

‘Raising a Question Mark’: Disability and Textual Recalibration in Contemporary Canadian Writing

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Warped Family Relations and Blighted Harvests

In *Survival*, her thematic guide to Canadian literature up to the book’s publication in 1972, Margaret Atwood famously characterized Canada as a nation of victims, struggling to survive against the imposing elements of their environment.¹ Far less remarked upon in the critical appraisal of this seminal text, though, is the corporeal language of her claim that one of the key victimizers in mid-twentieth century Canadian writing is the family. Atwood proposes that while in representative American literature of the same period, male subjects tend to leave their families to light out for the frontier, finding their own private America and transcending their fathers in the process, these narratives portray the family largely as a trap on which one gets snagged. Canadian intergenerational family portraits, she goes on, generate a “lurid gothic light”² insofar as they focus on the decaying heritage bound up with domineering grandfathers who beget families that “rot away,” resulting in “warped family relations and blighted harvests.”³ Their children try to escape and are “somehow crippled”⁴ as a result.

¹Margaret Atwood, *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (Toronto: Anansi, 1972), p. 3.

²*Ibid.*, p. 158.

³*Ibid.*, p. 161.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 163.

The implication is that all those who survive their rotten inheritances are disabled, in both a corporeal and a figurative sense. Yet Atwood qualifies this bleak portrait, and proposes that Canadian writers often provide an escape clause, albeit one that cannot be fully depicted within the confines of the narrative. Gesturing to Adele Wiseman's 1956 novel *The Sacrifice*, which depicts a Jewish immigrant named Abraham's settlement in Winnipeg and thwarted hopes for his son, Atwood identifies the third generation child (his grandson Moses) as a redemptive figure, whose prospective life might belatedly give meaning to the struggles of his predecessors – transmitting cultural values without reproducing the disfigurements that once attended them. "Wiseman can only project authentic success into the future, not depict it⁵," Atwood writes, gesturing to Moses's brief surfacing at the novel's close, and suggesting that literary formulations of Canadian identity are inherently directed outward toward an uncertain future that has yet to take shape.

Atwood's focus on this ambiguous moment of baton-passing between generations of male immigrants and their descendants now seems anachronistically Eurocentric and patriarchal at best – the product of a specific moment of nationalist Canadian literary studies born out of the thematic criticism of scholars like Northrop Frye, which became prominent in the mid- nineteen sixties.⁶ What interests me about this reading, however, and what strikes me as a necessary site of intervention in the present, is the language of disability that Atwood attaches to this intermediary generation. I am similarly drawn to the language of bodily integrity that in this example is bound up with the child

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 187.

⁶See Northrop Frye, *The Bush Garden: Essays on the Canadian Imagination* (Toronto: Anansi, 1971) for a collection of such suppositions on the quintessential features of a national Canadian literature.

who supposedly offers a way out of the parents' and grandparents' morass, a tentative step forward into contemporary Canadian identity.

The child's future cannot be depicted in full, Atwood suggests, because a more exhaustive representation might reveal the kind of bodily contingencies that would muddy its signification of a triumph over the past, and, to extend the nationalist analogy, would render uncertain Canada's present condition as a child out in the world, away from its European antecedents. But what if the future that the child ostensibly represents is complicated by a physical blemish, as is often the case in contemporary Canadian depictions of disability, and how does this disfigured form signify something other than a transparent success story? In other words, if the transparently average child, a variant on the figure that Rosemary Garland-Thomson terms the normate, "outlined by the array of deviant others"⁷ who shore up its boundaries, spells out a promising future and signals a satisfying conclusion to the generational narrative that defines so much canonical Canadian writing, what ambiguities does a disabled child portend? What narratives does it facilitate or modulate?

Atwood's reading does not explore the ethical implications of such literary instrumentalizations of disabled children, and there is much work to be done in considering how the disabled child's body serves in this example as an aesthetic impetus for raising questions about the form that the future will take. My research revisits Atwood's contentions about Canadian literature by focusing on this apparent oscillation between the heightened corporeality of disability and the vague, often apocalyptic anxieties to which it gives a form. My approach in the larger project from which this paper is excerpted is generally

⁷Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York: Columbia UP, 1997), p. 8.

historical in orientation, considering the recurrence of disability imagery within modernist Canadian fiction and later turning to how treatments of deformity figure into centennial representations of the form of Canadian identity in the late nineteen sixties, for example. In keeping with the broadly conceptual nature of this collective work, however, I want to forego this historicist framework and instead use this space to consider a selection of formally and historically disparate texts by Timothy Findley, Barbara Gowdy, and Ian Brown. Rather than presenting a definitive explication of the role disability plays in particular moments of Canadian literary identity formation, then, my aim here is to explore in a largely speculative manner how disability complicates literary imaginations of the future, especially those bound up with a larger national narrative. I do not intend to present these texts as ultimate examples, consequently, but as points of entry into a discussion about how disability intersects with both aesthetic matters of form and more thematic explorations of filial responsibility in a national literature that, as Atwood's comments demonstrate, is preoccupied with both.

