

Issues of Physical Disabilities in Cynthia Voigt's *Izzy, Willy-Nilly* and Chris Crutcher's *The Crazy Horse Electric Game*

Against her better judgment, fifteen-year-old Izzy let Marco drive her home from the football team's post-game party even though he had been "swilling beers" all night. Once she got into the car with him, Izzy realized that Marco's driving was impaired—the car was in the middle of the road swerving from side to side, and suddenly she "felt the weight of the car swing out of control before I heard Marco's voice, cursing, and I watched the tree—an elm—rise up at me" (Voigt 26).

When Izzy woke up in the hospital: "I moved my toes back and forth. At the end of my left leg the blanket twitched, but nothing happened under the flat white blanket on the rest of the bed. I looked at my legs and one of them had been cut off short forever" (61).

In both *Izzy, Willy-Nilly* (Cynthia Voigt, 1986) and *The Crazy Horse Electric Game* (Chris Crutcher, 1987), the teen protagonists face the life-altering consequences of a sudden physical disability after an accident. Twenty years after their publication, these books by highly acclaimed authors Voigt and Crutcher continue to be recommended for young adult readers as realistic portrayals of characters with disabilities, and both continue to be read and used widely in secondary schools (Landrum 284-290).

The issue of disability even further complicates the already complicated path of adolescent development and the search for identity. Good young adult fiction can provide a foundation for adolescents to face crises and to forge new identities. Young adult literature, "in which characters encounter conflict and violence, face its consequences, and assume responsi-

bility for their actions," can provide teachers and students with a positive form in which to "wrestle with complex problems" (Brown and Stephens). For adolescents with disabilities, the characters portrayed in books tend to influence how they develop their own identities and autonomy (Carroll and Rosenblum 620-630). Young adult literature can be effective in promoting understanding, awareness, and acceptance of those with disabilities and in creating positive attitudes towards others (Andrews; Myracle; Smith-D'Arezzo and Thompson 335-347).

Both *Izzy* and *Crazy Horse* take the reader on the journey of transformation that Izzy and Willie experience after they suffer accidents that leave them suddenly disabled. Izzy's right leg is amputated after her drunken date crashes his car into a tree, and Willie suffers brain injury from a waterskiing accident that leaves him with a speech impediment and a loss of movement and control on his left side. Both novels show how self images are shattered as well as the expectations that families and communities hold for them. Izzy's adjustment to the loss of her leg is narrated over the period of six months, and half the novel relates her emotions directly after the accident while she is still in the hospital. *Crazy Horse* takes place over two years as Willie winds up leaving his community to seek a new life and to recover elsewhere. The sudden physical disabilities unleash a host of reactions for the main characters and for family members and friends, including guilt, fear, avoidance,

pity, anger, depression, and rage. These reactions reflect societal perceptions of disabilities and influence the formation of Izzy's and Willie's new identities as disabled youth. This article looks critically at the assumptions and beliefs about disabilities and ideal body images that form the characters' identities and how these identities are forged and challenged within their social worlds.

Ideal Images

Both *Izzy* and *Crazy Horse* explore physical disabilities as well as the physical ideals held up for teens. In establishing ideals and norms, society ranks our intelligence, weight, height, and many other bodily dimensions, especially emphasizing physical beauty and athletic prowess. This ideal, unobtainable for most people, is constantly present in the media and especially influences young people. Fear of not being able to meet the standard (normal *or* ideal) is the source of anxiety for many teenagers, especially girls.

To understand how it feels to be disabled, it is important to understand how normalcy is constructed. The concept of a norm implies that the majority of the population must or should somehow be part of it. The concept of the norm also implies the concept of deviations or extremes, and often people with disabilities have been thought of as deviants (Davis 1-28). On the other extreme is the ideal body, something that is strongly wished for, but rarely attained. *Izzy* and *Crazy Horse* reveal the attitudes and beliefs that the characters hold about both extremes and how they define themselves and others in those terms.

