the disabled, this is not the case for Kelli in *Watching You Without Me*.

A way that religion shows its potential to increase the perceived legitimacy of Kelli's voice within the narrative takes place when Irene brings Kelli to Karen's religion class. Karen shares that Irene "substitute-taught [her] Wednesday-morning religion class for a few weeks" (95) and brought Kelli in one day to hold "a class about Kelli" (96). Irene's use of Kelli as a subject of social learning poses some problematic questions, particularly when her level of understanding and ability to consent is unknown. This discussion aside, Karen acknowledges her mixed feelings about the encounter but also admits that she saw a change in her classmates' attitudes after the visit in comparison to their general attitudes toward disability before the visit.

When Irene asks the class about their first impression of Kelli, Karen remembers that one boy said, “She’s *special!*” (96). Karen continues:

He knew this word because there was a group of students known as the “special” class in our school — more functional than Kelli, able to learn a few academic basics. We only saw them coming and going in the hallways though — they weren’t permitted to linger in the playground at recess with the rest of us. I knew, from watching kids following behind them in the hallways, limping and slobbering in comic exaggeration, they would’ve been mocked to death if they were. (96)

When people highlight difference, mock it, and reject another’s humanity in this way, it usually follows that their voice and agency is not attended to and understanding is neglected. Later in the religion class, after some discussion about what makes a person special, Irene asks, “Why did God make Kelli the way she is, do you think?” (97). A few children give answers that Irene gently corrects, and she then says that Kelli helps teach others “to be *selfless*,” to “*give of [them]selves*,” and “[t]o be kind” (98). After this lesson about God’s supposed plan for Kelli on Earth, Karen recalls:

At the end of the class, to Kelli’s delight, my mother encouraged everyone to go up to my sister and shake her hand. And how about this: There was no exaggerated rocking and gibbering directed at me over recess. No mockery, no drooling idiot faces pushed into mine. My mother’s magic had made my classmates, briefly, kind. (98)

Irene’s use of religion to teach this lesson, though problematic in its inclusion of Kelli as an example, changes the students’ perspective and behaviour in relation to those with disabilities, which increases the likelihood that they will engage in appropriate understanding in the future. Though the process has its problems, the outcome is positive, and religion is the primary reason.

Irene and Kelli's visit to religion class highlights religion's capacity to promote behaviour that uplifts the humanity and voice of those with intellectual disabilities, but it also highlights the capacity for religion to promote unrealistic and unhealthy patterns of behaviour for those who offer support in personal care. When carers who maintain appropriate understanding burn out, their voices and the voices of those they support are silenced. Irene demonstrates an unhealthy ideology when she tells the children that people like Kelli teach others to be "selfless" (98). Karen provides many examples where Irene's selflessness eventually negatively impacts her wellbeing and opens herself and Kelli to predators who seek to take advantage of them. In a conversation with Jessica, Karen notes that Irene "[d]isappear[ed] herself" (70) to take care of Kelli and that Karen feels she does not "have it in [her]" (71) to do the same. Jessica blames "Catholic stuff" (71) for Irene and Karen's need to "self-flagellate" (71), which Jessica describes as "[d]enying [one's] own needs" and "[s]eeking to suffer" (71), behaviours of "selflessness" that are often idealized within Christianity (Christopherson 222). Karen dates Irene's belief in this ideology back to her time as a nurse, noting that "nurses who came up in that era, especially those who did their training in Catholic hospitals, were taught to think of themselves not as medical professionals but as priestesses . . . because what they were doing was considered a sacred vocation — a calling" (180). This attitude stays with Irene throughout her life, as she has "never not had someone to look after . . . and it ha[d] never occurred to [her] to be anything *but* grateful for that particular burden" (180). Though Irene is able to maintain her selfless, all-encompassing care of Kelli for many years, which is partially (if not all) to blame on this religiously idealized selflessness, she is eventually unable to continue the self-sacrifice. When Karen grapples with the hidden, years-old mess of Irene's kitchen cabinets, she imagines what her mother was thinking when she abandoned her high standards of both cleanliness and care.

She thinks that maybe leaving the mess in the cupboard “is the first concession, Irene’s first *fuck it* . . . [a]n acknowledgement . . . *I’m alone and old and for god’s sake, I can’t keep this up*” (181). This first concession paves the way for many others, the riskiest being Trevor’s unsanctioned and overwhelming presence in Irene and Kelli’s lives. Were it not for religion’s influence on Irene’s method of care, perhaps she would have been more open to integrating support before Trevor, someone who silences and neglects both Irene and Kelli for his own emotional benefit, became her only option.

