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Bodies Unbroken: Disability in Indra Sinha's *Animal's People* and Katherine Dunn's *Geek Love*

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The University of Southern Mississippi

Bodies Unbroken: Disability in Indra Sinha's *Animal's People*
and Katherine Dunn's *Geek Love*

by

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ABSTRACT

This project explored the representation of physical disability in modern fiction with the hope to prove that disabled characters are receiving more complex and complete treatment in fiction as a reflection of social change, progress that is also supported by the growing field of disability scholarship. I will explore how two contemporary novels depart from older conventions of representing the disabled as static symbols of good or evil or as broken persons who need to be fixed. Scholars in both English and Disability Studies have commented on these problems, and their insights informed my argument.

Furthermore, I will explore the implications of disability in a global context through reference to two novels, *Animal's People* and *Geek Love*, as well as insights from studies on physical disability in fiction. I looked specifically at differences and similarities in how the two authors shape their stories and how they incorporate disability into their novels. The causes of these disabilities are also important, and their discussion will foreground the ethical frameworks for both novels. Through analysis and comparison of two novels, as well as a review of literary scholarship that takes the representation of visible disability as a focus, this study hopes to prove that physical disability is finally beginning to receive fair and significant treatment from fiction authors, and that this modern treatment addresses not only the personal ramifications of disability, but trans-cultural aspects as well.

Key terms: disability studies, modern fiction, disability, societal reactions, normality

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Chapter One: Introduction & Methods

Physically disabled characters have long made appearances in fiction, most famously in Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* and Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden*. Often, however, these characters serve a symbolic purpose, standing in for a moral or ethical lesson. In the last few decades, popular story telling has begun representing physically disabled characters as richly human, but problems remain that must be addressed. This cultural work parallels political work that represents disabled persons as subjects with full claims to human rights. Unfortunately, physically disabled characters are still largely misrepresented or misinterpreted in fiction, but, in what literary scholars call the post-modern era (from 1945 to the present), there has been an increasingly accurate—or at least slightly less inaccurate—portrayal of physical disability. Both Indra Sinha's *Animal's People* (2007) and Katherine Dunn's *Geek Love* (1989) represent contemporary notions of disability and agency, but each from a very different world culture. Dunn's novel is set in the United States, her characters are a family of carnival performers, and their dramas revolve around the personal circle of the family and do not necessarily address the problems of society on a larger level. On the other hand, Sinha's work, which takes place in a poverty-stricken town in India, is directly embedded in global politics and an awareness of how the global south appears to the global north as a “disabled subject” itself. The shift in setting and political vision makes this pairing particularly salient for a study of disability in the contemporary novel.

The narrator of *Animal's People* is a teenage boy living in an impoverished town in India. When Animal was a baby, a chemical plant explosion caused his spine to contort in such a way that Animal could not stand upright and had to walk on his hands as well as

his feet. His disability, caused by an accident, leads him to feel inhuman, which is why he refers to himself as "Animal." An American doctor comes to the town and befriends Animal, eventually suggesting that, if he were to go to America, he could receive corrective surgery and thus be able to stand upright again. Here we see the possibility of a cure presented, but the novel does not ultimately go the way one might expect. After struggling for a long time and initially dreaming of how wonderful life would be should he receive the surgery in America, Animal ultimately decides to retain his disability and to stay in India, the importance of which will be discussed further throughout the thesis.

Katherine Dunn's *Geek Love* (1989) takes a much different approach than Sinha's novel. Dunn's novel centers around a family of carnival performers, led by parents Al and Lil who purposefully create disabled and deformed children through heavy use of narcotics and radiation during Lil's pregnancies. The narrator, Olympia, is one of the children and is an albino, hunchbacked dwarf. Olympia's brother, Arty, has fins where he should have arms and legs, and he begins a cult called Arturism in which his followers show their dedication and reach some form of "enlightenment" through amputations of varying degrees. The family looks down on able-bodied society and considers them the abnormal group; thus, Dunn turns the usual normal/abnormal binary on its head. Although there is something grotesque and ominous about Dunn's novel, all of the central characters retain their disabilities throughout the novel, with no hint of desire for a cure.