Most Anything, Other Than Themselves

Although as I have noted, my approach here is intended to be one of non-mastery, it is necessary to give a brief account of my theoretical grounding in reading this body of texts on intergenerational crises. Given their focus on the labour of preparing for the future, and on transitional moments between generations who represent different phases of Canadian identity, it is unsurprising that the texts I consider tend to frame disability with respect to questions of reproduction, responsibility, and care. My work consequently grapples not only with disability studies but also with theoretical modellings of the child, particularly in queer theory, where much of what I consider

the most exciting recent work on the subject has been done. In part I take my influence from Kathryn Bond Stockton, whose 2009 book *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* is a remarkable study of the inherent strangeness and queerness of the figure of the child, which explores the many wayward paths children take in literary and cinematic narratives about the formation of subjects.⁸ Reviewing Stockton's earlier essays in 2005, and surveying the proliferation of work on children and futurity in recent queer theory, Michael Cobb ventures the fascinating possibility that children are fertile ground for such aesthetic and theoretical abstractions precisely because they are unsettled, and "can be most anything, other than themselves."⁹ Cobb's notion that the figure of the child is both placeholder and ambiguous future projection informs my own thinking about Atwood's argument about Canadian literature as a literature of victimhood – helping me to situate her gesture toward the next generation's curious steps forward into a kind of post-victimhood.

If Stockton's study of children who buck the linear trajectory weighs heavily on this project, which similarly considers children who grow in unorthodox directions, my research takes its cue more from the oppositional voice of Lee Edelman's rigorously contrarian polemic about the child. In 2004's *No Future*, Edelman proposes that political discourse insidiously champions an ideology of *reproductive futurism*.¹⁰ Under the mandate of reproductive futurism, he contends, all must be oriented toward the propagation and protection of successive generations, rendering those who practice non-procreative sex treasonous, and

⁸Kathryn Bond Stockton, *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (Durham: Duke UP, 2009).

⁹Michael Cobb, "Childlike: Queer Theory and Its Children," in *Criticism*, vol. 47, no. 1 (Winter 2005), p. 119-130.

¹⁰Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke UP, 2004), p. 2.

intrinsically, even radically, self-involved. Such holdouts are deemed insufficient believers in the cult of the child as well as political dissents because we are no more able to conceive of “a politics without a fantasy of the future,” Edelman summarizes, “than we are able to conceive of a future without the figure of the Child.”¹¹ To this impossible situation, Edelman proposes a sharp turn: the “compulsory investment in every adorable Annie¹²,” he insists, can only be decisively refused by embracing an alternative ethic he terms *sinthomosexuality* – a call to “Fuck the social order and the Child in whose name we’re collectively terrorized.”¹³

The mandate of reproductive futurism, Edelman observes, extends to literary discourse, so that in Charles Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol*, for instance, miserly and in his reading queer Scrooge must be made a second father to Tiny Tim before the novella is through. In this seemingly obvious example of the quintessential child we might begin to see how disability is often imbricated with futurity in the literary imagination. Nonetheless, I want to propose that Tiny Tim is a curious example given Edelman’s assertion earlier in his book that the Child is typically made “to image...an Imaginary fullness that’s considered to want, and therefore to want for, nothing.”¹⁴ The limping young Cratchit in fact wants quite a lot *because* of his disability: if he is to want for nothing, it is not simply because he is a child but because he is the most vulnerable of children, and visibly so – his limp a totem of his poverty and its manifestation as illness. The narrative’s impulse to restore him to that imaginary fullness, to make and to keep him well lest The Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come’s bad tidings of his premature

¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 11.

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 18.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 29.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 21.

end should come true, is to be sure bound up with its reformation of Scrooge, a bachelor for whom singleness marks an obstinate refusal of the social order. Edelman emphasizes Scrooge's procreative stinginess, the way in which his "nuttiness" is aligned with his refusal to "drop acorns from the family tree."¹⁵ Impressive as this reading is in terms of its breathless excavation of a hallowed text, Edelman curiously makes little of the bodily particularity of Scrooge's young foil, an unhealthy acorn whose disability, in conjunction with his youth, compels ethical interventions from his community.