Physical attractiveness and appearance play a central role in *Izzy, Willy-Nilly*. Voigt's protagonist, Izzy, begins the novel as the "ideal" high school student—successful, attractive, and athletic. Izzy has always been particularly concerned with how she looks and describes herself and her friends in terms of their physical appearance, e.g., Lauren's "ash blonde hair . . . , arched eyebrows she plucks carefully . . . , little Clara Bow mouth . . . , even at slumber parties her face is perfectly made up" (Voigt 43). Izzy tends to downplay her own sense of physical perfection before the accident, however: "boys would like me better if I didn't show off" (47); rather, she emphasizes what a nice person she is and how she will always try to do what is expected of her by others, especially family members.

Izzy describes herself repeatedly as a "nice" girl:

Nice suited me: pretty but nowhere near beautiful; popular enough, with girls and boys; although no jock, I could give somebody a respectable game of tennis, and I was one of only three sophomores on the school cheerleading squad. A B student . . . , I did the work I was told to do and didn't mind school: just a nice person, easy to get along with, fun to have around. (1)

Although Izzy views herself as an average, normal type of person, other characters in the book look at her as an ideal. This comes out most clearly when Rosamunde, her less attractive but more studious friend, refers to her as being part of the "in-crowd," coming from an almost Brahmin-like family, and being the object of great interest from boys: "You're used to people looking at you and envying you, wishing they were you" (241). There is a tension between craving and emphasizing physical beauty and downplaying it or not talking about it explicitly as well as trying to please people and being compliant.

In *Crazy Horse*, Willie also represents an ideal of adolescence: that of the athletic hero. Willie's reputation as a baseball hero has assumed mythic proportions after his winning game as the pitcher against the Crazy Horse Electric team. Coho, Montana, is a town with a long history of supporting athletics, and Willie's family has played a major role in establishing the tradition. His grandfather donated the land for the baseball team and was a legendary athlete in town and as a football, basketball, and baseball player at the University of Notre Dame. His father was also a hero, one who was voted most valuable football player at the University of Washington and played in the Rose Bowl. "In Coho, they had a day in his honor, with a parade down Main Street" (Crutcher 22). Willie is following in his father's and grandfather's illustrious footsteps. He wants his dad to be proud of him, but "there was a vague, uncomfort-

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able feeling that Big Will lived through Willie. Willie's successes were Big Will's too; and likewise his failures" (22). Crutcher sets up the psychological pressure and tension right in the beginning of the novel. Big Will is Willie's role model, but Big Will is also living vicariously through Willie.

Willie's performance in the Crazy Horse Electric baseball game comes at the height of his physical perfection. He feels like he could do anything, and his body is getting bigger and stronger every day. The game is important to him, to his dad, and to the town. They need to defeat the team that won a place in the championships three years in a row. Willie feels that he cannot let anyone down. At the bottom of the ninth inning, Willie catches the hard line drive that would have snuffed out his team's dream of the Eastern Montana American Legion championship, and they win. With the game as history, "Willie Weaver becomes a minor legend" (32).

Disability and Identity

Adolescents are in the process of coming to realize who they are and where they stand in terms of family and community. They want to belong, to fit in, and to find their place in the larger whole (Steiner 20-27). As soon as Izzy becomes aware of the consequences of the accident, she starts to talk about herself in the past tense: "I liked myself pretty much exactly the way I was" (Voigt 3). Her new body is difficult for her to acknowledge, and she tends to discuss herself in the third person, as if the real Izzy is somewhere else. She even imagines a "little Izzy" within herself, who is able to express the emotions that Izzy cannot show to the world.

Izzy's accident almost cancels out her self-image, which has been built largely on physical appearance. She has been part of a circle of friends who are "perfectly made up," stylishly dressed, always dieting to keep their figures in shape, and who base their

conversations with each other on shopping and boys. Izzy characterizes herself after the accident as being differentiated from others, as well as her former self based on her physical characteristics. The labels that she applies to herself are ones that have tended to arouse strong feelings in others and are negative in connotation: "The words hammered on the back of my neck. *Crippled*. *Amputated*. 'Not me,' I answered each one of them. *Handicapped*. 'No, not me.' *Deformed*. 'Not me, please'" (54).