Through analysis and comparison of the two novels, as well as a review of literary scholarship that takes the representation of visible disability as a focus, this study aims to prove that physical disability is finally beginning to receive fair, interesting, and

significant treatment from fiction authors, and although problems and clichés still exist in relation to disabled characters in fiction, authors such as Sinha and Dunn are beginning to break away from the aforementioned problems and clichés and to carve a new path for better representation of disabled individuals.

The novels discussed here align with issues in recent scholarship in several ways. They move disabled subjects from the margin to the center. They offer meanings of disability's symbolism that makes trite moralizing obsolete. Each perceives disability as a legitimate condition rather than a problem to be solved. And, most importantly, disabled characters here critique the status quo. They complicate what is understood as "normal." Both novels perform an inversion of a subordinate cultural value ("disability") over a dominant culture value ("normalcy"). In Sinha's novel, this reversal extends a political critique of contemporary global politics. Dunn's characters, on the other hand, are limited to their positions as members of an isolated American family, and their individualism gives them little sense of a larger context. Both novels present disability as an expression of individuation as their characters struggle against alienation. In Sinha's novel, this struggle is apparently resolved when the protagonist returns to his village community, although the reality remains that Animal, the protagonist, will most likely always be a little lonelier and a little more isolated than those in the able-bodied community. In Dunn's American novel, there is no comparable society for her characters, who remain unique yet alone when the family that gave their identities meaning dissolves, and Olympia, the protagonist, must face a new and stranger isolation as an adult in the able-bodied world. Both novels push boundaries within disability studies while maintaining the sad fact that, ultimately, society still decides what is and is not "normal" or

acceptable, and those who fall into the "abnormal" category suffer regardless of whether they themselves accept their alleged abnormalities or not.

What do these novels ultimately say about disability? Do these novels indicate progress in the way readers see disability, or in the way authors write about it? What happens when this problem moves from a national to an international setting? In what ways are the characters of both the American novel and the Indian novel extensions of a contemporary culture gone awry—not symbols but persons constituted by their social settings? The medium of fiction, which develops our knowledge of humanity through interiority and even resistance to quick and cursory understandings of others, plays an important role in the contemporary revision of disability and identity and resists reduction of humans to symbols. The characters are still figures in an ideological drama, however, and the scope of drama in Dunn's novel is very different than in Sinha's. By comparing the political figuration of difference in these novels, this study hopes to articulate fiction's unique contribution to disability studies while at the same time pointing to problems within disability studies and the real-world culture that remain unresolved.

Methods and Analysis

The overall design for this thesis involved the interpretation of two novels informed by criticism on those novels and selected essays within the emerging field of disability studies. Samples and evidence come in the form of quotations pulled from the two novels, *Animal's People* and *Geek Love*, as well as insights from studies on physical disability in fiction. The two novels under analysis provided evidence of the change occurring in contemporary fiction regarding the way in which authors and their readers, as well as scholars within the disability studies realm, view physical disability. The

novels have similar messages, but they also contrast in many ways, specifically in the voices of the two different narrators, their domestic and international settings, and in the use of the normal/abnormal binary, a predominant lens through which scholars read literature in the earlier stages of disability studies. Modern scholars, specifically Ato Quayson, wish to move beyond the normal/abnormal binary into more complex areas of study, but it is also worth noting that this binary does still exist within fiction and can indicate a starting point from which scholars can then pursue deeper, more complex ideas and problems. In both novels, disabled characters are implicitly compared to the able-bodied characters sharing their spaces. In *Animal's People*, this domestic setting is a familiar one in which “normal” people stand upright, have four working limbs and so forth; in *Geek Love*, the domestic setting is flipped, placing the reader in the middle of a carnival family to whom normal people are, in fact, the strange ones, and deformities are desirable. These contrasts provide separate angles in relation to the issue of physical disability, allowing for a well-rounded and multi-sided view for this argument.

This thesis compares and contrasts the novels' interpretations and representations of the disabled characters and will focus specifically on the narrators' views of their own separate disabilities. The way in which the narrators experience their own disabilities and how they react to the able-bodied people around them, as well as how able-bodied characters react to the disabled characters, helped to highlight the importance of culture and society in relation to disability and disfigurement. Furthermore, the different responses highlighted the importance of cause and effect. The manners of disfiguration pinpoint the issues of ethics and morality that the author intends to discuss. The children in *Geek Love* are purposefully disfigured as money-making schemes for their parents,

which demonstrates a level of corruption no doubt intended to shock readers. *Animal* is also disfigured as a result of corruption, but at the global level, indicating Sinha's desire to disclose the corruption of big businesses that tend to eschew morality and ethics for the benefit of their own growth and success.