This reading leaves me dissatisfied, but in some ways that dissatisfaction is a productive point of departure, an opportunity to raise some of the same questions Edelman raises with theoretical sophistication from a different angle. My project is similarly drawn to texts involving children who make ethical demands of those around them, as I have said; it takes its cue from the same animating spirit of Edelman's inquiry into the political project of securing the future. But it focuses on the particular requirements of problem cases like Tiny Tim. What happens, I want to ask, when the acorn that falls from the parents' tree is not depicted as being abstractly perfect? How does disability intensify or otherwise modulate these anxieties about what is coming? Finally, what future does the disabled child signal, and what narrative mechanics are triggered as a result of the necessity of representing the child's deformity?

Cut Off at Birth

I have dwelled on Edelman's ironic call for queer subjects to embrace conservative political culture's caricature of queerness as a radically

¹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 44.

non-procreative force, oriented against the future, because it is also a call to reject an ethic of communitarian intervention that the texts I consider explore in their depictions of disabled children. Edelman's interest in what has to happen to Scrooge figures in narrative terms is, I would argue, an instructive tangent in thinking about how disability operates in these texts. I want to begin to focus this discussion by turning to Timothy Findley's 1977 novel *The Wars*, which is often treated as the capstone of Canadian postmodernism and historiographic metafiction¹⁶ but only tangentially discussed in terms of the extent to which that project relies on representations of disability. The novel concerns the fate of Robert Ross, a Southern Ontarian soldier in the First World War, whose wartime experience is recreated piecemeal through the archival interventions of a researcher figure who becomes a surrogate for the reader, finding fragments of Robert's life in photographs and interviews with friends. Disability haunts the novel from the outset, where this reporter figure describes a rare photograph of Robert with his generally under-photographed older sister Rowena, a wheelchair-user with hydrocephalus for whom Robert was a guardian figure despite his age.¹⁷ We learn early on that Rowena's death in an accident that took place while she was under his watch is the inciting incident of Robert's conscription. Later we are given an account of the moments after the funeral, where Robert's bereaved mother interrupts him in the bathtub to try to disabuse him of his notion that Rowena, whose image haunts him throughout the war, was his charge. "No one belongs to anyone," she tells him: "We're all cut off at birth with a knife and left at the mercy of strangers. You hear that? Strangers."¹⁸ She also washes her hands of his plan to become a soldier, an endeavour

¹⁶Linda Hutcheon, *The Canadian Postmodern* (Toronto: Oxford UP, 1988), p. 16.

¹⁷Timothy Findley, *The Wars* (Toronto: Clarke Irwin, 1977), p. 3.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, p. 23.

that by the end of the novel leaves him burned beyond recognition: “You can go to hell. I’m not responsible. I’m just another stranger. Birth I can give you – but life I cannot. Not anymore. I can’t keep anyone alive.”¹⁹

Now, I do not want to suggest that Mrs. Ross’s apparent disavowal of her filial bond and resultant obligation toward both her deceased daughter and her easily bruised son is necessarily an instance of the kind of disavowal Edelman has in mind. Her situation is quite specific, given that she is responding in part to the sanctimoniousness of the mourners around her, who are scanning her face for signs of grief. What I would note though is how, like Tiny Tim, Rowena makes particular ethical demands on those around her because she requires near-constant care; her status as a problem child ushers in a debate about filial responsibility. So strong is this call that Rowena retroactively forces her mother either to account for or to disavow personal responsibility for her death. Outside of this charged discussion and Robert’s haunted dreams, it bears mentioning, Rowena hardly exists in the text as a character in her own right. The very notion of Rowena as subject seems antithetical to her status as a token of Robert’s past, interchangeable with the single extant photo of her. She is largely an instigating device, starting this critical discussion about what can be done for children after childbirth, as well as the novel’s metafictional exploration of the responsibility a nation-state bears toward its soldiers. Her haunting presence forces these competing models of parenting – that of the dutiful brother, racked with guilt over his momentary inattentiveness, and that of the mother who has removed herself from care and drawn the line of her responsibility at accidents – into a crisis of self-definition.