Izzy depersonalizes her body as a means of coping with her accident. When the physical therapist arrives in her hospital room, she likens the massage of her body to the kneading of pizza dough, and describes herself in terms of her physical deficit: "[T]hat's what I was, a thing, a messed-up body" (57). She describes the personal consequences of her accident as resulting in deficits, or loss of "normalcy":

I wasn't normal anymore. I was abnormal. I wasn't going to be able to be a cheerleader, or even to walk around. I couldn't ride my bike or play tennis—I don't think crippled people could drive cars, not with only one leg. Not to mention dances . . . ,who would ask me to dance with him now? Who would want to go out with a cripple? (61)

The kind of language used in *Izzy* to discuss disabilities shows that she *is* her disability. She defines herself in terms of what she is not, how she is deficient, how her life will be constricted, and how she is suddenly abnormal. The language she uses tends to reinforce a deficit view of disability, which assumes that those who are different from the perceived norms are missing something or are sick, helpless, or invalid (McDermott and Varenne 324-348; Gartner and Joe 2).

Willie also has a similar reaction to the changes in his body shortly after his accident. He describes his body as being "cooperative" or "not cooperative." Before the accident, his body was "his friend" and would do anything he asked of it: "He felt so fast and strong and confident that nothing could touch him" (18). His identity was tied very closely to his performance as an athlete, his father's expectations of him, as well as his community's traditions. After the accident Willie "can't get used to his body; hauling his left side around is like dragging small sacks of concrete . . . [H]e feels like a circus freak" (80). Willie also feels an uncontrollable rage at his circumstances. He is angry and resentful at friends who are able to do things that he is not longer able to do. His therapist

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tells him: “[I]t just taps into what you’ve lost and you get angry at yourself and the world. . . . That golden boy isn’t you anymore, and as long as you keep measuring yourself up against him, you’re gonna be mad as hell at everybody” (70).

Willie, like Izzy, views his changes as losses in relation to the ideal self he was before the accident. He, too, uses derogatory terms, such as “cripple,” in describing himself. His whole identity and history as well as his place in the community have been tied up with his performance as an athlete. After the accident, he no longer feels that he fits in anymore and must go out of his community in order to heal.

Izzy’s Social World

Izzy and Willie’s views of themselves as disabled are shaped strongly by the reactions and attitudes of the people around them. Directly after the accident, Izzy is shunned by her friends. Although they visit her, it is clear that they feel awkward and uncomfortable. They stare at her face, trying to avoid looking at her amputated leg: “[T]hey didn’t have anything to say. . . . They just stood there saying nothing” (Voigt 47). One of her friends, Lauren, who is aspiring to be a model, avoids entering the hospital room fully and never actually speaks to her. Her best friend, Suzy, calls her on the phone to convince her that she should not bring charges against Marco, the boy responsible for the car accident. Izzy finds out later that Suzy has started dating him.

Marco never apologizes or even speaks directly to Izzy, and although Izzy inflicts a form of mild revenge on him later in the book, she never confronts him directly about the accident or feels enraged about what happened. Her parents also do not want to press criminal charges against Marco, because that is not the “kind of people” they consider themselves to be.

Izzy’s family fosters dependency in Izzy, which is a continuation of their behavior towards her before the accident. Her mother is an organizer and the smoother-over of problems. Her reaction to Izzy’s accident is to redecorate the house so that Izzy has easier access to the ground floor while she is wheelchair-bound. Her father is portrayed as the family provider. For example, he announces that he will have a swimming pool installed so that Izzy can continue her physical therapy in the privacy of her own home.

Izzy’s younger sister is jealous and resentful of the special attention that Izzy is receiving, and her older twin brothers, star athletes and college students, are unable to discuss openly Izzy’s disability with her.

