

Review: Clare Walker Gore, *Plotting Disability in the Nineteenth-Century Novel* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), 208pp. ISBN 978-147-445-5015, £80.00.

HANNAH BURY

IN HER RECENT monograph, Clare Walker Gore proposes that disabled characters in Victorian fiction perform important 'work', and are therefore active, rather than passive, in their narrative roles. Rather than simply focusing on their physical appearance as a marker of non-normative embodiment, Walker Gore highlights the various functions that disabled characters have within nineteenth-century literature. This study explores how depictions of disability go beyond plot, characterisation, and metaphor, in order to demonstrate the 'socially constructed and therefore changeable nature of disability as an identity and an experience'.¹ In doing so, it challenges the viewpoint that disability is fixed in its literary representation. Contributing to a rapidly growing area of study, the book examines disability across four chapters using Victorian novels by canonical authors such as Charles Dickens, Wilkie Collins, and George Eliot, but also lesser-known authors including Dinah Mulock Craik and Charlotte Yonge. Walker Gore primarily discusses how disability can be interrogated through formal features of text, but also shows an indebtedness to broader contextual understandings, making visible 'the connection between disability as a social identity and disability as incapacity in novelistic characterisation'.²

Structured in this way, *Plotting Disability* builds on the work of other literary disability scholars, including Lennard Davis and Martha Stoddard Holmes, who have 'provided a critical framework within which it is possible to write about disability'.³ This framework concerns how disability as a social identity can be represented through characters in literature. However, Walker Gore departs from

¹ Clare Walker Gore, *Plotting Disability in the Nineteenth-Century Novel* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), p. 9.

² Ibid., p. 2.

³ Ibid., p. 6.

previous scholarship because she reads fictional depictions of disability not as 'positive representations to be praised and negative ones to be condemned', but 'as historical artefacts that are also aesthetic works', and aims 'above all to demonstrate the value of attending to disability for literary criticism'.⁴ This discussion of disability is grounded in the concept of 'narrative work', which refers to the ability to 'work' in an economically productive sense.⁵ Walker Gore takes advantage of the slippage between 'disabled' and 'dis/abled' throughout, arguing that disabled characters in Victorian novels are 'marked by physical difference that defines them in the social world'.⁶ Disabled characters are still powerful despite their marginalisation, as they compensate for a lack of able-bodied 'work' by performing other important roles, such as narrative 'work'. The term 'plotting' thus refers to a way of 'charting the positioning of disabled characters' in a narrative.⁷ Through analysis of the individual roles of disabled characters, this study makes clear how their positioning 'has shaped the critical reception of nineteenth-century novels in hitherto unacknowledged ways'.⁸

In the first chapter, on the work of Charles Dickens, Walker Gore posits that marginalised, minor characters are used to represent disability: 'We know upon meeting a minor character in Dickens that they *are* minor because their bodies betray them as such'.⁹ The chapter argues that minor characters operate on two levels. First, they are highlighted through 'normalcy', a term first defined by Lennard Davis to show the ubiquity of disability by juxtaposing it with the 'normal'. Second, marginalised characters resist normalcy: they 'pull our attention *away* from the ostensible centres of Dickens's novels, and in doing so, disrupt the social and moral agenda their main plot-lines serve'.¹⁰ In asserting that non-normative bodies critique their marginalisation, Walker Gore attributes greater agency to disabled characters in comparison to earlier critics who focus on the pity and

⁴ Ibid., pp. 6, 13.

⁵ Ibid., p. 3.

⁶ Ibid., pp. 2-3.

⁷ Ibid., p. 4.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., p. 22.

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 23-4.

ridicule directed towards characters within novels.¹¹ It is also pleasing to see a move away from Tiny Tim as a repeatedly analysed disabled character. While this chapter is ambitious in scope – containing readings of five texts in total in an effort to deliver ‘a degree of critical nuance’ – the quality of the analysis is not compromised.¹² The interpretation of Little Nell in *The Old Curiosity Shop* is a memorable highlight, in which Walker Gore interrogates the cultural spectacle of the ‘freak’ and the freak show, a nineteenth-century phenomenon popularised by P. T. Barnum.¹³

Chapter two compares the ‘correspondingly liminal state’ of disabled characters in the work of Wilkie Collins to that of Dickens, outlining how Collins uses the sensationalist plot to ‘destabilise the categories by which we read bodies’.¹⁴ The discussion of the intersections between gender and disability is a strength of the chapter, particularly in the analysis of Collins’s *Poor Miss Finch*. In this case, disability is central rather than marginal. Lucilla, who has a visual impairment, is not excluded from the marriage plot, but rather participates in it despite her disability. It is also in this chapter that Walker Gore brings together two main themes of her study: ‘disability’ and ‘plotting’, as she explores how disabled characters are used to unravel mystery at the level of the sensationalist plot and have the agency to ‘work’ within an ableist society.