Another way that religion, or rather religious thought, has the potential to uplift Kelli’s voice is through the perceived sanctity of her words, but this impression maintains harmful disability tropes. Though Karen is no longer religious when she returns home to live with Kelli, her religious upbringing serves as a continuous motif through which Karen navigates her view of the world and disability. Generally, she rejects the notion of radical selflessness, but this resistance does not keep certain influences totally out of Karen’s mind. When Kelli speaks, there are many instances where Karen describes her whispering as a form of prayer. Karen notes that when Kelli likes the sound and feel of a sentence, she will say it in a “sing-song, staccato repetition” (87). In one particular instance, Karen joins Kelli in her whispered repetition of, “*Shaydatbeard, Leo, shaydatbeard*” (87) during a time of humorous shared memory about the people at their mother’s funeral. Karen notes that “[i]t was very much as if [they] were praying together” (87). This moment of sisterly intimacy, and Karen’s word choice reflecting on it, presents an image of all words and communication, no matter the message or the person saying them, having the capacity to bring people together in a shared moment of comfort and faith in something bigger, regardless of personal belief in a specific religion. This shows that religion can sometimes uplift voices of those with disabilities. Another instance of Karen referring to Kelli’s

speech as a prayer is shown when the sisters are navigating Trevor's final attempts at control. Kelli, rather than leaving the kitchen to sit in her stool, remains stalled in the doorway. Karen writes that Kelli "ignored [Trevor]" and "was intent on whatever it was she was doing there against the door frame, whatever prayers or benedictions she was whispering" (327). In this instance, Karen's reference to Kelli's whispering as a prayer gives her words a purpose, and though people around Kelli may not know what that purpose is, the words are important to Kelli. Karen's use of the word "prayer" to describe Kelli's words show religion's capacity to uplift the voice of those who are intellectually disabled in the novel and shows that the words are meaningful simply because they exist.

Despite the capacity that the image of Kelli's voice as prayer has to emphasize the importance and legitimacy of diverse voices, it falls prey to the trope of the holy innocent, where "people perceived as having intellectual disabilities are somehow granted a greater connection to the natural world or even to God" (MacDonagh 270). MacDonagh continues:

This tenacious representation serves a social function: it gives a meaning, a role, to people who otherwise do not seem to have any other reason to occupy a place in society. The role of the holy innocent not only provides a minimal degree of protection for such people in that it gives them a status that protects them somewhat from the callousness of others. It also provides them with a function, rationalizing their presence in society as representative of a divine (or, later, a natural) plan that is beyond the mundane and practical. (270)

Both Irene's stunt in bringing Kelli to religion class and Karen's continuous reference to Kelli's words as prayer uphold this stereotype. One could ask, "What risk, though, does this representative pattern pose to voice, especially since the disabled voice seems to be uplifted?"

One problem lies in the over-evaluation of the innocence of the disabled. Certainly, there are those who live their lives without the burden of moral choice, but to assume this existence of all those with intellectual disabilities is a diminishment of their diverse personhood and a simplification of their circumstances. Additionally, maintaining this belief serves as a form of assumed understanding, where those who are external from the message sender's experience use their own knowledge to establish certainty regarding another person's place in the world.

*Watching You Without Me* shows complicated religious implications for Kelli as she navigates the world. Though at surface level religion may appear to uplift Kelli's humanity, it ultimately results in her suffering the consequences of a burnt-out caregiver and places her at an increased risk of assumed understanding via representative tropes.

#### *The Time Period — Adults in 2019*

As in Glickman's *The Discovery of Flight*, Coady's *Watching You Without Me* points to the reality that the time in which a book is written and set plays a significant role in the treatment of the disabled voice. Lynn Coady attends to this reality by including many narrative tropes concerning disability with the purpose of subverting them, a tactic for which she is well known. This is particularly prevalent when addressing the extent to which era and generational messaging can influence the treatment of voice, and Coady's pointed humor exposes these instances. In relation to the time in which the story was set, though likely set in roughly the same time period as *The Discovery of Flight*, the Petrie sisters in *Watching You Without Me* are much older than Sophie and Libby and thus show the ripples of a time that valued diverse voices less than society in 2019. That said, there are still instances where Coady's 2019 narrative falls prey to some key representative problems that cannot be resolved by her subversion. This shows that

though voices are more attended to by some now than they were in the past, as long as generational messaging exists, there is still potential for harmful opinions to make their way into the narrative, particularly for those who are intellectually disabled.

Lynn Coady has long been known for her tendency to include a representative pattern with the sole purpose of subverting and further complicating the problem. Analysts of Maritime Canadian literature agree that Coady often maintains a “subversive self-consciousness” (Wyile 85) and “resist[s] the sentimentalizing and idealizing tendencies frequently associated with regional writing” (Iverson 1). The same can be said for her inclusion of some problematic disabled representations in *Watching You Without Me*. For example, Karen uses language that others Kelli, but this is subverted when Coady shows Karen attending to the subtleties of lingual shifts in other ways, showing her to be a changing and open product of her time and upbringing. This is primarily shown through her use of the word *retarded*, which reflects both the persistence of harmful language around disability and a growing awareness of its social implications. The word appears three times throughout the narrative: twice in Karen’s reflections and once in spoken dialogue, and each instance points to Coady’s use of time to indicate a societal shift.