These two novels explore morality and ethics in vastly different manners. Dunn seems to suggest that morality is only a relative term, meaning different things to different people. The majority of readers would be shocked and revolted by the parents' behaviors, but the children themselves do not appear so incensed. In fact, they are almost prideful of their deformities and of their parents' decisions to run the family business. The fact that the disabilities present in both novels are produced, rather than results of random natural chance, suggests that the authors both wish to address broader concepts beyond disability: namely, ethics and morality, explored at the small, familial level in *Geek Love* and the larger, global level in *Animal's People*.

Focusing mainly on the two novels, *Animal's People* and *Geek Love*, this thesis provides several interpretations of passages from both novels to demonstrate the differences and similarities between the representations of the disabled characters in the books. The thesis looks specifically at differences and similarities in how the two narrators view their own disabilities and how they interact with the world around them as a result of these disabilities. The causes of these disabilities are also important, and their discussion foregrounds the ethical frameworks for both novels whose authors avoid simplistic moral symbolism. Through textual analysis I assessed how fiction contributes to the evolving conversation of physical disability in both domestic and global societies.

Chapter Two: Concepts of Disability Studies

History and Background of Disability Studies

Sari Altschuler's "'Ain't One Limb Enough?': Historicizing Disability in the American Novel" (2014) explores the lack of attention given to early American literature by disability scholars. Altschuler writes, "Of the ninety most recent publications in the field, most offer analyses of twentieth and twenty-first-century literature, twelve cover pre-1865 texts, and none treat American literature before 1836" (246). It is not hard to imagine why early American literature receives little to no attention from this particular area of study. Beyond the possibility that more modern American literature has a larger readership is the fact that disability is scarce in the pages of early American literature. Altschuler writes, "there simply aren't very many impaired bodies in early national fiction" (246). The author suggests that this absence is due to disabled individuals living on the fringes of society in early America, thus they were not a large part of the national imagination. Altschuler calls for disability studies to "challenge some of its own assumptions and to flesh out new textures and nuances" in light of historic background (268). Altschuler's work helps to establish the historic foundations of disability studies and, like many of the scholars in the forthcoming discussion, calls for a change toward more complex, nuanced analyses and discussions within disability scholarship.

Michael Bérubé's article "Disability and Narrative," published in 2005, brings to light complications within disability studies regarding how characters should be read and the changing ways in which scholars and readers alike examine a text. Bérubé focuses on reader perception of disabled characters, but he also complicates the scholarship surrounding disability by pointing out that literary scholarship exists to find figurative

meanings within literature, therefore characters cannot and should not be studied as manifestations of actual human beings with no symbolic importance. He admits that "it is all right for readers to object in simple terms to narratives or characters that use disability for pity or horror" (570), but goes on to say, "It is altogether queer that disability studies might suggest that the literary representation of disability not be read as the site of the figural" (570). Although Bérubé seems to contradict himself here, he implies that there are problems with accurate or fair representations of disabled characters, but there are also times when it is appropriate for disability to be symbolic. The problem, then, lies in *what* the disability symbolizes. Bérubé argues that fictional characters are meant to be read figuratively, not as actual human beings, but he would likely concede the point that many of his peers in disability scholarship make: that is, disability that represents purity or evil, or disability that exists only as a moral lesson or as the main obstacle which a character must overcome, is simplistic and needs to change. Not only are those issues problematic for authentic representation, but they are also problematic within the symbolic and analytical world of literary scholarship in that they are rather trite.

Societal Reactions and the Need for a Cure

Christina Minaki addresses the issue of disability representation in her article "Great Responsibility: Rethinking Disability Portrayal in Fiction for the Real World" (2009), calling for a change in the representation of disabled characters. Minaki focuses on children's literature, but her research is relevant for all reading levels. She argues that disabled characters in literature should not be solely wise, pure, talking cardboard cutouts in wheelchairs; rather, they should maintain the same depth and complexity as is expected of any other character in a well-written piece of fiction. Minaki suggests that

authors who incorporate disability into their fiction should "resist the urge to write about disability only as a misfortune to be overcome. It is another, equally viable way to be in the world. [...] People/characters with disabilities should not be portrayed only to inspire, teach, or correct others. Stories should include people with disabilities because they [...] lead lives within which interesting [...] things happen" (n.pag). The issue of "overcoming" will be an integral part of this study, as it is a prevalent problem within the field of disability studies.