Walker Gore turns her attention to the domestic fiction of Charlotte Yonge and Dinah Mulock Craik in chapter three, examining three novels by each writer respectively. She argues that disability motivates their marriage plots, which allows for disabled characters ‘to take centre-stage’.¹⁵ The chapter is a welcome addition because it illuminates the work of Yonge and Craik as largely forgotten women writers, and makes visible the intersections between disability and gender by focusing on feminine roles such as marriage and motherhood. Craik and Yonge’s

¹¹ See for example Stanley Wainapel, ‘Dickens and Disability’, *Disability and Rehabilitation*, 18 (1996), 629-632 and Ann Dowker, ‘The Treatment of Disability in Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century Children’s Literature’, *Disability Studies Quarterly*, 24 (2004).

¹² Walker Gore, p. 6.

¹³ For a recent discussion on the nineteenth-century freak show, see Helen Davies, *Neo-Victorian Freakery: The Cultural Afterlife of the Victorian Freak Show* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

¹⁴ Walker Gore, pp. 14, 77.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 118.

disabled female characters are central to marriage plots as they are able to 'set the terms on which marriage relates to the formation of the family'.¹⁶ Walker Gore explores the connections between nineteenth-century gender and disability in more detail in a recently published chapter in *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Disability*.¹⁷

The final chapter examines a critical turn in the 'plotting' of disability through a comparative study of George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* and *Daniel Deronda*, and Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady* and *The Wings of the Dove*. Walker Gore shows how late-nineteenth-century writers departed from realist narrative plots, as represented by Eliot, in order to respond to modernist themes of decline during the *fin de siècle*. In particular, the chapter identifies a key difference between Eliot and James in terms of their literary representation. While Eliot's depictions develop 'crucial moral qualities of sympathy and selflessness' in relation to disabled characters, James presents a 'grimmer reworking' of Eliot's sentimental approach.¹⁸ According to Walker Gore, James delivers a 'damning verdict', using disabled characters to represent hopelessness and to show how disability is 'unfit for purpose in the modern world'.¹⁹ One strength of this chapter is the way in which the analyses are contextualised; the links back to previous chapters achieve a macro 'plotting' of disability, despite their extensive variation in terms of author, topic, and genre. Further, Walker Gore's linguistic choices must be praised here, as her discussion of disability in this chapter refers back to the 'ability' to perform labour that she foregrounds in the introduction. For instance, *The Mill on the Floss's* Philip Wakeham is a character who in many ways remains marginal to the marriage plot. However, Walker Gore uses 'work'-orientated metaphors to describe his narrative position in relation to the character of Maggie; he is not 'a tool in her moral development' or 'a cog in the machine of her story' but a meaningful character that produces narrative 'work' in his own right.²⁰ This

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 162.

¹⁷ See "'Of wonderful use to everyone": Disability and the Marriage Plot in the Nineteenth-Century Novel', in *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Disability*, ed. by Alice Hall (London: Routledge, 2020), pp. 120-31.

¹⁸ Walker Gore, *Plotting Disability in the Nineteenth-Century Novel*, pp. 16, 17.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 17.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 181.

is an implicit, yet effective, mode of writing that both reinforces her central connection between disability and dis/ability and the way that these differences are 'plotted'.

At the end of her study, Walker Gore asserts the continued relevance of her chosen texts: 'The disabled characters of the Victorian novel have gone on working [...] well into our own time'.²¹ Rejecting a 'hierarchical reading practice' in which fictional characters are treated as though they are real people, Walker Gore offers a more nuanced approach. Although it would have been pleasing to see some consideration of intellectual disability, an area that is largely overlooked in the field, this book will broaden the scope of future work on this subject.²² Above all, it reinforces the importance of formal questions relating to characterisation and plot in analysing representations of disability. Her investigation thus offers a well-rounded study of disability in Victorian literature, supporting efforts within the field to 'permanently change the academic conversation to include disability'.²³



BIOGRAPHY: Hannah Bury is a second-year PhD student at the University of Salford. Her interdisciplinary doctoral project analyses intersectional representations of femininity, madness, and disability in Nineteenth-Century children's literature and Disney film adaptation. Hannah has recently published an article in a special issue of *Brontë Studies*, and she has a book chapter forthcoming in the edited collection entitled *Gender and Female Villains in Twenty-First Century Fairy Tale Narratives* (Bingley: Emerald Publishing, 2022).

CONTACT: h.j.bury@edu.salford.ac.uk

²¹ Ibid., p. 235.

²² Scholars including Mark Osteen in *Autism and Representation* (London: Routledge, 2008) and Alice Hall in *Literature and Disability* (2016) call for broader representations on intellectual disability. However, Lennard Davis's forthcoming *The Disability Studies Reader* (London: Routledge, 2022) will include a section of essays that focuses on this specific subject.

²³ Walker Gore, p. 13.