

Making the World Come True: How the stories we tell can help us usher in a more accessible world

Amanda Leduc
OCUL Accessibility Symposium 2.0
June 17, 2025

Presentation Overview

- 9:50 – 9:52: Presentation Overview
- 9:52 – 9:55: Terminology and Language Notes
- 9:55 – 10:10: Introduction of Amanda Leduc and exploration of Amanda's publishing journey and her growing work as a disability rights advocate, and how these two things gradually intertwined with her work in accessible book formats and disability representation.
- 10:10 – 10:30: Disability awareness and activism in storytelling: what do we do now?
- 10:30 – 10:45: Q&A

TERMINOLOGY/LANGUAGE OF CHOICE

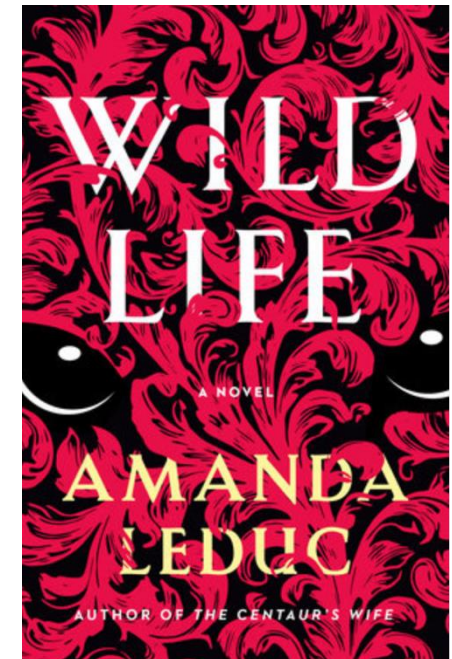
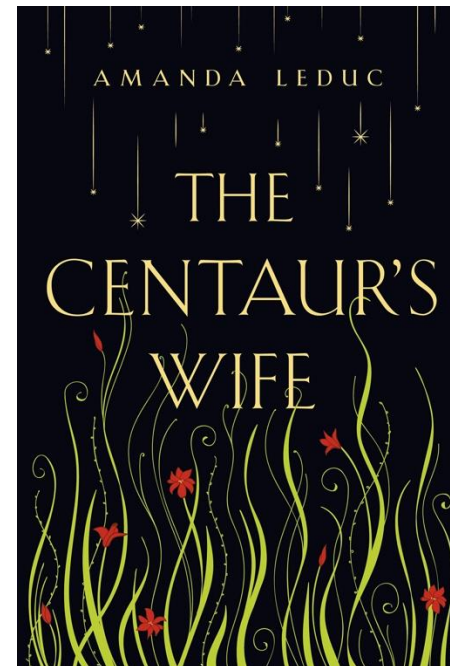
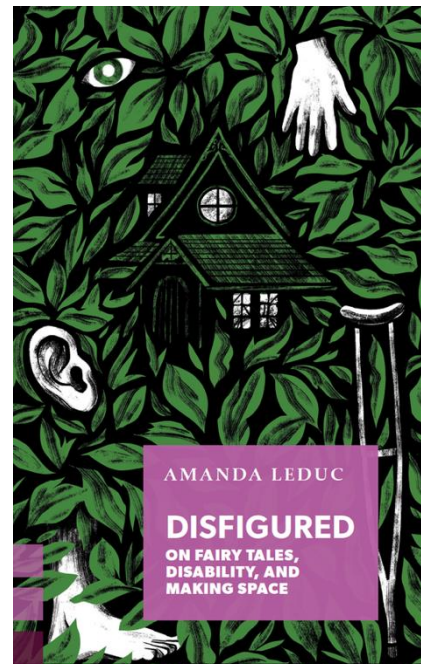
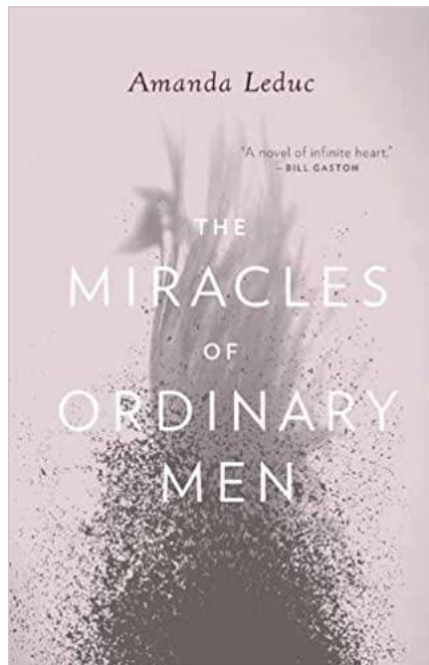
- Throughout this presentation, I will be making use of ***identity-first language*** as opposed to ***person-first language***
 - **Identity-first language** (“disabled person” as opposed to “person with a disability”) holds that disability is an important part of what makes someone who they are, and we shouldn’t use language to look away from that.
 - **Person-first language** is still fine to use! It is just important for us to always interrogate language and consider whether language is couching shame under the guise of political correctness.
- For the same reason, I will not be using euphemisms for disability (e.g. “differently-abled”)

