Reframing the Story of Helen Keller and Anne Sullivan: Resisting (Dis)ability Stereotypes through an Analysis of Children’s Literature

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Abstract

This demonstrates how widely circulating stories such as those about Helen Keller shape what we know about what it means to be abled or disabled, challenges simplistic binary understandings of the disability experience, and points to the power of narratives to shape systems of beliefs.

Keywords

Disability, Ability, Gender, Narratives, Interdependence, Deaf

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Citation

Silhouettes return to give a sense of how Helen’s world might have felt from the inside—dim, bewildering, rageful, and, eventually, enlightened by language. The story of Helen Keller and Anne Sullivan has a well-known beginning that’s been dramatized in the movie and play *The Miracle Worker*: Due to an illness, Keller lost her sight and hearing before the age of two, then struggled to find her place in the world. In 1887, a 20-year-old Sullivan, a recent graduate of the Perkins Institution for the Blind, arrived at Keller’s Alabama home to become the young girl’s teacher. This breakthrough provided a means for Keller to communicate with others and unlocked her abilities. However, Keller helped Sullivan in turn. The opportunity to teach a young Keller came at a time when Sullivan, whose sight was limited due to a childhood infection, desperately needed a way to earn her living.