The first use of the word occurs as Karen recalls that in her teenage years, she wished she was not “the girl with the retarded sister” (Coady 55). This early use is immediately followed by the disclaimer, “I’m certain I would never have uttered that final sentence” (55). This comment distances Karen from the common language of her past, which suggests a growing discomfort with the once common term and an acknowledgement of its outdated nature. The second and only spoken use arises in a moment of stress. When a threatening stranger confronts Kelli as she sits alone in a car, Karen yells, “She’s retarded!” (132) in order to quickly convey Kelli’s vulnerability. Karen later explains that while this was not a term she typically used, it was “the

one word people unambiguously understood” (132). This unambiguity is shown *not* to be the case when the man misinterprets her intent and thinks she is calling *him* retarded. The man’s misunderstanding highlights that the term’s transformation into a derogatory slur has made its meaning unstable and easily misread. It no longer functions as “unambiguous,” which reveals Karen’s flawed assumption about its communicative clarity. The final instance of the word usage occurs when the Gorsebrook facility loses track of their resident, Jeremy. In her panic, Karen resists the urge to ask, “how retarded is he?” (190) to gauge the severity of his displacement. She notes that she “lost all sense of the acceptable terminology” (190) and ultimately stops herself before saying something she might regret. Her self-interruption illustrates a moment of growth, showing that she is not only aware of her language but is also actively trying to adjust her impulsive thinking in relation to acceptable language. Coady uses these moments to critique both individual and societal relationships with outdated and offensive terms that ultimately diminish the perceived humanity of others and extinguish the legitimacy of their voices. Karen’s reflections serve as a lens through which readers can witness Linton’s identified the tension between internalized language of the past and the emerging social awareness, much like Sophie in *The Discovery of Flight* (Linton). On one hand, Karen linguistically others disability by relying on a term that simplifies and stigmatizes. On the other hand, her discomfort and reflection suggest a shifting cultural landscape that recognizes the harm such language can maintain over the course of time.

Though Coady includes problematic patterns to subvert them, there are tropes included in *Watching Me Without You* for which she does not offer a solution. These ultimately maintain a silencing of Kelli’s voice and agency and a diminishment of her purpose. One representational problem in *Watching You Without Me* that hinders Kelli’s voice is her presence as the sibling to

the protagonist who elicits change in other characters. Just like Libby in the *The Discovery of Flight*, Kelli falls within Meyer's observation of many characters with disabilities taking space "as siblings, sidekicks, and best friends" (63) who "catalyze growth" (62) in the protagonist. Specific to intellectual disability, MacDonagh notes that "in literature characters with intellectual disability are rarely considered on their own terms so much as in their relationships to other people" (272). These notions exist for Kelli in *Watching You Without Me*. Like Libby in *The Discovery of Flight*, who helps Sophie work through her coming of age and further solidify her sense of self, Kelli's basic function in the plot of the story is to help Karen heal from her troubled past with her mother and help her to become a better, more confident person. When Karen arrives back in Halifax after her mother's death, she is cynical and wounded by her past and is self-conscious in her new role as caregiver. During this time, she advocates for Kelli's placement in a care facility, which is in line with Irene's arrangements for the time of her death. Karen's push for this arrangement is partially rooted in her discomfort with dedicating her life to caregiving and her reluctance to resume her restrictive past identity as the "dutiful daughter" (Coady 13). At the same time, Karen grapples with deep, personal insecurity. An internal, critical voice constantly undermines her confidence, which repeats, "*You don't know what you're doing*" (11) while supporting Kelli's needs. Eventually, as Karen settles into life with Kelli and receives guidance and reassurance from Adult Protective Services, her perspective begins to shift. Over time, the harsh self-criticism softens, and she gradually comes to believe in her own ability, so much so that she decides she "ha[s] to stay" (87) with Kelli and that she *is* "capable" (280) of providing care for Kelli without the use of a care facility. Though she does not embody a personal shift into the selflessness of Irene nor the selfishness of Trevor, her change is simply because she has Kelli in her life. This serves to simplify Kelli's presence in the story, and without

a deeper examination of Coady's deployment, a reader may assume that Kelli's only function is to serve as a catalyst for Karen's growth. An inadvisable reading tactic is to focus too finely on the function or non-function of disabled characters within a narrative, because every character, no matter the story, serves to shed light on a different issue, a different metaphor, or a different lesson whether they have an acknowledged disability or not. A reader must look beyond their surface function to find that there is often more to the story than originally meets the eye, even if harmful tropes are maintained.

Though Coady includes some examples to show that society has shifted in its treatment of those who are disabled, her unresolvable tropes show that there are still ways that Kelli's function in the story could potentially be diminished, thus minimizing the instances where her voice is present.

#### *The Narrator — Karen*

In *Watching You Without Me*, Lynn Coady uses Karen as the narrator to play a major role in exposing the barriers to appropriate understanding that are in place for Kelli's voice within the novel. Not only does she act as the filter for Kelli's voice, but she also shares many details and assumptions about Irene and Trevor's side of the story. Though she shares details in an attempt to paint the whole picture of Irene, Trevor, and Kelli's experiences, there are instances where understanding is either neglected or assumed due to her bias. Like Sophie in *The Discovery of Flight*, Karen is by no means perfect, and the reader finds many opportunities to question Karen's opinions, attitudes, and methods throughout the narrative. When Karen takes over Kelli's care and brings her own set of wounds and idiosyncrasies with her, and though Karen's efforts to

legitimize Kelli's voice are sometimes successful, she cannot separate herself from her own experience and give Kelli the full understanding she deserves.