Disability and disabled are not bad words, and identifying as a disabled person is not a bad thing either. I will be leaning *all* the way into this during this presentation.



AUTHOR INTRODUCTION – AMANDA LEDUC

- Disabled author with cerebral palsy
- Author of four books:



- I've always wanted to be a writer—I was writing “books” with construction paper covers in kindergarten and first grade!
- I was born with cerebral palsy, which is a muscle condition resulting from a brain injury experienced either in-utero or in early life up to age 3.
- In my case, I was born with a cyst in my brain which necessitated surgeries to remove it and correct my way of walking when I was 4 and 5 respectively.
- The surgeries and resulting physical therapies left me with a limp and other health issues.
- I was bullied rather severely in elementary school because of my disability, and so I spent the better part of two decades trying to pretend that I wasn't disabled.

- I only began doing disability activism and work in my mid-thirties, when I had to reckon with my disability again due to aging.
- I was inspired in this work by many disabled writers and advocates who were doing groundbreaking work in fighting for access and inclusion, particularly in Canadian literary spaces.
- But as it turned out, disability—and *otheredness*—was a theme I was already exploring in my work, even without knowing it.

Amanda Leduc

"A novel of infinite heart."
—BILL GASTON

THE
MIRACLES
OF
ORDINARY
MEN

THE MIRACLES OF ORDINARY MEN

- Published: May 2013
- Plot: a man wakes up one day and discovers that he is growing wings, while another main character searches for her mentally ill brother on the streets of Vancouver.
- I meant for this to be a novel about faith, but it was also very much a novel about what it means to inhabit a body (and mind) that is different and *othered* from the world around it.

- After my first novel was published, I went back into the weeds of Canadian publishing (spoiler alert: publishing books and building community is a very long and hard road!) and tried to continue building community and finding my way.
- In 2016 I began working for the Festival of Literary Diversity (FOLD), where I really began to grapple with the inaccessible nature of Canadian publishing and literary spaces.