¹⁹*Idem*

Moreover, as I have already suggested, Rowena's death before Robert goes away and is laid waste by the titular wars instigates the narrative's recuperation of his wartime experience. It is also the inaugural moment of the novel's criticism of the war effort that processes young bodies in the name of national identity consolidation, without accounting for the meaningless sacrifices of human life that such consolidations require. If, as Edelman notes, Dickens's novella must resolve itself via even the most miserly citizen's embrace of Tiny Tim, Findley's far less redemptive portrayal of a nation that has sent its youth to die in the wars must proceed with a critical difference. The child, in this case Robert, must indeed be cut off at birth (if not by his mother than certainly by his nation) and left at the mercy of strangers abroad. His mother's caution, and the analogy she makes between her two children, is therefore a preemptive strike against the wars, a Cassandra-like prophesy concerning the vulnerability of all children, spurred by the example of the disabled child, for whom a mundane fall proved fatal. The fate of the disabled child thus gives rise to a contemplative moment that prepares us for the ethical project in which the novel is invested – a curious moment insofar as there is no authenticating source for this discussion, no documentary text to explain how the researcher might have come upon it. It is there, and depicted almost as a one act play, complete with stage directions²⁰, because it must be in order to prime us for Robert's own multiple bruises to follow, and in more figurative terms, for his own status as a kind of national cast-off for archivists to reconstruct after the fact, or, to extend the filial metaphor, a historical orphan.

²⁰*Idem*

...For There to be Such Perfection

Disability also serves as an impetus for anxious ruminations on the future in the short fiction of Barbara Gowdy, whose 1992 collection *We So Seldom Look on Love* is full of depictions of disabled children on various temporal thresholds. In the opening story “Body and Soul,” for instance, we are introduced to a woman named Aunt Bea, who serves as a waystation for a range of physically and mentally disabled foster children, socializing and keeping them until they are deemed fit for adoption by the world at large. I want to focus on the second and longest story in the collection, “Sylvie,” about the titular character, a young woman with a Siamese twin named Sue, who presents as a second set of legs that Sylvie attempts to hide under her dresses, and who is described as an arrested child that the more developed Sylvie must carry with her.

As the story begins, Sylvie is on the verge of two seemingly quite different appraisals of her deformity, that of the circus community on the outskirts of her town, which cheerfully welcomes her into their company, and that of a series of medical men who diagnose her as an “autosite parasite”²¹ and identify Sue as a vestigial limb. While the former community gives her work because of her physical variation, the latter speaks instantly of amputation and the removal of her so-called “excess plumbing.”²² After a short-lived career as a vaudeville performer, Sylvie subjects herself to the rehabilitative gaze of medicine. She falls in love with a doctor who eagerly takes her to a specialist in congenital deformities; her would-be spouse proposes to her almost from the first, and looks on her body with vampiric lust, chanting “New territory...new data”²³ as if he finds himself before a welcoming spreadsheet.

²¹ Barbara Gowdy, *We So Seldom Look On Love* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 1992), p. 51.

²² *Idem*

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

Obviously we are far from the territory of Findley's effort to redress the historical record, and to sew cast offs like Robert back into the nation that shuttled them off to a stranger's mercy. Gowdy is of a piece with Southern Ontario Gothic in this use of both magical realism and the grotesque. Yet here too we find disability posing a series of questions about the future, and resulting in a kind of narrative parenthesis – a moment of reflective pause before what is to come. Sylvie's anxieties about going through with the amputation are twofold. First, she obsesses on the possible link between this undeveloped, soon-to-be excised sister Sue, who she has decided is only a set of legs, and the dead child of Mary, one of her co-performers, who is also named Sue. Sylvie is unsettled by the abrupt death of this infant, which launches her into a reverie about the value of deformity:

She couldn't understand why she and Mary and the other freaks were alive, and a perfectly formed baby was dead. The minute she'd laid eyes on Sue it had struck her that it was all right being deformed if deformity had to exist for there to be such perfection.²⁴

Second, she worries that the surgery will occasion the loss of her almost supernatural capacity for memory – one of the many quasi-divine gifts with which Gowdy's disabled characters are endowed. While her yearning to be normal turns her to the doctor following her early flirtation with the freak show, before long she worries that if her second set of legs are removed, she will not only forget this perfect child but also lose her own idiosyncrasy:

Will she forget baby Sue's face? What if her freak memory is connected with her freak legs? What if she becomes somebody else for whom nothing that happened to the person she was will be worth preserving?²⁵

²⁴*Ibid.*, p. 57.