Though it is clear from the earliest pages of the novel that Karen and Irene did not get along, Karen gives the reader the fullest picture of Irene's experience that she can, even though she is eventually unable to remove her own biases from her reflections. A moment where Karen both acknowledges and biasedly dismisses Irene's history is shown as she reflects on the many fights she had with her mother as a teenager. She remembers:

And, yes, I had pushed my mother. Oh god, had I ever, in all my young righteousness. *I* was ambitious, *I* had potential, *I* had big plans (unlike *you*, was the ongoing subtext), *I* needed expanded horizons, expansive vistas, freedom, Mother. Freedom to accomplish all the wonderful things the young, vivacious, ability-crammed me was so clearly capable of.

(36)

There is a duality of intention in this passage. Though Karen is acknowledging the ways that she pushed her mother during their frequent disagreements, her sarcasm suggests that she still has emotions that are left unresolved. The use of *ability-crammed* in particular shows that while she can admit the ways she was reactive and self-righteous towards her mother, she still harbours discontent related to how her mother made her feel in comparison to her sister Kelli. Another example of this biased acknowledgement is shown when Karen, before realizing the true nature of Irene and Trevor's codependency, imagines how their relationship started with a hint of jealousy. She notes:

For lack of a daughter, then — a proper daughter, a daughter who called more than once every couple of months, a daughter who visited more than once a year, a daughter willing

to shoulder her way past the slammed-shut door of “Fine” every time she asked her mother “How are things?” — Irene had managed to recruit herself a son. (183)

Karen’s impression of her mother throughout the novel often fluctuates between admiration, respect, anger, and pity. She knows that she behaved badly in the past and admits that there are ways that she could have been a better daughter and sister to her family, but she also blames her mother for withholding honesty about how she was *really* doing. In this instance, Karen is acknowledging that her mother likely found Karen’s emotional and physical distance from her and Kelli difficult, which shows that Karen does attempt to appreciate Irene’s side of the story. That said, Karen also riddles this moment with her own bias. Karen is so absorbed by her own assumptions and burdened by her history with Irene that she fails to consider the possibility that Trevor and Irene’s relationship developed independently of her. This shows that though Karen attempts to understand her mother’s side of the story, she cannot separate her telling from her own bias or seek answers outside of her own experience.

Karen also shows her biased retelling in relation to Trevor. Denial that Trevor is the antagonist of the story is not possible, but Karen still spends much of her retelling painting him as a complex person who has many wounds of his own. As they converse about their pasts, Trevor shares that his childhood was less than ideal. In particular, he notes the inconsistent behaviour and unpredictable love he received from his father growing up, who “was a drunk and a big fucking baby” (227-228) and would give him “big hugs and kisses” (227) one day and be “red-faced . . . kicking presents around and yelling” (227) the next. Trevor also shares that his wife left him for the hurtful reason that she “found being *married* a chore” (203), revealing another instance where Trevor is shown conditional, unpredictable love. In the rubble of his brokenness, he latches himself onto Irene and Kelli, and though Karen knows that Trevor is

clearly complicated, wounded, and likely mentally ill, she is unable to separate her own experience from her thoughts of him, however warranted those negative feelings may be. As Karen tells the story within *Watching You Without Me*, what becomes clear is that she is telling the readers the story long after all the events take place, so she already knows everything that eventually happens with Trevor. Even in the simplest moments of describing Trevor, Karen cannot help but hint at her true feelings towards him, even before she reaches the climax of his negative presence. During their first week of knowing each other, he stays at the house for a barbeque and Karen describes his cooking techniques as “manipulat[ing] the meat” (33). He cannot even cook in front of Karen without the description being negatively skewed. A similarly neutral instance is turned negative in Karen’s eyes when she hears Trevor call Irene “Rini” (50).

Karen remembers:

I nearly dropped my mug into my lap. Trevor was referring to my mother — *Rini*. But my mother’s name was Irene. There were only a handful of people on the planet who’d ever called her Rini . . . Now Trevor was watching me, as I took my time replacing my mug on the coffee table . . . We both understood that this moment, this weird trump card Trevor had been keeping up his sleeve, meant that all was forgiven. By him, that is, with respect to me. (50)

Trevor gives many nicknames to many characters throughout the course of the novel, but he strikes a nerve in Karen when he uses a nickname in reference to her mother. Though this move is fairly neutral when one considers how Trevor behaves in relation to other characters, Karen views the use of the name as a threat. This threat is directly related to her own bias towards Trevor and her history with her mother. Though Trevor’s behaviour cannot be excused, critics note that Karen has bigger problems than Trevor, and that her biggest enemy is her own bias.