Minaki is one of many scholars within disability studies calling for authors to stop creating disabled characters merely so they can attempt to overcome their disabilities. Not only should disabled characters encompass all of the aspects that humanity entails, both good and bad, they should also be able to exist as they are without needing to overcome their disabilities. Minaki goes on to say, "Many of the difficulties related to disabilities stem from society's prejudices toward it. These prejudices come from fear [...], ignorance, misunderstanding [...], and general avoidance of it. Portraying disability means portraying valuable difference, not bodies or minds 'gone wrong'" (n.pag). Society's reaction to disability will be another common thread throughout this study. Society often considers disability as something abnormal, thus it is that judgment rather than any reality that makes disabled individuals "different" from other people. Minaki stresses the importance for authors to understand the societal issue and to therefore create disabled characters who are just as complex as the able-bodied characters.

Barker provides thorough research into both literature and disability studies in her book *Postcolonial Fiction and Disability* (2011). Similar to the previously discussed

scholars, Barker focuses on reader responsibility as much as author responsibility. She hopes readers will pay attention when disabled characters are introduced in novels, noting that they serve an important purpose and are rarely accidental—they are not, however, always vehicles of morality and so should not be automatically assumed as such. Barker's post-colonial angle is particularly relevant in relation to *Animal's People*, which takes place in a small town in India. The narrator of *Animal's People* is a disabled teenager and, although Barker's main focus is on disabled children, one could argue that Animal retains enough childlike qualities to fit into Barker's arguments. Barker states, "as protagonists and narrators [disabled children] provide disquieting and highly critical insights into the process of nation-building and cultural regeneration" (189). *Animal's People* takes place long after India gained independence from Great Britain, yet "cultural regeneration" is still at the heart of the story, due in large part to the chemical plant explosion. The town around the chemical plant is left to attempt to put itself back together with its limited resources, and Animal is one of the many people in his town disfigured as a result of the chemical explosion. Animal was a baby when the explosion occurred, thus does not recall his parents, nor does he recall ever possessing a "normal" body. In that sense, Animal grows up as the town "grows up" around him, attempting to rebuild itself from the bottom-up.

Barker further discusses the similarities between post-colonialism and disability studies through study of several different novels. She aims to "'decolonize' disability studies through engagement with post-colonialism's attention to the particularities of cultural representation and interpretation" (190). Here the reader can see another connection between Barker's scholarship and the works of Indra Sinha and Katherine

Dunn. Cultural representation and interpretation are largely important themes within disability studies as a whole, and particularly in *Animal's People* and *Geek Love*. The reaction of society to the bodies of Sinha's Animal and Dunn's Olympia plays an integral role in the plot of both novels, suggesting that societal reactions create the problem of what is and is not considered "normal." Barker further explains the connection between post-colonial studies and disability studies by suggesting that "the incorporation of disability perspectives into mainstream post-colonial theory is [...] not simply a niche interest or a rarefied addition to the field's already wide-ranging concerns, but a point of immediate relevance to many post-colonial subjects and experiences" (6). Barker insists upon the connection between the two areas of scholarship and successfully argues that there is room within post-colonial studies to allow for disability interpretation.

Anna Mae Duane writes specifically about *Geek Love* in her article, "The Angel and the Freak: The Value of Childhood and Disability in Katherine Dunn's *Geek Love*" (2012). Duane focuses on the idea of deceptive appearances, pointing to the character, Chick, who is physically "normal," unlike his four siblings. His seeming innocence is obliterated when he kills almost his entire family. Duane's analysis suggests that *Geek Love* dramatizes faulty judgments based on physical appearances, both negative and positive. Those judgments highlight the importance of reactions to "abnormal" bodies, which is an integral part of disability studies and of this thesis. Everything is relative and disability is no different—abnormality is determined by mass society and holds no basis in reality. The way society responds to those with "different" bodies reinforces the beliefs of what is and is not normal, thus continuing the cycle in which disability is considered abnormal.