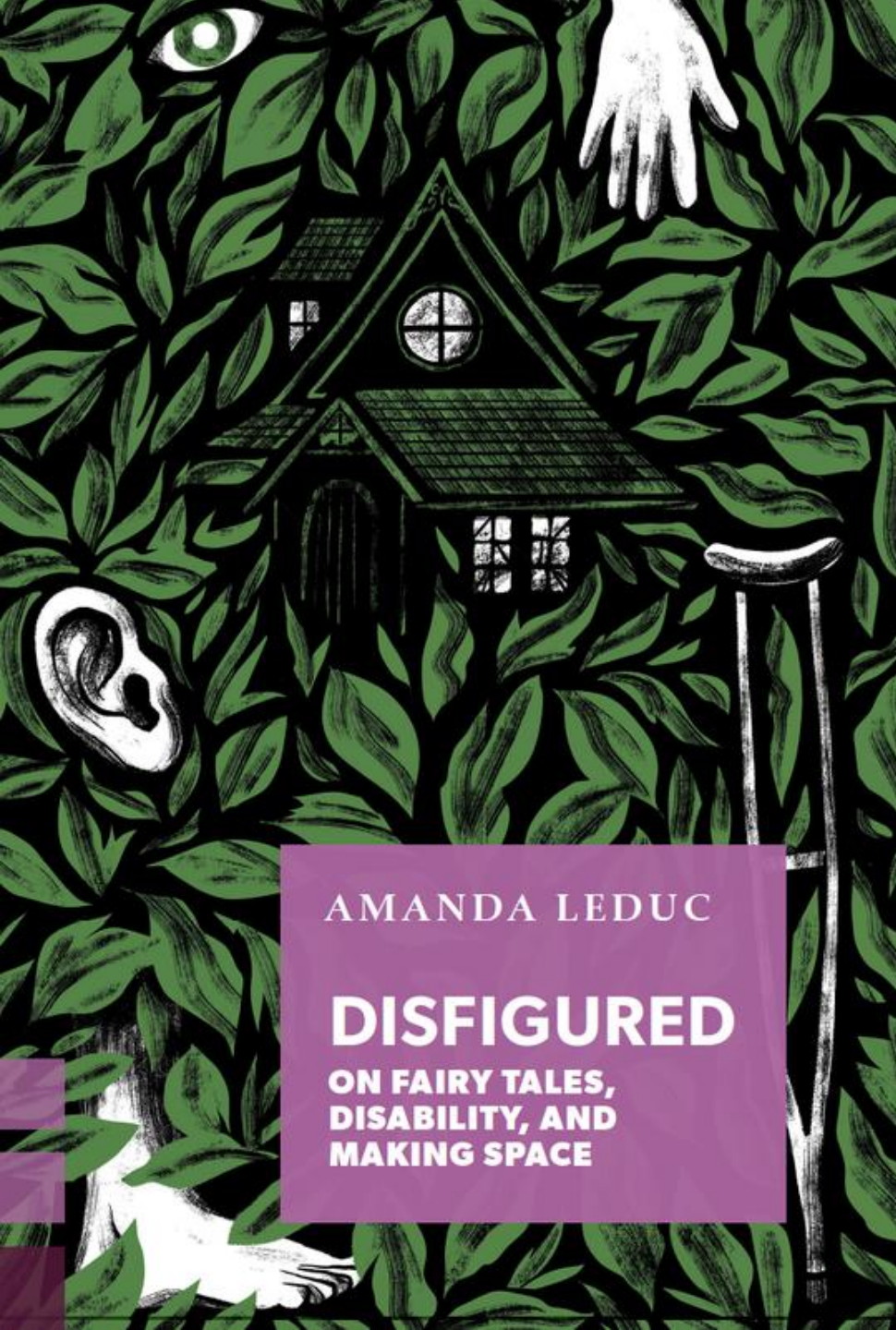
- We tried to build accessible events at the FOLD and very quickly realized how inaccessible most CanLit events were (and are) by default.
 - Often held in physically and economically inaccessible spaces
 - Readings rarely have captions or ASL
 - Braille, large print, access volunteers and other accessibility measures are rarely, if ever, included in literary events.

- As I was realizing this kind of inaccessible infrastructure in the literary world, I was also beginning to be aware of it in the stories I was telling.
- In 2018 I went on a writing retreat off the coast of Seattle, and one day had an epiphany when I was walking through the forest trying to figure out my newest book.

- As I walked, I realized how inaccessible the **physical** forest is to any disabled person who might use a mobility aid.
- But at the same time, when I thought back to the forest of my imagination—and the forest of the fairy tales I loved while I was growing up—I realized that fairy tales were filled with disabled characters.
- The problem: we are taught not to see these characters as disabled—**because they are often painted as villains.**

- The more I thought about it, the more I realized that the act of painting disabled characters as villains (or as side characters, or objects of pity) helps to shape how we see the world.
- If we are taught from a young age that the only disabled people we see in stories and in film are bad and ugly, what sorts of expectations does this set up for how we see disabled people in the real world?