Izzy’s sudden disability does not seem to bring about significant changes in her family members. Her family tries to preserve appearances in the face of change and to hold desperately onto the status quo. Part of it comes from a stiff-upper-lip mentality. They believe that people should not complain about adversities but rather deal with them as well as possible. Much of their behavior is built on maintaining the facade of an upper-middle-class lifestyle. Their attitudes do not allow Izzy to express any conflicts about her situation or to develop independence in spite of physical limitations.

Izzy does not make waves, does not ask questions, and accepts everything but then suffers in silence. Izzy’s isolation and negative self-image cause her to sink into a deep depression. Not only has she been shunned by her friends, but also her family members are unable to discuss her feelings of despair and confusion with her. None of the professionals involved with her treatment is portrayed as providing information, advice, or therapy that contributes to her acceptance or understanding of her disability.

The one ray of hope and help in her life is Rosamunde, a brainy acquaintance from Latin Club. Rosamunde is the only person who actually speaks what is on her mind and asks Izzy the questions that no one else dares to: “Nobody . . . was talking about what had happened, as if everyone was pretending everything was normal and all right” (82). Rosamunde, on the other hand, encourages Izzy to express herself: “C’mon, Izzy, you can have a negative thought” (89).

Rosamunde’s directness, honesty, and intelli-

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gence, however, are somewhat devalued by her physical appearance and social status, “sort of lumpy and badly dressed and not pretty” (191). Although Izzy is grateful for Rosamunde’s companionship, her parents seem to disapprove of Rosamunde, especially Izzy’s mother, who comments several times on her physical appearance: “She probably feels uncomfortable because of the way she looks . . . with that nose? And that hair? And her figure?” (125). Izzy’s mother also comments unfavorable about the profession of Rosamunde’s father: “The city police are lower on the respectability scale than the state police” (171).

Still, Izzy realizes that Rosamunde has been more of a genuine friend than the friends who are now shunning her: “She wasn’t the kind of person who I had for friends . . . [S]he was different. . . . Except I knew I like talking to her. . . . [W]hen she came to see

me I had a better time than when my friends came to see me” (176). Rosamunde is the only person in the book with whom she can talk about her problems and her feelings of depression. Her family wants to pretend that nothing has changed, her friends have shunned her, and the professionals at the hospital never even break the surface of real conversation. Rosamunde, on the other hand, is the only one who encourages Izzy to be independent,

when she is at home and when she eventually returns to school.

Izzy struggles with issues of social acceptance, class values, dependence, and public attitudes versus private beliefs. Like Willie, her sudden disability brings to the surface the values, expectations, and assumptions about the physical and behavioral attributes that people ought to possess. Society places a high premium on physical and behavioral capabilities for mastering the environment, and sudden disability violates important cultural norms and values. In Izzy’s case, she engenders what Hahn has termed “aesthetic anxiety,” which are fears raised by persons “whose appearance deviates markedly from

the usual human form or includes physical traits regarded as unappealing” (42). The fears are expressed by a tendency to shun those with undesirable bodily attributes, which are used to differentiate them from the rest of the population. Those people are placed in subordinate positions within society, elicit serious discomfort, make others feel anxious, and are viewed as inferior and threatening. These anxieties are prevalent in a society that places “extraordinary stress on beauty and attractiveness” (Hahn 43).

Izzy’s friendship with Rosamunde serves to emphasize the theme in *Izzy* about how surface appearances can be misleading. Rosamunde explains to Izzy that, if you look different, “you have to face up to people’s preconceptions right away. . . . You can’t hide it” (138). Rosamunde has been marginalized because of her appearance, her open and direct behavior, and her social status, yet Izzy comes to realize that Rosamunde’s friendship and support are more genuine than what she has been receiving from friends who only appear to be “perfect.”