Nathan Whitlock writes, “The story is less about the threat of Trevor than it is about the threat Karen poses to herself, and about her painfully slow — and sometimes literally painful — struggle to come to terms with the resentment and anger that has powered her life thus far” (Whitlock 2). Karen’s bias is the most dangerous enemy within the story, not only to herself, but to Kelli and the level of understanding that she is shown.

Of primary interest in relation to this project is Karen’s entrenched bias regarding Kelli’s speech, and though there are certain communications of Kelli’s that she understands appropriately, there are more instances where her own biases cloud her filtering of Kelli’s experience. Because of this, she either neglects or assumes understanding. Though she loves her as a younger sister loves their older sister, Karen utilizes a lot of varying language to describe Kelli, even outside of the demeaning and biased description of her voice. One example of this general diminishment occurs when she refers to her sister’s favourite place in the window as her “perch” (3), a word defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary* as “[a]nything on which a bird alights, rests, or roosts,” providing an animalistic image in relation to Kelli sitting in the window. Additionally, when Kelli and Trevor go out on their first walk together and Karen is unsure if she should have let her sister go walking with a stranger, she consoles herself by thinking that “surely your average sexual predator would not prioritize the 250-pound mentally handicapped woman with a skin condition” (11). This image maintains commonly held societal ideals regarding “who should or should not be sexual” (Holmes 12), showing that Karen still maintains commonly held biases. This bias not only diminishes Kelli but also falsely assumes that predators would not target Kelli or take advantage of her, which has been shown to be false multiple times in this discussion. Additionally, Karen shows general bias towards Kelli when she shares about Kelli’s mood since Irene’s death. Karen shares that being back in her childhood

home is difficult for many reasons, but that “[t]he problem wasn’t Kelli. That is, the problem *was* Kelli, Kelli was always the baseline problem, but in this case she wasn’t the immediate problem” (56). Karen’s view of Kelli-as-baseline-problem speaks to the reality that many caregivers have a negative view of complicated care even if they deeply love the person they are caring for, showing that Karen holds bias towards Kelli in general. Finally, Karen shows general disability bias towards Kelli’s adulthood when looking at photos of Kelli throughout the years. She notes that looking at them is like seeing a “documentary in stills of an endless childhood” (241), which perpetuates Michals’ trope of the “eternal childhood” (Michals) that Libby also finds herself subjected to. Karen’s word choice here highlights a common problem in relation to intellectual disability, one where those who are adults are viewed and treated as if they stay children forever. This image maintains the false impression that the way in which intellectually typical children grow up is more valuable than the way that the intellectually disabled reach adulthood.

In relation to Kelli’s voice, Karen’s bias is equally degrading, particularly in the words she uses to describe Kelli’s speech, her neglecting patterns while listening to Kelli, and her assumptions of Kelli’s meanings. Though she begins to realize how to properly attend to the voices of all people, there are still moments when she cannot properly translate Kelli’s experience, uplift her voice and agency to its full capacity, or show appropriate understanding. As a continuation of Karen’s use of animal imagery for Kelli, she describes a form of Kelli’s speech as “parrot mode” (8). While diagnostic descriptors like *echolalia* or *echophasia* are not necessarily required or creative in the context of a novel, particularly when avoiding a purely medical model of interacting with naturally occurring variability in communication, the use of *parrot mode* further serves to reduce the value of Kelli’s spoken words to that of an animal who

speaks without meaning. Karen also reveals a deeper, more troubling attitude in relation to Kelli's repetition. She notes:

My sister only has a few things she likes to say — her “catchphrases,” my father used to call them — so when they change, when you hear Kelli uttering something entirely new, it feels odd, like a cool hand landing on your shoulder out of nowhere. Like when you know a stranger's in the house because the air has shifted with an influx of new pheromones, the dust eddies suddenly swirling around in entirely different formations.

(6)

This reflection shows that Karen's baseline expectation is for Kelli to only say specific words and phrases, with anything new causing discomfort for those who know Kelli well. Therefore, Kelli's capacity for communication is placed in a box. This limited expectation, or neglected understanding, is shown through Karen's choice of descriptive language, and serves to dismiss the value of Kelli's voice.

Karen also employs the bias of assumed understanding of Kelli's desires and meanings. Though Karen knows Kelli well, it does not necessarily follow that Karen is always going to instinctively know Kelli's meanings or feelings, or that she is immune to placing her own wants and desires into her translation of Kelli's experience. One example of this assumption is shown through Karen's frequent description of the emotions she associates with Kelli's different methods of speaking. According to Karen, Kelli vocalizes “happily and incessantly” (5), “almost suspiciously” (19), “gleefully” (101), and “peevisly” (287) to name a few instances. While these are neutral descriptors for those who do not have barriers to their independent communication, those who do have barriers to their communication may not feel according to these specific descriptors, yet do not have the understanding, means, or methods to communicate