In *Geek Love*, Katherine Dunn challenges common ideas concerning what is "normal" through her host of physically impaired characters who view physically "normal" people as strange. Through the first-person narrator, a bald, hunch-backed dwarf woman named Olympia, Dunn invites readers into a world in which social binaries are inverted and destroyed, leading readers to question classifications of normalcy. Dunn's characters are wholly human, with several flaws and no superior morality. Through those characters, Dunn attempts to portray physical disability in a fresh light, absent of preaching or pity. It is important to note that, while the freak/normal binary is widely abandoned by scholars within disability studies as a rather arcane method of study, that binary is central to Dunn's work and so merits discussion.

Tobin Siebers, a scholar who focuses on the impact of physical appearances through aesthetics, discusses in-depth the importance of societal reactions and the prevalence of society's innate desire to cure or fix an alleged impairment in his book *Disability Aesthetics* (2005). Although mainly concerned with artwork, Siebers' work—and the concept of aesthetics in general—can also apply to the written word with regards to disability. Aesthetics' desire to refute the beauty of a "perfect" body and to incorporate disability and/or disfigurement in art translates over to disability in literature. Siebers writes, "Aesthetics tracks the emotions that some bodies feel in the presence of other bodies [...]. Taste and disgust are volatile reactions that reveal the ease or disease with which one body might incorporate another" (542). These "reactions" as described by Siebers are evident throughout both *Geek Love* and *Animal's People*, but they receive particular attention in the former. The mass public who enjoy the freak shows watch them with a macabre interest, the way one may rubberneck in attempt to see a gruesome wreck

on the side of the interstate. The "freak" family at the center of the novel, however, reacts to able-bodied people with disgust, considering them disgraceful and repulsive. Indeed, the family's distaste for able-bodied individuals is so marked that the family nearly abandons the newborn baby, Chick, because he has not visible abnormalities. Of course, the aforementioned scene is a comment on the real-world society in which many families give up babies who do possess deformities of any kind. The body itself, and the deformities present, do not instigate the problems—rather, societal reactions to those deformities are the basis for continued prejudice and discomfort, therefore society is continually running in a vicious circle.

More of Siebers' work relates quite well to both *Animal's People* and *Geek Love*, thereby helping to create a link between the two seemingly disparate novels. Regarding work that incorporates disability in a raw, realistic manner, Siebers writes, "The work reverses the apparently natural tendency to represent any form of corporeal transformation as driven by the desire for improvement or cure" (545). Both Sinha's and Dunn's novel engage in challenging the "desire for improvement or cure," and that direct challenge of societal norms stands as an integral—perhaps the most integral—part of both novels. All of the main characters in Dunn's novel are proud of their disabilities and have no desire to "fix" themselves by any means; furthermore, on a much more drastic level, the members of the able-bodied public who eventually begin to follow Arty in a cult-like fashion mutilate themselves in order to be more like Arty in appearance. In *Animal's People*, which tends more toward the realistic than does *Geek Love*, Animal decides to forego treatment in America in favor of retaining his disability, which goes against most conventions within fictionalized disability—more often, there is the desire

to "fix" a disability, but that desire is not evident in either Dunn's or Sinha's novel. Disability aesthetics "broadens the inclusion of disability found throughout modern art by affirming that disability may operate both as a critical framework for questioning aesthetic presuppositions [...] and as a value in its own right" (546). Disability aesthetics, then, seems to be at play in both *Animal's People* and *Geek Love*, challenging the norms and including disability without any agenda regarding those disabilities.

Character and Agency

The troubling ending of *Animal's People* led Andrew Mahlstedt to write the article "Animal's Eyes: Spectacular Invisibility and the Terms of Recognition in Indra Sinha's *Animal's People*." Mahlstedt investigates the seemingly negative ending in an attempt to justify why the novel ends on the note that it does. He finds that, ultimately, the novel provides some semblance of empowerment and positivity despite the grim circumstances of its conclusion. The narrator's refusal to receive corrective surgery that could fix his spine and allow him to stand upright and his acknowledging of the happy, full lives that he and his neighbors lead despite their destitution allows for a positive and empowering end even in the face of uncertainty. Animal ultimately rejects the social stigmas regarding the way he looks. The American doctor who wants Animal to receive the corrective surgery views him as abnormal, and believes he must be fixed. The doctor's view is a commonly held view in the real-world as well as in fiction. Much of the literature within disability studies points to the idea that the societal reaction to a person who looks different than what is considered "normal" creates the problem for both the disabled individual and the "normal" person.

