Review of *Disfigured* by Amanda Leduc

Michelle Superle and Harjinder Saran, University of the Fraser Valley

This book review is different from a typical academic book review—because *Disfigured* is absolutely atypical. In the spirit of *Disfigured*, then, I co-review this work with Harjinder Saran, a blind undergraduate student who will soon begin her Honours project with me. This collaboration results from a discussion about diverse picture books in the upper-level children's literature course I teach. Our alternating sections of the review are notated with our initials (MS for me, and HS for Harjinder), as well as different fonts.

MS: *Disfigured* is an exceptional work, but it's also unique. This book is exceptional in the same way all academic books are exceptional, when they're exceptional: it pushed me to understand and consider the subject matter in a completely new, different way; it changed my scholarly and pedagogical practices. It persuaded me that, as Leduc argues, "It is the world's responsibility to make space for my body, my words, my lopsided gait—our bodies, our words, our ways of moving through the world" (205). Such persuasion is what defines a successful academic book. But *Disfigured: On Fairy Tales, Disability, and Making Space* (2020) by Amanda Leduc is also unique—in many, many ways.

MS: First of all, Leduc *talks about herself* in the book, offering personal examples and experiences from both her childhood and adulthood to contextualize her argument. Although positioning oneself within the discussion has become common practice in the Humanities over the past few decades, it's still fairly rare in literary criticism, particularly in the field of children's literature—and especially when the positioning involves descriptions conveyed in dreamy, present-tense vignettes that invite readers to experience pivotal moments in Leduc's life alongside her.

HS: Leduc's approach of balancing out the academic sections in *Disfigured* with her own story adds a human quality that is often lacking in academic discussions of disability. Most of the scholarly sources that I've read are highly medically or academically oriented, which eliminates the real person behind the disability. Of

particular value are Leduc's descriptions of her own elementary school experience with bullying, which not only provide readers with a glimpse into that part of her life and her disability, but also invite readers to empathize and perhaps resonate through their own experiences. Walking with a different stride and limp was one of Leduc's reasons for being told that "you walk like you have a pickle up your ass."[1] I appreciated this candour because it corroborated my experiences with bullying; I was often told, "you walk like a duck"—apparently due to my V-shaped stance and gait. It took reading *Disfigured* to start me contemplating in more depth these childhood experiences and the comments made then about my blindness and prosthetic eyes.

MS: For Leduc to intersperse her lived experience in *Disfigured* this way provides a level of power that most academic writing lacks. All the theory and pithy quotations (which she also includes) in the world cannot compete with a good story—which is the key point that Leduc emphasizes throughout *Disfigured*. As she explains, "It has meant so much to me to find disabled community in unexpected places—to hear a writer I admire detail her difficulties and recognize that those could be my difficulties, too; to see another woman with cerebral palsy talk about her experiences onstage and imagine that that could also be my future" (149). I think, I hope, that *Disfigured* can do this for literary scholars precisely because Leduc offers readers this solidarity—which is crucially important because for most people who don't live with disabilities, "the deepest of truths" is that "they cannot imagine this kind of life. The inability to imagine a happy ending outside of the confines of the fairy tale is… a failure of imagination" (151). With *Disfigured*, Leduc provides vigorous stimulation for the imagination, exactly as fairy tales themselves were called into service to do for the nineteenth-century "Romantic child."

MS: Beyond her own, Leduc also includes other disabled writers' descriptions of their experiences and observations. These nudge readers in the direction that Leduc argues they must go: towards "[u]nderstanding the varied richness of the disabled life—this reality that a life can be filled with pain and also joyous, that it can be bright and beautiful while also filled with struggle" (217). For example, Leduc quotes "Penny Loker, a Canadian artist and advocate for

[1] Harjinder is referring a non-paginated audio version of *Disfigured*, so there are no page numbers associated with her citations.

those with facial differences" who "has hemiofacial microsomia as well as Goldenhar syndrome" (140) pondering the cultural narrative that "*Ugly is bad*" (157, italics original) in relation to a 2019 shooting at a mosque in New Zealand, which the media spun as, "Shooter Was Badly Picked on as a Child Because He Was 'Chubby'" (157). Loker muses, "I've lived my whole life looking like this….And going on a murder spree to inflict pain and suffering *because* I look like this is not something that has crossed my mind" (159, italics original).

MS: Another unique quality of *Disfigured* is the way it brings the broad theoretical lens of disability studies to bear on fairy tales. No other full-length monograph in the field considers such a breadth of fairy tales through this lens—as one of the granddaddies of fairy tale scholarship, Jack Zipes, enthuses in his endorsement of *Disfigured*: "A unique and dazzling study…a revolutionary approach to understanding why we are drawn to fairy tales and how they shape our lives" (back cover). Despite Leduc's warning that her examination of these works is not "meant to be a work of disability scholarship," and her explaination that she is "a physically disabled woman who also deals with a major depressive disorder" who uses her "own experience to explore fairy tales and their cultural impact in the world," and "it is not [her] intention to speak for the field of disability studies or for all disabled people, or for all those who likewise deal with their own mental health challenges" because "disability is not a monolith" (13), I can only surmise that it must be a valuable contribution to this field.