that they may feel otherwise. In addition, there are moments in the novel when Karen uplifts Kelli's voice, though she gains a desire or proves a point of her own through this uplifting, creating a defence with impure intentions. When Trevor takes Karen and Kelli for a tour of the local care facilities, they squeeze into the cab of his truck, "which [Karen is] not happy about because being crammed against [her] sister [is] a lot like cuddling up against a lavishly padded space heater" (25). That said, it comes as no surprise that when Kelli immediately begins complaining of knee stiffness, Karen does not hesitate in suggesting that they go back to "get the sedan" (26). Though defending Kelli's wellbeing, Karen's suggestion serves to alleviate her own discomfort within the close quarters of the pickup cab, showing that Karen's filtering is not free from her own personal agenda. Finally, in the penultimate moment of the novel, Karen assumes Kelli's meaning when she says, "Leave" (364), and "Leave Trebie" (365) to Trevor. Karen, who previously told Trevor to leave, assumes Kelli is telling Trevor to leave and wants to "pump her fist" (365) and say "*Way to go, Kelli! Tell him!*" (365). Alternatively, Trevor has been repeating, "I believe in you" (364) to Kelli, and he believes that Kelli is repeating his words instead of Karen's. Karen, who is authoring the tale in retrospect, writes that Kelli says, "leave" instead of "lieve," although there is no way to prove one way or the other which Kelli truly means. Karen's bias is an unavoidable force through which Kelli's experience is filtered.

Even in Karen's more redeeming moments, her behaviour and translation of voice are still tinged with bias. When Karen initially describes Kelli's voice, she refers to her speech as "babbling" (3, 13), and though this could initially be viewed as further bias, infantilization, and diminishment of her voice, Karen shares that her own mind "babble[s] (11) when she thinks. While there are better, more socially appropriate words that Karen could choose to use, sometimes, a choice of wording simply reflects a creative attempt to accurately depict a type of

speech. Karen is also slightly redeemed when she is speaking with other members of the disabled community during a visit to Gorsebrook home for a tour with Kelli. A “stocky boy barrell[s] up to [Karen and Kelli] . . . and insist[s] on giving [them] both hugs” (287). When Karen explains that Kelli is “not so much into hugs,” (287) she speaks to Marlene, the care facility director, rather than to Arthur, who is not a boy at all but has an “older-man’s bald spot” (287). Karen notes that “[t]he moment [she] said it [she] realized [she] was doing the thing that made [her] most annoyed when strangers did it to Kelli . . . talking over and not to the boy, taking it for granted that he wouldn’t understand” (287). Karen not only talks over Arthur, but she also answers for Kelli without first asking her if she would like a hug or not. Kelli shows later that she is capable of saying “[n]o” (287) to Arthur on her own terms, and though Karen is right in her assumption of Kelli’s desires in this moment, she does not give her the space to say yes, even if unlikely. That said, Karen does realize the error of her ways in regard to speaking over Arthur and dismissing his voice, though she does not show the same acknowledgement that she speaks for Kelli instead of letting her speak for herself. In this way, her bias is slightly redeemed. Although she speaks for Kelli, she shows an inward acknowledgement of her error with Arthur and corrects herself by speaking directly to him for the remainder of the conversation.

In Karen’s description of Irene, Trevor, and Kelli’s experiences, Karen shows the capacity for growth away from assumed understanding. That said, she ultimately allows her bias to cloud her interpretations and still has a lot of work to do before this growth ensures a more consistent shift towards appropriate understanding.

### *Conclusion*

In terms of parenting, care, religion, the time, and the narrator, Coady shows in *Watching You Without Me* that none of these facets serve to uplift Kelli's voice to its full capacity or maintain appropriate understanding. Even though her vocal words are more prominent than what Libby is physically able to achieve in *The Discovery of Flight*, others' perception of Kelli's intellectual disability prevents her from experiencing the legitimization of voice that is available to Libby. Though Irene listens to and understands Kelli's desires, she is unable to maintain the level of care she once upheld, which exposes them to Trevor's control and hinders their voices. Trevor's care is manipulative, self-centred, and neglects understanding of Kelli. Though Karen's care is more balanced, there are times when she also neglects understanding and dismisses Kelli's words. Within the analysis of religion in the novel, though religious thought temporarily changes Karen's peer's behaviour in relation to disability, they receive an image of unhealthy selflessness. In addition, harmful religious tropes are maintained and shown through Karen's description of Kelli's words as a prayer. The time in which the novel is set shows that there is a growing awareness around the language used to describe disability, though there are tropes that Coady includes where subversion is not successful in eliminating their harm. Finally, in relation to Karen as the narrator, though she shows moments of attending to Kelli's voice and accurately describing the experiences of characters, her bias and past clouds her interpretation of Kelli's experience and exposes her to assumed understanding. In the concluding chapter of this project, I will discuss the role of both the author and the readers in maintaining the voice of a character with a disability and compare the subtle conclusions that can be drawn in the comparison of the physically disabled voice and the intellectually disabled voice as shown in these novels.