²⁵*Idem*

What most interests me about this doubling of the Sues, as well as this fear that the amputation might erase Sylvie by restoring her to a form she has never possessed, is how the incessant presence of disability, even in the threat of its cure, seems to arrest the narrative progression of the short story. Disability throws a wrench into both Sylvie's aborted performing career and her prospective romance with the doctor. The haunting possibility of a "tiny, normal, perfect"²⁶ Sue makes it impossible for her to continue exploiting her own attached Sue for the act. The parasitic twin becomes for her a haunted text, always gesturing toward her perfectly formed namesake.

Similarly, Sylvie's procession into a reproductively typical future – "we'll have four children"²⁷, her paramour assures her – is cast into doubt once the threat of amputation introduces anxieties about cutting off the idiosyncrasies she suddenly deems must be preserved if she is to be herself, the bearer of Sue. Indeed, faced with the prospect of having children, Sylvie curiously begins to think of herself as a guardian to the Sues: both her sister's and her surrogate daughter's keeper. What we have in this moment of reflective pause and anxiety before Sylvie goes through with the surgery, as she does in the final moments of the story, is an instance of what Ato Quayson calls "aesthetic nervousness."²⁸ Disability, to borrow Quayson's terms, "short circuits"²⁹ the tenets of representation, in this case deforming the genres that the story is on the verge of becoming at various points – the bildungsroman, the grotesquerie, and the domestic melodrama, to name a few. And as in Findley's novel or even the failed intergenerational narratives

²⁶*Ibid.*, p. 46.

²⁷*Ibid.*, p. 57.

²⁸Ato Quayson, *Aesthetic Nervousness: Disability and the Crisis of Representation* (New York: Columbia UP, 2007), p. 15.

²⁹*Ibid.*, p. 17.

Atwood describes, the figure behind that short circuiting is once again a child.

A Frame on Which to Hang the Human World

The last text I want to look at, Ian Brown's 2009 memoir *The Boy in the Moon*, shares Findley's and Gowdy's texts' preoccupations with disability and filial duty. But it is also something of an outlier, not least as nonfiction, and largely because it explicitly confronts this capacity of the disabled child to raise questions about the future, as well as to prompt a discussion of guardianship. The book chronicles Brown's life with his son Walker, who has CFC (cardiofaciocutaneous syndrome), a genetic disorder so rare that he likens its diagnosis to being blasted into an unknown galaxy.³⁰ At present, Walker, who does not speak and who is significantly developmentally delayed, is in an assisted living home, whose precarious funding structure is part of the rhetorical exigency that gives rise to the book, which is concerned with the necessary costs of such forms of assistance. "Raising Walker," Brown writes at the end of the first chapter, "was like raising a question mark"³¹ "What is the value of a life like his," he asks, turning from the aesthetic to the economic – "What is the cost of his life to those around him?"³²

This series of framing questions as well as this depiction of Walker as himself a "question mark" cues us early on to think of the book not just as a memoir but also a polemic, with political stakes engendered by this enigmatic subject. This is not merely "a father's search for his

³⁰Ian Brown, *The Boy in the Moon: A Father's Search for His Disabled Son* (Toronto: Random House, 2009), p. 8.

³¹*Ibid.*, p. 10.

³²*Idem*

disabled son,” as the subtitle promises, but a provocation to allegorize Walker in thinking of more systematic questions of disability and value, cost and care. What I want to call particular attention to here, though, is the complexity of Brown’s notion of ‘raising a question mark’ – the way *raising* a child who is a genetic unknown inherently *raises*, that is, poses questions. Furthermore, I want to think about the question mark largely as an aesthetic principal – an impetus to textuality and particularly to narrative, and a call that anticipates a range of responses. As Brown notes when he describes Walker’s inscrutable expression while handling a bag full of pop-can tabs, his ambiguity becomes a site of readerly intervention for him and by extension for the reader.³³ His most banal actions are freighted with meaning, inviting a range of readings that span the concrete – he plays with the bag because he likes it – as well as the abstract – whereby the bag might represent Walker’s version of negative capability. “Maybe I’m reaching,” he admits, but “he gives me no choice but to reach this way...Everything about him compels me.”³⁴

It might be fruitful to think of Brown’s depiction of Walker as a compelling interpretive object, the titular boy in the moon, in terms of David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder’s concept of narrative prosthesis. To summarize, Mitchell and Snyder claim that in cultural texts, disability is often the inaugural site of narrative.³⁵ Its irreducibly corporeal, problem status, they argue, forces certain “cultural accommodations³⁶,” narrative resolutions that range from charitable donations to euthanasia. Narratives are thus forced to account for disabled characters,

³³*Ibid.*, p. 13.