In other words, because normalcy and abnormality are manmade concepts, there is nothing inherently wrong with having a disability or being deformed in some way; however, society's negative reactions to disability and deformity lead to the belief that there *is* something wrong with those individuals who appear different, and there is a desire to fix what appears to be wrong. As Rosemarie Garland-Thomson writes in her book *Staring: How we Look* (2009), "the visibly disabled body intrudes on our routine visual landscape and compels our attention, often obscuring the personhood of its bearer" (20). Indeed, people in the real world may find themselves staring (or trying extremely hard not to stare) at a person who does not fit society's conception of normalcy, and that human behavior is replicated within the pages of fiction. In *Animal's* case, those unaffected by the chemical explosion are fascinated by his unconventional, seemingly broken body and desire to fix it, fitting with the common misconception that what is abnormal must also be wrong.

Furthermore, the very basis of *Geek Love*—"freak shows"—rests on this attraction to and inability to look away from abnormal bodies. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson goes on to say that "social expectations shape our ocular sorting processes, making certain appearances and actions unusual and cataloging people as alien or native, extraordinary or ordinary" (18). Again this statement supports the idea that what is "normal" is mere social construction, concepts that the general public have been conditioned to believe for centuries. *Geek Love* sets out to challenge those long-held beliefs by presenting the family of "freaks" who view able-bodied individuals as strange and even repugnant, thereby highlighting the transience of human beliefs and definitions. Yet what seems impossible to challenge is the fact that people remain fascinated by

disability, so much so that it has almost always found its way into literature in some form. Thomson suggests that the various types of monsters, elves, and other such mythical creatures that have populated the pages of stories for as long as the written word has existed actually represent certain types of disability and other "abnormal" bodied-individuals. Garland-Thomson writes, "the long history of monster and freak shows offers the most florid example of how and why people look at dissonant shapes and scales. These shows are publicly staged staring encounters that use extraordinary bodies to challenge the human need for order and certainty" (164). Rather than attempt to incorporate disability into society in a productive manner, "freak shows" play on the irregularities, thereby insisting upon and reinforcing the idea that disability and deformities are strange and abnormal enough to command gawking.

Geek Love, of course, provides the strongest evidence of this in its focus on the freak show culture. The question remains, though, regarding Dunn's purpose in writing her novel. What message is she trying to convey? It is evident that she agrees in large part with many of Garland-Thomson's ideas regarding the societal response to abnormality. Perhaps the public's discomfort around disability lies in the truth that the majority of people who grow into old age will face some form of disability within their lifetime. Garland-Thomson writes, "This inconvenient truth nudges most of us who think of ourselves as able-bodied toward imagining disability as an uncommon visitation that mostly happens to someone else, as a fate somehow elective rather than inevitable" (19). The view of disability as simply someone else's misfortune plays out in *Animal's People*. Animal's disfigurement is the direct result of a chemical plant explosion, therefore his

disability links directly to that accident—he just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, in the eyes of many people.

This view is problematic, however, in that the world is far more arbitrary than that. Selectivity hardly exists in things beyond the scope of human control—catastrophes simply happen, to anyone, at any time. The able-bodied community, those both in the real world and within the realm of Sinha's fiction, distances itself from the disabled community through such beliefs in simple bad luck, yet they remain fascinated by the "grotesque." Again, society and its reactions to disability and "abnormality" prevent disabled people from fully engaging with the community around them. Garland-Thomson states, "The cultural imagination thus ever threatens to thrust those who are too large, too small, or too irregular outside of the circle of common humanity" (167). Forcing disabled people "outside the circle of common humanity" then gives rise to protective, exclusive groups such as the freak family in *Geek Love*—though admittedly to a far lesser extent. An "us vs. them" mentality arises and the disabled community must prepare themselves to deal with daily discomforts when trying to connect with the able-bodied community.