HS: Leduc has begun paving the path for further discussion and literary discourse amongst scholars and educators, along with opening up a portal for readers of all backgrounds to share their own experiences with stories and disabilities—as Leduc herself does within this book. In terms of scholarship that connects disability and children's literature, particularly fairy tales, many articles and reviews have been released since the publication of *Disfigured*. There are, however, few sources preceding it—which demonstrates the importance of Leduc's contribution. Among the few, two publications are noteworthy: "Reading Disability in Children's Literature: Hans Christian Andersen's Tales" (2011) by Vivian Yenika-Agbaw, focuses on just four tales by Andersen; "A Narrative Blind Eye: Visual Disability Representation within the Brothers Grimm Folk Tales" (2008) by Leah Laxdal, is a Master's thesis from the

University of Windsor that focuses on a few Grimms' tales in relation to just one type of disability, blindness.

HS: One particular work of literary criticism, *Disability, Deformity, and Disease in the Grimms' Fairy Tales* (2014) by Ann Schmiesing, provides an important reference point for Leduc in *Disfigured*. This monograph is one of the more notable publications in the field, and it acts as a valuable stepping stone. However, it is strictly a work of "Literary Criticism and Theory", as categorized in the publisher's listing (it is published as part of "The Donald Haase Series in Fairy-Tale Studies"). Leduc extends Schmiesing's ideas into the connection between the personal and political, as mediated by story.

HS: *Disfigured* further paves the path by drawing upon not only the texts themselves but also Leduc's and others' own lived experiences, developing a broader examination of fairy tales beyond nineteenth-century European "classics" by the Grimm brothers and Andersen. Leduc expands the scope to include tales from many cultures, multimedia works from the Disney corporation (including films, songs, and toys), as well as other children's classics. This extension is exceptionally valuable to me as a reader—a disabled person who has always loved stories and grew up immersed in western fairy tales.

HS: For me, *Disfigured* is a refreshing and rejuvenating take on the ablest trends that have been tightly woven into so many generations of children's stories—an important cultural pattern that has historically been ignored by critics in the Humanities. As Leduc demonstrates convincingly in *Disfigured*, portrayals of disability in fairy tales function as a punishment, a warning, or an obstacle to overcome. I was unaware of this pattern as a child reader, so I accepted it as a normal narrative in my society and culture.

HS: As soon as I became aware of the pattern during my adolescence, I recognized its dangers and began to wish vehemently for it to be overturned. I became disappointed

and angry that the literary representations I could relate to were restricted to societal discomfort with the different ways in which I take up and navigate space, particularly by appearing less graceful, or the ways my body differs when utilizing a mobility device. It was upsetting to me to realize that these are all elements typically associated with an unpopular character or one who must overcome this challenge. I began to understand that the messages about disability children's literature conveys to young readers are narrow and harmful—that disability is messy, scary, and in need of being extinguished from our world.

HS: In parallel, I began to recognize how some of my real-world interactions were clearly influenced by narrative messages, such as "You can see just like a baby rabbit if you eat your carrots." Personal insults on the playground, like "your eyes look weird—your empty sockets make you look like a ghost" also caused me significant emotional pain and seemed to be normalized by the narratives that surrounded me and my peers. Despite the promises of redemption and recovery so prominent in fairy tales and other prevalent narratives, I understood that nothing was going to change for *me*. For me as a very specific reader—a person with a visual disability who navigates the world in a different way from sighted people—Leduc's insights are not only reassuring, but also provide validation for the ideas I developed as a fledgling literary critic.

MS: Admittedly, I am not well-versed in disability studies, but if *Disfigured* isn't "a work of disability scholarship" then it should be, as Harjinder's responses attest. Subject matter and theoretical frame aside, the word that comes to mind when I reflect on Leduc's book is (interestingly) "accessible". This work conveys complex, important ideas using clear language in a manner that's engaging and inclusive for everyone from undergraduates to faculty. The use of stories—especially Leduc's personal stories—in a text that explores the importance of stories, not only creates a pleasing balance of form and content, but also makes her argument more palatable and persuasive. As she acknowledges, storytelling is a vital component of disability writing and activism: "The trick here is to tell stories in a way that outlines injustice but also

calls on the community and the social structures in place to change so that *anyone*—not just a select few—might also be able to reach for success in the future" (45). Leduc accomplishes this very storytelling in *Disfigured*.