- Put simply: if you never see someone in a wheelchair when you are young, whether in real life or in story, you grow up not thinking about how a wheelchair user moves through the world.
- You don't think about ramps because you've never had to *consider* how a wheelchair user might need and use them.
- You **take the inaccessible world around you for granted.**



DISFIGURED: ON FAIRY TALES, DISABILITY, AND MAKING SPACE

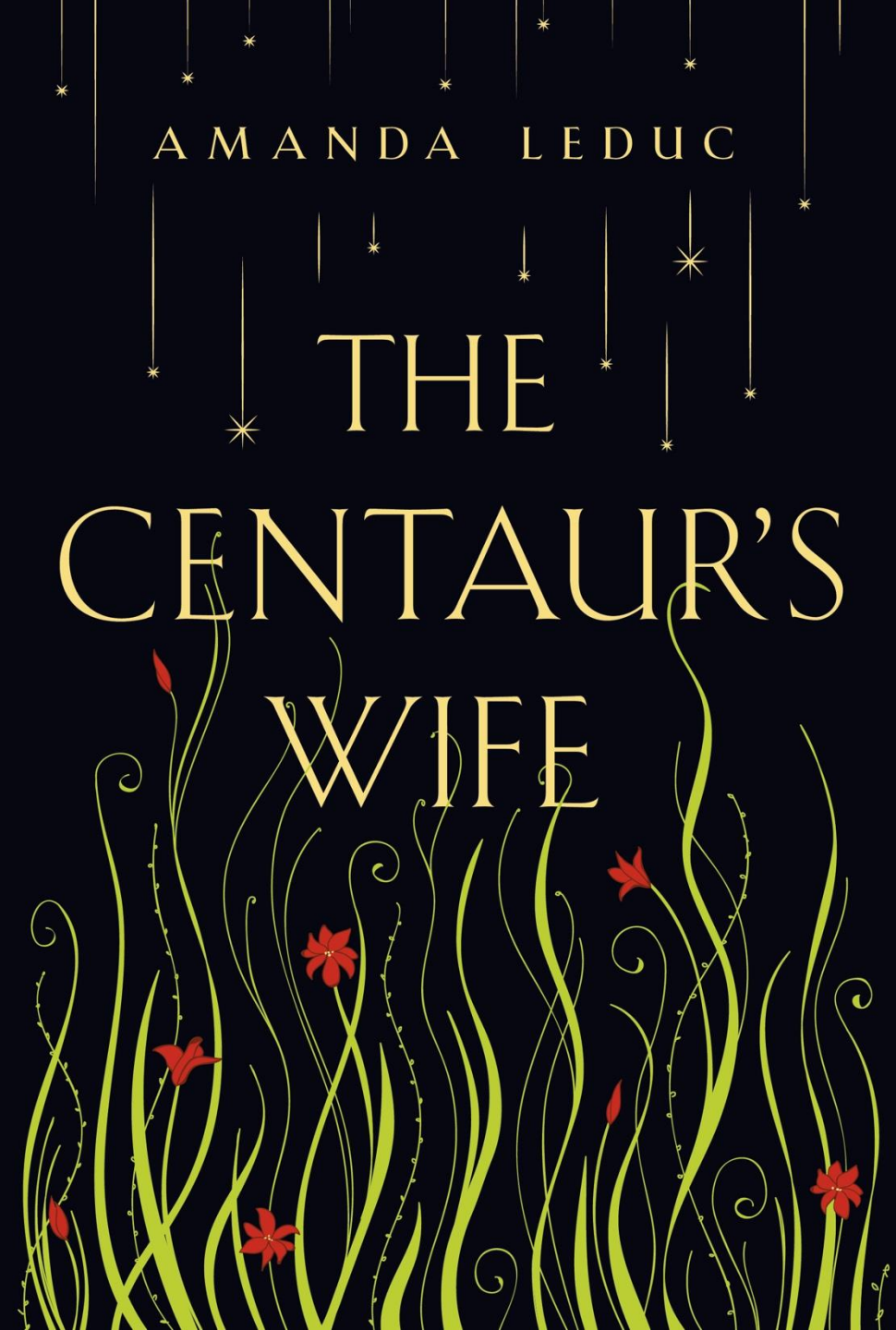
- Published: February 2020
- Plot: a blend of memoir and cultural criticism that weaves my own personal story of disability with different fairy tales and how they've shaped views around disability, and what we might do to change this in the world.
- *Disfigured* was a kind of landmark book for me, in that it really coalesced many of my writing themes together and helped me to really own my truth and what I was trying to say to the world.