³⁴*Ibid.*, p. 16.

³⁵David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), p. 57.

³⁶*Ibid.*, p. 47.

whether by rehabilitating them, casting them aside, or, to borrow Quayson's terms, coming apart in a spell of aesthetic nervousness. Brown at once relies on Walker as a narrative prosthetic of his own, I want to argue, while reflexively commenting on this textual reckoning that Walker's disability requires, acknowledging that the "constant questioning" that rules his life as Walker's caregiver is both troubling and strangely comforting – "a frame on which to hang the human world, a way of living"³⁷

Walker's question mark status is largely depicted in such generative terms. In a particularly stressful early meeting with the family doctor occasioned by Walker's refusal to eat, Brown tells us, the doctor off-handedly muttered what became a fundamental question: "We do want this child to live, don't we?"³⁸ Brown is alert, I think, to the possible narratives that such questions evoke – the way expressions of uncertainty about the value of Walker's life or the value of being his caregiver interpellate both parent and child into a number of pre-formed narrative structures. The ambiguity of the question seems to invite the stability of readymade literary genres as a way of processing the unknown, even if none of those genres are sufficient to account for the complexities that his singularity entails. Describing his response to this question, for example, Brown's register slides from biblical evocations of suffering saints, to devotional literature, to tragedy. He speaks of a "medieval urge"³⁹ spurred by the sight of his crying child in the doctor's office: he is motivated, he admits, by "fear of retribution if I ignored the dull call of his flesh and his body and his need."⁴⁰ He goes on:

³⁷Ian Brown, *The Boy in the Moon: A Father's Search for His Disabled Son* (Toronto: Random House, 2009), p. 39.

³⁸*Ibid.*, p. 26.

³⁹*Idem*

⁴⁰*Idem*

In any event I felt like an ox slipping into its yoke. I could feel the heavy tragic years coming on ahead of me, as certain as bad weather; there were nights when I even welcomed them. At last a fate I didn't have to choose, a destiny I couldn't avoid.⁴¹

At other points Walker is likened to a shaman, and Brown to one of his followers: “The boy recalibrates the world⁴²,” Brown says, gesturing to how raising Walker transforms his notions of value. Much of that recalibration, it seems, is textual. That is to say, Walker’s unknown form and the strangeness it results in for his caretakers gives rise to a shifting mass of explanatory narratives. Walker raises question marks that Brown responds to with his own interpretive “reaches.”

The Last Frontier

These texts, it must be admitted, are quite different in tone and scope, as are the various ends to which they put disability. By placing them beside one another I do not want to suggest that they are doing the same things, or that they can simply be reduced to “doing” any one thing with disability. Gowdy’s recuperation of a host of eccentrics at most bears a family resemblance with Findley’s belated restoration of Robert to the national consciousness that discarded him, or Brown’s inquiry into the cost of ensuring Walker’s survival. Putting aside questions of form and genre, their rhetorical situations are also quite different, complicated by the extent to which each claims to possess an ethical valence in the world; in this regard, Brown’s book is clearly the most directly engaged in the political arena, or at least the most focused on ensuring a particular future. Yet putting them beside one another nevertheless reveals a governing preoccupation with how

⁴¹*Ibid.*, p. 27.

⁴²*Ibid.*, p. 36.

disability, and especially the disabled subject's ostensible dependence on the nondisabled, serves as an aesthetic embodiment of anxieties about the future. Moreover, it shows how varied that embodiment can be – scanning variously as an instrumental use of disability to denote "warped family relations" and as an unwieldy trope that troubles the coherence of narratives.

In each case, as in Atwood's broad survey, disability serves a Janus-like function –facilitating narratives that at once glance back on a preceding generation and nervously look forward to a future that does not appear to be self-sustaining. Further, the questions disability raises are coterminous with the unfinished form of children, particularly those who are unable to articulate a position of their own, who must be advocated for by others. I do not say this to glorify self-expression, which might seem to privilege certain disabilities over others, but to observe that in each of these cases, it is largely the absence of the child's expression of a statement of self, a point of view, that invites such textual recalibrations on the part of non-disabled observers and narrators – suppositions on what is to be done for him or her. If disability is, as Mitchell and Snyder have put it, "the last frontier where the conflictual nature of our beliefs about 'viable' lives gets acted out"⁴³, then what these texts demonstrate is that the disabled child is often situated on the edge of that frontier.

⁴³David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), p. 178.

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