## Chapter 4 – Final Thoughts

There is a moment that occurs in some communication that is often untraceable. A moment where one feels the “click,” or the “A-HA!” when a voice, in all its various forms, is not only heard, but appropriately understood. The moment does not occur when the message sender finds the perfect way to explain a concept, or the right movement to convey an emotion, or exudes the proper look in their eye, but when the message receiver experiences a perfect harmony of two realities: a recognition of humanity in the message sender, and the deep acknowledgement that they will never fully understand the message. In stating this theory, it is not my intention to draw any stark conclusions about how a disabled character should or should not be treated in our cultural imagination. Instead, using the Pendulum of Understanding, I hope to draw attention to neglected understanding, assumed understanding, and the differing levels of appropriate understanding that *do* or *do not* exist within this imagination, and whether disability type plays a role in this treatment.

In the previous chapters, I outline that both *The Discovery of Flight* by Susan Glickman and *Watching You Without Me* by Lynn Coady deploy a representation of disability and voice that both reflect and add to the shape of Canadian culture. Through a comparative analysis of how physical and intellectual disabilities are filtered through the external facets of carers, religion, temporal framework, and narration, it becomes clear that while both novels attempt to uplift disabled voices, the successes and limitations of these efforts are deeply shaped by the type of disability being represented and the narrative structures that are utilized.

In *The Discovery of Flight*, there are times when Libby is offered appropriate understanding by the many influences in her life and her voice is not only heard but validated.

Her parents, though they initially assume understanding, adjust their reception of Libby's messages to a more appropriate, uplifting balance between the care they need to provide and maintaining Libby's agency and choice. Sophie, though she sometimes neglects certain aspects of Libby's experience, finds a respectful balance between uplifting Libby's voice without assuming that she always knows what Libby is going through. Though both religion and the time period of the setting neglect their understanding of Libby, she has space within the novel to utilize these facets to her own advantage, using her writing and her alter ego, Aya, to undermine both religion's misinterpretation of difference's place in the world and the time's underestimation of her capabilities. Though Glickman falls prey to numerous representative tropes, she does not allow characters to speak for Libby while she is alive and gives her space in the narrative to express her own personhood. Libby, with her distinctly physical disability, is given appropriate understanding by at least some of the identified influences, which allows the reader to witness a voice that has the room to fly.

In contrast to Libby's exposure to appropriate understanding, *Watching You Without Me* does not show Kelli being offered appropriate understanding by anyone present in the novel. Though Irene has her own issues and biases in relation to disability, she is the only character examined who the reader can infer provides Kelli with consistent appropriate understanding and enriches Kelli's life with the activities she seems to like and find fulfilling. That said, Irene exists as a mythic, far-off ideology and loses herself in the process of care. Her presence is an unreachable, too-far extreme in the realm of self-sacrifice which cannot be exceeded by anyone else in the novel. Kelli's other regular carers, Trevor and Karen, either neglect or assume understanding depending on the circumstances and place their own needs and desires ahead of Kelli's wellbeing. The Petrie's religion assumes the circumstances through which Kelli exists

and holds her words to a spiritual standard that she shows no evidence of holding. The time in which Kelli lives gives evidence of a shifting language from words that demean another person to words that acknowledge the diversity of humanity, but Coady's tropes threaten to place Kelli in a box without room for growth or narrative agency. In terms of the narrator, Karen shows moments where she *almost* appropriately understands Kelli and thus can facilitate her communication within her retelling of the narrative. She attends to her words and non-verbal forms of communication, but ultimately, her bias and emotional burdens do not allow her to filter her past with Irene, Trevor's intentions, or Kelli's voice clearly without the ever-present floaters of her own knowledge and experience. While Coady's novel critiques the systems and attitudes that silence intellectually disabled individuals, Kelli's voice remains largely inaccessible, and her agency is often assumed or overwritten by Karen. The absence of Kelli's own narrative perspective threatens to maintain the very barriers that the novel seeks to expose.

The difference of disability type plays a key role in the character's exposure to different types of understanding. With Libby's physical disability, while her communication requires physical facilitation, the intellectual facilitation needed for those in her life to receive her messages are not as reliant on the judgement or appropriate understanding of other people. She has a few key people in her life who appropriately understand her messaging at a young age, and after that is given access to a technology that does not pass its own judgement or filter on the words that Libby herself types out. Her voice is unavoidably present in the structure of the novel, and thus, she has the ability to bypass any potential incidence of neglected and assumed understanding within the narrative. Though Sophie accurately judges many aspects of Libby's experience of reality, Libby is not reliant on Sophie, or anyone for that matter, as an intellectual facilitator for her thoughts and feelings once her own line of communication is opened up. That

said, Libby needs someone to plug in her computer, ensure she is sitting at the proper angle for the eye-tracking typer, and cannot communicate using technology without the physical intervention of other people. In this way, message receivers can easily neglect their understanding of Libby were they to unplug her computer, not give her the proper amount of time to type, or simply dismiss her before giving her the chance.