- *Disfigured* was published by Coach House Books, an independent Canadian publisher based in Toronto that is celebrating its 60th anniversary this year. Happy anniversary Coach House!
- As part of their marketing plan for the book, Coach House set out to make the book as accessible as possible, reasoning that the more formats the book was in, the more people would be able to read it.
- We partnered with the Centre for Equitable Library Access (CELA) and the National Network for Equitable Library Service (NNELS) to produce *Disfigured* in Braille, accessible epub, and several other formats in addition to traditional print and audio.

- Many of us are lucky enough to be able to read books traditionally, and don't think about what it might be like to have a print disability.
- But the reality is, over 5 million Canadians—that's 12% of the population—have difficulty reading print books. So if a book is only published in print, it's a book that this portion of the reading public can't access.
- This illuminated another structural inequity for me in my author journey: the way that publishing caters to the many at the expense of the few.

- Publishing is a capitalist enterprise and therefore is hard-wired to scramble for the dollars of the many.
- Disabled people have historically been financially and socially disenfranchised and have been portrayed as “burdens” on society—so capitalism doesn’t see disabled people as a viable market.
- But the reality is: when you make something accessible, you’re making it accessible for everyone—not just disabled people.

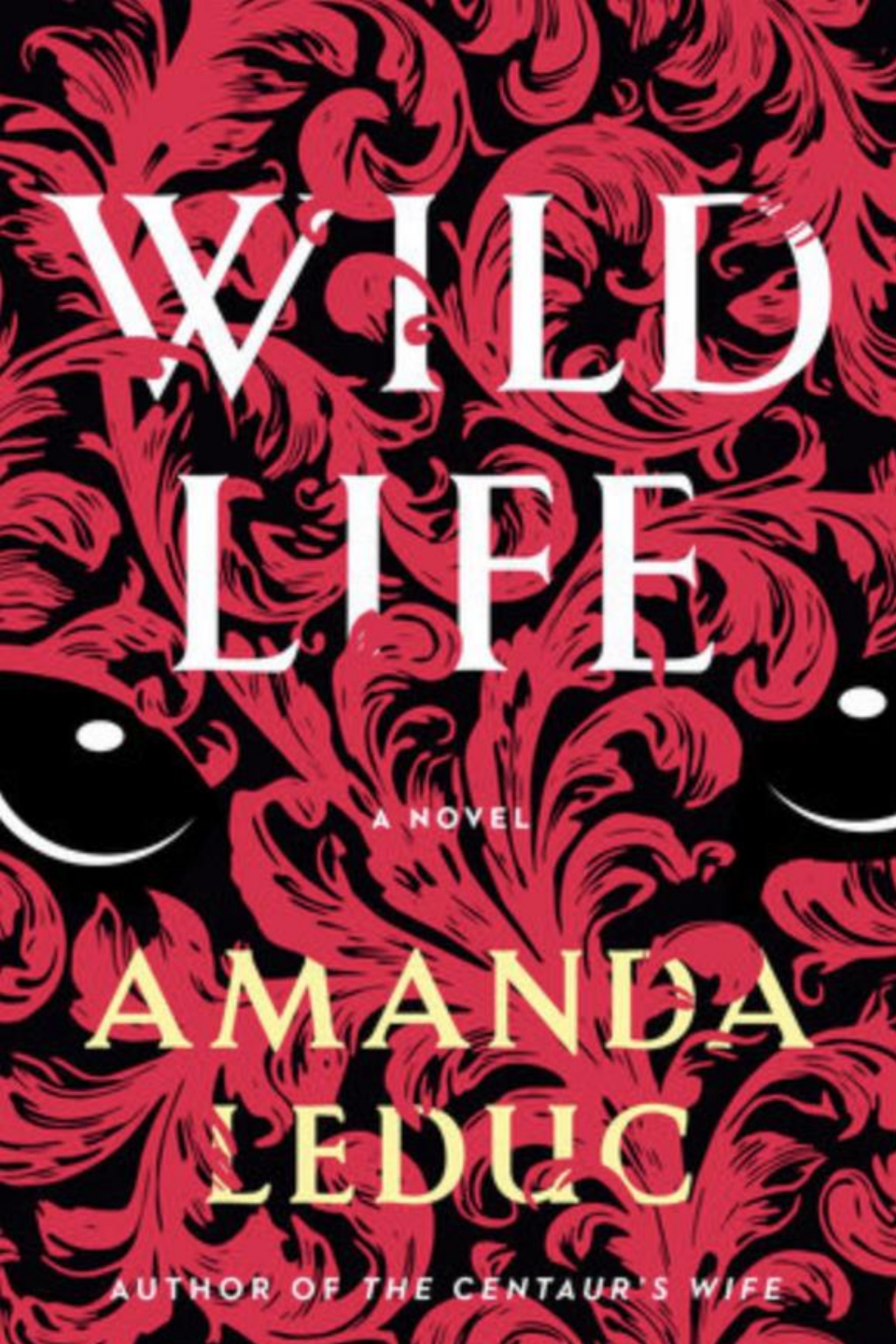
- And when you call attention to these inequities in the system, you begin to push and agitate for structural reform.
- Many publishers don't have the funds available to ensure that their books are all accessible at publication. But increased awareness of this issue can help us push for more government funding to ensure accessible options are available to more publishers and their books.
- **Raising awareness leads to recognizing the structural inequities at play, which leads to pushing for change.**