Willie’s Social World

Willie’s interactions with others evolve as the novel progresses. After his accident, Willie is seen by others and views himself as a pathetic victim of circumstances and somewhat pitiable. His friends, however, do not desert him. Willie feels that he is a burden to them and that brings on the breakup with his girlfriend, Jen, and the added tension between his parents. He tends to view himself as his own worst enemy. Willie’s accident takes the lid off unspoken problems and tensions that have been simmering in his family since the death of his baby sister two years earlier to Sudden Infant Death Syndrome. His father has been playing the role of stoic and trying to hold his family together. He has had a great deal of his own identity invested in Willie’s success as an athlete. When Willie is injured because of his father’s carelessness, he is unable to keep the facade from crumbling.

In Willie’s hometown, his identity is so wrapped up in his image as a sports legend that he feels he must leave and start a new life elsewhere. On his trip to Oakland, California, he is beaten up by a street gang. He realizes, as the novel unfolds, that he has been advertising himself as a victim, and he is determined to change.

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In his new environment, many of the students attending One More Last Chance High School are also facing difficulties and obstacles in their personal lives. Willie is not the only student to struggle with a physical disability or emotional difficulties. He is given shelter by Lacey, an estranged father who is responsible for the disfigurement of his own son. Lisa, the gym teacher at his new school, who is also studying physical therapy and sports medicine, teaches him visualization and movement techniques. Willie joins a health club and Sammy, a Tai Chi instructor, teaches him to harmonize both body and mind. Willie realizes that a large part of his body's "cooperation" with him is mental.

In contrast to Izzy's situation, many people in Willie's environment help him to achieve greater independence and autonomy by giving him encouragement, friendship, skills, and opportunities for talk and reflection. Both novels reveal that the restrictions of a disability do not lie solely within the disabled individual but rather may be located more powerfully in the social world in which people live. Neither Willie nor Izzy is able to continue with an unchanged identity. Willie needs to escape a community that has turned him into a sports icon; Izzy finds genuine friendship outside a circle of friends who have shunned her. Both become outsiders and, with the help of other outsiders, are able to transform themselves.

Victim and Survivor

Not only do *Izzy* and *Crazy Horse* reveal certain societal attitudes and beliefs towards persons with disabilities; they are also both reflective of a literary tradition that has portrayed characters with disabilities as either victims or survivors. As a victim, a character is portrayed coping with a disability either by suffering self-blame or by denying that he or she is really suffering. The disability becomes central to the person's self-concept, self-definition, social comparisons, and reference groups (Fine and Asch 3-21). This person assumes a role of helplessness, dependence, and passivity. People with disabilities, therefore, are seen as the recipients of help or pity. The role in literature of these victims soothes middle class values, because he or she refuses to accept the disability as a source of rage (Kriegel 31-46).

For most of the novel, Izzy is characterized as a victim. She admonishes herself for causing discomfort to others: "I minded the guilty feelings I was having, for causing all the changes" (Voigt 146). She blames herself "as if I was being punished, as if it was my fault" (71). She tries to excuse the behavior of her friends: "probably it made them sick to look at me. . . . [T]hey had more interesting things to do" (75). Other people convey to her their pity: "We all feel so bad for you, it seems so cruel and unnecessary and . . . it's a terrible thing" (75).

In real life, there is rarely anyone to blame for a disability. Kent states that most disabilities occur as the result of natural causes, such as genetic conditions or illnesses. Izzy's disability, however, is not the result of natural causes. She is portrayed as a victim, someone physically damaged by the actions of a man. Images of disabled women in literature as victim "serve to heighten the sense that she is inadequate and helpless, [and] more vulnerable than her disabled peers" (59). Women tend to be portrayed as victims in literature much more often than men, to be shown as the lonely outsider, judged unattractive due to her impairment. By the end of the novel, however, Izzy begins to make her first strides towards independence.

In *Crazy Horse*, Willie is portrayed as a survivor. Although he is initially the object of pity and even violence from others, his character undergoes considerable transformation in coping with his disability. In modern literature, protagonists often lack a sense of wholeness or are victimized by the limitations of humanity (Kriegel 31-46). The image of the modern character with disabilities is often one who endures, and as a survivor, discovers that he is an outsider in a world that possesses growing doubts about its insiders: "He has been ennobled not by his condition but by his willingness to accept the condition as his own. To endure is to outlast circumstance, to step into, if

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not beyond, the pain of one's existence" (38). Outside of the town where he has grown up, Willie is able to accept his disability and change. His return home at the end of the novel shows an environment that is not only intolerant of Willie's disability but of others' personal shortcomings, as well.