Libby's experience with her disability is much different than Kelli's lived reality. Though Kelli can speak words vocally and does not require physical intervention for her messages to be sent, the way she communicates sometimes requires an intellectual facilitator to balance between their own knowledge of Kelli and the world, the words Kelli is saying and her physical communication, and an acknowledgement of the things they can never know. Within the categories of parents and carers, religion, the time period, and the narrators in *Watching You Without Me*, characters either do not consider Kelli's point of view, leading to neglected understanding, or the acknowledgment of the unknown is left out, leading to assumed understanding.

Though both Kelli and Libby require some form of facilitated communication, the type of facilitated communication needed in order for their messages to be appropriately received varies significantly. In *Tell Them You Love Me*, some claim that the young man requires physical facilitation while others claim he needs intellectual facilitation. If what the man "needs" or "does not need" is set aside, does the viewer believe that Stubblefield found appropriate balance between her own knowledge, the acknowledgement of humanity, and the humility of accepting the unknown? Do the doctors find this balance? The family? These questions are the conflict that the discussion boils down to in the end — what area of the pendulum does the person find themselves placed within by the message receiver, and what consequence does that have on their

choices, particularly when disability is involved? What becomes obvious in this discussion, based on the differing treatment of Libby and Kelli, is that in general, our world is much more comfortable providing appropriate understanding when there is either no facilitation required, or the facilitation claims to be purely physical.

Both the authors and the readers of a story have a major role to play in combatting neglected or assumed understanding when they are present in an imaginative rendering of a character with a disability. In *The Discovery of Flight*, Susan Glickman uses her role as the author to allow appropriate understanding to find Libby, and her allowance of Libby's perspective plays an invaluable role in highlighting that even though Libby's perspective is available, there are aspects of her experience that both the characters and the readers will never know. Though Libby's novel becomes available for the other characters and the readers to view, it is, ultimately, a work of Libby's imagination. Her novel may closely mirror her relationship with her sister and parents and reveal many of her opinions, but the fictive element ensures that the humbling required when faced with the unknown is encouraged for both the characters and the readers of her narrative. A similar element exists in *Watching You Without Me*. Though Kelli's voice remains unattended to by the characters in the novel and some harmful tropes threaten to undo a lot of the subversion that Coady seeks to accomplish, she ensures that she leaves the readers with the unavoidable presence of ambiguity. The final confrontation between Trevor and the sisters shows Trevor and Karen both believing that Kelli is on their side. Though the reader is given clues through Kelli's movements and facial expressions as to whose side she is actually on, Coady never provides a definitive answer, and thus, the reader cannot ethically draw any conclusions as to Kelli's true experience of that moment. These elements show that as an author

who imagines disability, there is a responsibility to ensure that conclusions about experience cannot be drawn.

These differing approaches between Glickman and Coady are not inherently better than one another. Rather, these differences acknowledge the ethical complexity of imagining voices that can never be understood. As Bérubé and Hall have argued, the act of speaking for others, particularly those who cannot speak for themselves, is fraught with risk and necessary nuance. That said, it is also, at times, required. This is to say that it is not wrong to imagine: it is wrong to *not* imagine, and it is wrong to imagine you are *right*. The challenge lies in imagining with humility, care, and the constant acknowledgement of one's own imaginative limitations.

#### *Thinking Forward on the Path to Appropriate Understanding*

The potential for future discussion within this topic is limitless. Though I have touched on two Canadian novels in relation to voice, I have barely scratched the surface of the representations of disability available within the Canadian canon. Once a broader examination within Canada is established, representative patterns can be compared with other parts of the world and within the context of other cultures. Though these comparisons can be drawn between similarly Western ways of imagination and policy, there is no doubt in my mind that there are cultures where appropriate understanding is not a far-off or utopic concept, but one that is easily maintained. These ways of thinking could also be present within Indigenous perspectives, found in written texts, oral storytelling, and other physical manifestations. Genre difference is also a potential point of comparison, where memoir, poetry, speculative fiction and science fiction could also be examined for their treatment of voice. In addition, how does intersectionality impact the presence of appropriate understanding? The research potential is endless, and I hope

that this small piece of the puzzle assists in the formulation of a broader and more comprehensive compilation of disability criticism within the Canadian context.

To conclude, I return to the concept of facilitated communication. As a reader, the responsibility to ethically facilitate and appropriately understand is in our hands, regardless of the story being depicted. When reading, it remains important to remember that the experiences we encounter, especially those that are not ones that we identify with, can never be fully understood based on narrative alone. We are the ever-present facilitators of experience, and it is necessary for us to balance between our own knowledge, an acknowledgement of humanity, and resting easy in the presence of the unknown. These dynamics are not unique to fiction, nor is the pendulum of understanding only valuable within the context of literature. It is a dynamic tool that is constantly in motion, and is influenced by context, emotion, and willingness to listen to all people. It is my hope that in creating this project, I have identified the ways in which all message receivers can adjust their listening methods so that humanity, dignity, and autonomy can be promoted in all facets of society. If there is one take away, let it be that the unknown aspects of another's experience should no longer be seen as a scary entity to be avoided, but a necessary comfort towards better understanding.

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