THE CENTAUR'S WIFE

- Published 2021
- Following on the heels of my work with *Disfigured*, TCW explores many of the same themes—modern fairy tales with disability representation—in a fictional context.
- TCW takes the usual tropes of dystopian fiction—where the disabled characters are left out to die—and instead imagines what might happen if we come together and try to help each other survive.
- All of the characters in the novel are disabled in some way.

- After my years of trying to avoid disability and my years of growing as a storyteller, I finally realized that these two elements of my work and life gave me a unique perspective and opportunity to educate and invite others into a new space of imagining a different world.
- *The Centaur's Wife*, like *Disfigured*, was also published simultaneously in traditional and accessible formats, thanks to a continued partnership with CELA and NNELS.
- It is a strange but ultimately hopeful novel, and writing it unleashed something in me that made space for my fourth book, *Wild Life*.



WILD LIFE

- Published March 2025
- Plot: two walking, talking hyenas bring a message of grief, hope, and love to a wild, uncontrollable world.
- Also, there's a zoo break or two. 😊
- All of the characters in the novel are also disabled. Disabilities range from depression and PTSD through to being hard-of-hearing, being an amputee, dealing with cancer, and working through trauma and grief.

- We have been raised in society to think of disability as a *them* issue—it's always the disabled person's responsibility to ensure that they get what they need. (And if they don't get it, too bad.)
- But the reality of life is that we all have needs, and we actually *do* have the power—economic, social, mental, spiritual—to ensure that all of our needs are met. It's just that our capitalist system has very clear ideas about whose needs are worthy of being met, and this is a very hard story to overturn.
- My journey over these last twelve years has been instrumental in showing me how so much good can be achieved when there are groups and teams working together—in publishing, in event organizing, in libraries, in literary spaces—toward a common goal of telling this new story of how we all deserve to thrive in the world.
- **We can, together, tell new stories.**

The disability story the world has told over and over is this one: disability is a sad story, one that the disabled person alone must fight to overcome.

But the truth—the REAL story—is that disability offers ALL of us an unparalleled opportunity for CREATIVITY, INNOVATION, and CHANGE.