MS: Finally, and best of all, *Disfigued* is beautifully written. Dear reader: I devoured it as though it were a racy novel; I wanted to know everything. (And more—my burning question, "Why did you have to leave Scotland, Amanda? *WHY*?!?" remains unanswered and haunts me to this day.) Leduc harnesses all the best qualities of creative non-fiction with virtuosic prowess, using original metaphors and elegant descriptions to reel me in—sometimes for a sucker punch, sometimes for a dazzling insight that leads to epiphany. For instance, Leduc provides one of the most original and thought-provoking descriptions of depression I have ever read: "I wanted to grasp a zipper at the top of my head and pull it down so that I could step out of my skin as one might move out of a dress—to step out of my being and my life and move quietly, invisibly, into someone else's, or into no life at all" (181). Yes. This.

MS: As an educator, the highest praise I can bestow is that *Disfigured* has changed how I will teach fairy tales in my second-year historical survey of children's literature course. It has changed how I will incorporate disability studies in my third-year special topics course on children's literature and children's rights—a course in which I have positioned *Wonder* by R. J. Palacio as the core text for the past five years. It has changed how I will teach essay writing in my second-year creative non-fiction course. It has changed just about everything, actually.

MS: As a literary scholar, the highest praise I can shower on *Disfigured* is that it has provided me with brand new literary insights. Leduc claims that "this book is not a work of fairy-tale scholarship" (13); I disagree. She carefully contextualizes and expertly analyzes these works on par with other fairy tale scholars—often incorporating their foundational work into her discussion. In this way, Leduc makes a valuable contribution to the field. For example, although I have read (long, long ago) almost every work of fairy tale scholarship she cites, never before had I considered or appreciated the insight that Leduc posits about "Rapunzel":

> It is endlessly interesting to me that the prince doesn't come back with his *own* rope, ready to rescue the maiden—nor does he alert his kingdom to her captivity and come charging to the tower with army at hand. She is better in the tower—

> contained. As long as she's in the tower, *she exists just for him*. (163-4, italics original)

MS: Overall, Leduc argues that fairy tales are powerful narratives which create a "conceptualization of disability" that promises it's possible for all manner of challenges—including physical and psychological—to be "overcome" or "reversed" (216). Because these narratives are so widespread and popular they become internalized; therefore, they wield immense influence for encouraging people to believe that disability is "visited on us in response to a grand, overarching narrative plan" instead of recognizing that it is actually "a lived, complex reality that reimagines the very nature of how we move through and occupy space," thus "denying the lived reality of what it means to be a disabled body in the world" (216). This is problematic because it "denies the possibility of growth on the disabled person's terms" (216). Before reading *Disfigured*, I had not noticed this particular pattern in fairy tales; now that I've read this work, I can't stop noticing it.

MS: As a human being, the highest praise I can give *Disfigured* is that it has changed how I walk down the street. Sidewalks are suddenly filled with menace. For example, thinking of blind people I know, I wonder—and wonder why I've never wondered before—Where are the textured panels indicating that the sidewalk ends and an intersection begins? Where is the Braille? Where are the tweeting speakers that promise it's safe to enter a crosswalk or chirp sternly when it's not? As Leduc explains, "we support and perpetuate a culture where the emphasis is on the cure rather than societal change—where the aim of the narrative is to eradicate the disabled life rather than change the world so that the disabled life can thrive. The stories we tell need to be different. It is no more and no less than that" (187). Leduc demands "stories where people are not applauded for embracing difference but instead reshape the world so that difference is the norm" (205). So do I.

MS: And, of course, perhaps most relevant here: my highest praise as a reviewer is that *Disfigured* ranks as an exemplary work across genres. It is effective as an academic work of literary criticism, as a consciousness-raising treatise for disability studies, and as a collection of creative non-fiction essays. It is an important contribution to all three genres, for precisely the reason Leduc explains:

> Some of us don't dream…of personal transformation as the happy ending.

> Instead, we find our points of light in others who might look like us, or share our experiences of tripping up a flight of steps and spilling a pot full of tea. And together we dream about the transformation *of the world*. (152, italics mine)

MS: There is a moment in *Disfigured* when Leduc describes a depression so intense and severe that she not only lost the will to live—"I woke up every day and wished that I was dead" (160)—but also believed her death wouldn't make any difference: "It would not even be that big a deal, I reasoned….I wouldn't write or publish anymore, but as far as I could tell, nothing I had written up to that point had made much of a difference….What did it matter if I died and was no longer writing? It didn't, I told myself. It didn't matter at all" (161). This is the only point she gets wrong in *Disfigured*: in fact, it would be a very big deal if Leduc were no longer writing. Anyone—everyone—who enjoys stories will be grateful that Leduc continues to write. "Those three years of depression were the worst years of my life—and yet, in the end, I was lucky," Leduc muses (186). So are we. As a scholar, and as a person, I am lucky indeed to have read and been influenced by *Disfigured*. This book has enriched my personal and professional lives in more ways than I can quantify. I look forward eagerly to Leduc's next publications.