Willie leaves the environment where he is seen only as a sports icon and joins a group of teenagers who are struggling with their identities as outsiders. The story focuses not only on Willie's adjustment to his disability, but on the lives of the other characters who also undergo transformations. Willie has helped Lacey, the man who took him in, to accept the hospitalization of his son. The story of Willie's disability is interwoven with themes that every adolescent faces—issues of independence, identity, friendship, physical appearances—as well as other subplots, such as street gang violence.

Willie makes a speech at his high school graduation and credits the people he met at the alternative high school for helping him to achieve autonomy once again: "This school . . . saved my life. . . . Nobody here preached at me. . . . They let me figure it out for myself, demanded that I figure it out for myself" (Crutcher 200). Willie gained insights that his "mind and body are just different parts of the same thing, and there are not limits for either, that most of the really important answers are already inside me" (200). With this statement, the focus is shifted from Willie's struggles with his disability to larger issues that every adolescent seeks to learn.

One criticism of Crutcher's complex and realistic portrayal of Willie is perhaps an overemphasis on how much Willie was able to return to "normal." He measures his recovery by how well he is able to play basketball with nondisabled peers, and his physical therapy regime is so successful that it is "nearly impossible to tell there was anything wrong with him" (195). Even his best friend Johnny does not immediately recognize him when he returns home to Montana: "God, I can't believe how you look. I thought

you were crippled for good" (213).

Part of Willie's transformation, however, has been achieved through the support of his new friends in an environment where difference is accepted and strengths are developed. In his home environment, Willie quickly reverts back to feeling only limitations: "[H]e feels crippled here, like he did before he left" (223). Willie has accepted his disability and has been able to create a new self out of his accident, rage, courage, and resourcefulness, but he needs an environment that will mirror his new self rather than reflect what he is not.

Discussion

Izzy, Willy-Nilly and *The Crazy Horse Electric Game* accurately portray the emotions that young people would face in dealing with a sudden physical disability, which attests to the popularity of these novels over the years. A close analysis reveals that many positive, but also some negative messages, about disabilities are embedded within the texts. Izzy questions the world of appearances after her accident. She realizes that her friendships are based on the superficial concerns of physical appearance and are not able to stand up to a crisis. The book provides many insights into the feelings and thoughts of Izzy as she deals with a sudden disability. However, there are many stereotypes about disabilities that are not sufficiently challenged in the novel. Izzy is portrayed, for the most part, as a passive victim of her circumstances. Derogatory language is used to describe her in terms of her disability, such as "crippled." She is viewed as the object of people's pity, someone who needs to be protected, and dependent on others, and incapable of independently participating in everyday life.

Willie, at the beginning of the book, is also presented as a victim, his own worst enemy, pitiable, pathetic, and the object of violence. *Crazy Horse*, however, evolves beyond this state. Throughout the book, information about his disability and ways in which to cope with it are provided through a series of conversations with therapists. Willie's story becomes interwoven with the stories of the other characters who are attending the alternative high school. The focus shifts away from the disability and shifts towards Willie's maturity and transformation with the help of others in the story.

The story of Willie's disability is interwoven with themes that every adolescent faces—issues of independence, identity, friendship, physical appearances.

The complex, realistic portrayals of physical disabilities in both of these novels can help young readers to think critically about their personal views and can play an important role in the evolution of a young person's sense of self. Young people, especially, need to develop critical faculties in order to look beyond the surface of stories in order to understand which values and beliefs are being conveyed. If young adult fiction is to provide a forum for discussion of differences, it is important that literature does not serve merely to perpetuate myths and stereotypes about disabilities but rather to provide a foundation with which to face crises and forge new identities (Brown and Stephens).

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