When we flip the script like this—when we begin to challenge the idea that disability is a “sad story” and see its potential for ushering in what’s bright and new—we change the world.

HOW I TRY TO TELL NEW STORIES AND USHER IN A MORE ACCESSIBLE WORLD

1. Representation.

- I try to ensure a wide range of disabled characters in all of my work. My life might have been quite different if I had read more disability representation as a teen, and so now I'm trying to make that world a reality for others.
- Disability can be both the focus of a narrative and/or incidental. Sometimes our stories *are* about how disability shapes our lives, and sometimes disability is just a part of how we go through the day.
- **There is room for *all* of these stories.**

2. Access—Books

- I work regularly with CELA and NNELS now to ensure that all of my books are “born accessible” (published in a number of traditional and accessible formats) right from the date of publication. (More gov’t funding will allow CELA and NNELS to do this for even more books.)
- **This is and will always be a team effort, and I am so grateful for their invaluable work.**

3. Access—Events

- As an author, I have an accessibility rider that I send out to all event organizers whenever I appear at a festival, reading series, or other event. All of my events must be held in physically accessible spaces and all online events must have captions or ASL, and I encourage the use of any and all other accessibility measures.

HOW CAN **WE** USHER IN THE BRIGHTER, MORE ACCESSIBLE WORLD?

1. Representation

- **In MEDIA:** Disability needs to be a part of all of our literature, TV, and film—because disability is a regular part of everyday life. **Disabled creators need to be in all of these spaces—behind the scenes as well as front and center!**
- **In SPACES:** Physical spaces can be shaped to welcome disabled people, and our *social* spaces can be shaped this way too.
- **In THOUGHT:** Enacting change begins with ideas—with trying to view the world through a different lens. Writing *Disfigured* helped me to view the world differently, and my whole life changed as a result.
- **Most importantly: representation in STORY, which ties all three things together.**

HOW CAN **WE** USHER IN THE BRIGHTER, MORE ACCESSIBLE WORLD?

2. Listen to the voices that call for change

- All change begins with ideas. Listen to disabled people when we highlight systemic issues—e.g. the way that the systemic issue of publishing overlooking print disabilities fuels the work of CELA and NNELS and other similar groups across the world.

HOW CAN **WE** USHER IN THE BRIGHTER, MORE ACCESSIBLE WORLD?

3. Consider what resources you have at your disposal and how you might put your own power to use.

- As an author, I have particular power (not much, but some!) and heft in certain spaces—like those of literary events, disability rep, and accessible publishing. My experiences in publishing and literary event organization have given me a platform to highlight these issues in particular ways.
- How might your resources and power lend themselves to you making change?

I won't change the entire world with my work, but I can change a corner of it—and that's enough.

And guess what? The same is true for you. 😊

GOING FORWARD

- Seek out and elevate disability stories, particularly stories written by and led by disabled creators
- Pay attention to language—how it is used, how it is taken for granted, and how it can cause harm even when we don't realize it.
- Pay attention to **story**—particularly the stories we've traditionally told about disability. Ask yourself: does the world have to be this way? And if the answer is no—what can you do to bring about change?

GOING FORWARD

- Read books and narratives by disabled people, and do not be afraid to engage with them *critically*. There is no one perfect disability story, or perfect example of disability representation. Disabled people are messy and imperfect and any representation that does us justice will be messy and imperfect too!

GOING FORWARD

- Understand: disability is not a bad word. Saying “disability” is just like saying, “I have Need X”. The key here is that *society* has determined that some needs (the needs of the abled majority) deserve to be met while other needs (the needs of the disabled other) do not. We must reject this thinking, this story.
- Cultivate **grace** and **humility** in our paths to change. We must give ourselves and others lots of space to enter into and engage in this journey.

And so the question becomes: **what is your part to play?**

What are you going to do to help usher in a brighter, more accessible world?

“Like most things in life...disability is sharp, painful, humbling, as well as tremendous, giving, awe-inspiring. It is human.”

Dr. Paige Terrien-Church

Q & A