HS: For me as a "junior children's literature scholar,"—which is what Dr. Superle calls us in English 388D, her course on "Children's Literature and Children's Rights"—I believe that if this text were used as a resource within literary studies it would provide an enriched perspective. For example, connecting ideas from *Disfigured* with concepts from The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child would be a rich vein to mine. As stipulated in Article 23 of this human rights treatise, disabled children have the right to live as full and productive a life as their able-bodied counterparts. The UNCRC also draws attention to the importance of both media and children's literature (Article 17), therefore confirming the connection between the ideas children are exposed to, what they learn, and how they live.

HS: In this context, Leduc's suggestions for more sensitive, nuanced, and accurate literary representations of disability become much more than mere wishful thinking; they are actually a crucial aspect of all children's education. Accordingly, every country that has ratified the UNCRC is duty-bound to provide such stories for children.

Providing all children with stories that positively (or at least neutrally) portray a variety of different bodies inhabiting the world in different ways is an important element of educating children about their rights and assisting them to understand how many different kinds of bodies inhabit their world. Thus, children's stories that accurately and sensitively portray disabled child characters' experiences could be one facet of both shifting societal attitudes about disability and altering the way in which these harmful ideologies are presented to children at a young age. Such readjustment of this representation would allow disabled children to relate to empowered characters while learning about their capabilities and rights, instead of being mired in the disempowering narrative that society is not built for them.

HS: As Leduc suggests, better stories would be those that encourage imaginings of happy endings in which disabled characters lives full and enriching lives regardless of their disability. After all, as Leduc points out, "the failure to imagine" is a key component in holding this back from becoming a reality.

HS: Overall, *Disfigured* provides readers with a raw yet compelling perspective on the stories and fairy tales that have been passed down through generations—without any consideration of the harmful ablest attitudes disseminated with each retelling and reinterpretation. Though both children's literature and popular culture have been increasingly peopled with diverse characters over the past decade, Leduc's examination of the prevalence of ableism in omnipresent narratives such as fairy tales—especially in their Disney incarnations—confirms that much more is needed. *Disfigured* has potential to act as a catalyst for ensuring that representations of disability are closely examined and refocused in aid of enhancing young readers' understanding of diversity and inclusion.

HS: As a result of reading *Disfigured*, my own perspectives on disability have shifted. This work has assisted me with gaining deeper understanding of the complex intersection of issues involved. As well, Leduc's findings have motivated me to adapt

the focus and approach she takes in *Disfigured* and apply them to the emerging body of picture books about disabilities for my Honours project with Dr. Superle. I hope that other scholars—from junior to senior, emerging to established—will also be inspired to explore other works of children's literature in this way.

Michelle Superle is an Associate Professor at the University of the Fraser Valley, where she teaches children's literature and creative writing courses. She has served twice as a judge for the TD Award for Canadian Children's Literature and is the author of *Black Dog, Dream Dog* (Tradewind, 2010) and *Contemporary, English-language Indian Children's Literature* (Routledge, 2011). Her articles have appeared in *Papers*, *International Research in Children's Literature*, and *The Lion and the Unicorn*. Superle's current research projects, the Dig for Your Rights! pilot program and her monograph-in-progress, *Picturing Agriculture*, are supported by a SSHRC Insight Development grant.

Harjinder Saran is an English major at the University of the Fraser Valley, where she is a staff columnist for the campus newspaper. In addition to her *Cascade* column, "Diversity Includes Disability", Saran is also a regular contributor of blog posts to Blind Beginnings, a non-profit organization that "inspire[s] children and youth who are blind or partially sighted and their families through diverse programs, experiences, counseling and peer support, and opportunities to create fulfilling lives."

Works Cited

Laxdal, Leah. *A Narrative Blind Eye: Visual Disability Representation within the Brothers Grimm Folk Tales*. Electronic Theses and Dissertations, 7999. U of Windsor, 2008. https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/etd/7999

Leduc, Amanda. *Disfigured: On Fairy Tales, Disability, and Making Space*. Coach House, 2020.

Schmiesing, Ann. *Disability, Deformity, and Disease in the Grimms' Fairy Tales*. Wayne State UP, 2014.

Convention on the Rights of the Child. Treaty no. 27531, United Nations Treaty Series 1577, 1989, treaties.un.org/doc/Treaties/1990/09/19900902%2003-14%20AM/Ch_IV_11p.pdf Accessed 7 July 2022.

Yenika-Agbaw, Vivian. "Reading Disability in Children's Literature: Hans Christian Andersen's Tales." *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2011. DOI:10.3828/jlcds.2011.6.