Ato Quayson makes a similar argument regarding societal reactions in his book *Aesthetic Nervousness: Disability and the Crisis of Representation* (2007). Quayson states that "the term 'disability' is no longer taken as referencing the notion of a reduced ability deriving from an impairment, but speaks to the built and social environments that generate difficulties for the disabled person's capacity to live a full and fulfilled life" (2). The continuous societal reinforcement that there is something wrong, different, or disturbing about disability creates difficulties for disabled individuals when trying to lead normal, productive lives. *Animal's People* provides evidence of this negative societal

reinforcement at work. Throughout most of the novel, Animal believes he cannot live a fulfilling life because of his disability. He sees himself as something other than human, even, which of course is a result of societal reactions and expectations. He recognizes that his body is "abnormal" and thus believes for most of his young life that he cannot even be considered part of the human race. Quayson goes on to say, "Certain present-day responses to disability even among people presumably sharing an enlightened mode of thinking still hark back to unexamined sentiments of a bygone era. Thus it is not at all uncommon for some still to think that impairments are a sign of some special metaphysical disorder, or that people with disability carry their impairments because of mistakes in their past lives" (13). Quayson's statement is particularly interesting in light of the setting of *Animal's People*. India has a large Hindu population, a religion that believes in reincarnation and karma.

Hinduism receives brief attention in Sinha's novel. Animal notes that Hindu beliefs suggest his condition is a result of karma for previous bad deeds, and he mentions that some people in the town look at him as though they are wondering what he did in a previous life to deserve his disability in the present life. The aspect of Eastern religion ties in once more with the importance—and the inherent danger—of society and culture. Although people all over the world might be uncomfortable or uncertain around disabled individuals, reactions differ slightly based on geographical (and therefore cultural) location. For example, the Abrahamic Religions—Christianity, Islam, and Judaism—do not suggest that disability is a direct punishment for a past sin. Therefore, cultures that are heavily influenced by the aforementioned three religions have perhaps a more accepting view of disability than the cultures more influenced by Eastern religions such

as Hinduism and Buddhism. Animal recognizes the importance of Hindu culture in India and thus understands that, in addition to the general discomfort the able-bodied public has in reaction to a disabled person, further discomfort—and even judgment—arises from the Hindu population.

Jennifer Rickel explores the issue of dehumanization through the fascination of suffering in *Animal's People* in her article, "The Poor Remain: A Posthumanist Rethinking of Literary Humanitarianism in Indra Sinha's *Animal's People*." In addition to the sociopolitical issues that run throughout the novel, there is also the issue of the narrator's self-imposed dehumanization, which involves his severely bent spine that renders him incapable to walk upright, from which stems his nickname, Animal. As the novel progresses, the narrator's understanding of what it means to be human shifts and becomes more complex. He begins to understand the nuances of human nature and at times loses confidence in himself and what he thought he knew about the world. When first presented with the opportunity to go to America for surgery, Animal is eager to comply; however, Rickel writes that Animal realizes the surgery would only signify "conforming to a normative conception of the human," which Animal realizes is not something he is willing to do. The issue of defining what a human being is relates significantly to the issues of societal perception and reaction within disability studies.

Jesse Oak Taylor's "Powers of Zero: Aggregation, Negation, and the Dimensions of Scale in Indra Sinha's *Animal's People*" explores *Animal's People* as a vehicle for identity politics and a potential catalyst for social change and the remarkable phenomenon of empowerment coming from having nothing. Taylor concludes that the odd and seemingly counterintuitive optimism that rises from having nothing is a result of

the unique closeness that can bind communities together after tragedy, as happens in the novel. Not only does Animal have a strong sense of himself, but the entire community does as well, therefore they are reluctant to accept help from outsiders. As with many of the previously discussed scholars specifically researching *Animal's People*, Taylor stresses the importance of Animal's final decision to forego the corrective surgery. Taylor writes, "His refusal to be 'cured' resists the universalizing promise of humanism, in which universalism is predicated on a paradoxically exclusionary image (once white and male, now at any rate 'two-footed')" (n.pag). Here once again the question rises regarding what makes a person a person, and why society considers certain people "regular" and others "irregular." Animal's struggle to and eventual success in finding peace with who he is, thus forging a strong identity of self and refusing in the end to change his physical body, stands as perhaps the most significant literary moment within this thesis. It seems as though Sinha is about to go down the problematic path of overcoming and fixing the disability and then, at the last minute, he does not.

Normality vs. Abnormality

In his article "Fundamentally Freaky: Collapsing the Freak/Norm Binary in *Geek Love*," Michael Hardin intends to prove how *Geek Love* author Katherine Dunn sets up the "freak" vs. "norm" binary only to deconstruct that binary by allowing characters to have attributes applicable to both categories, thereby challenging the previously accepted black-and-white dichotomy between what is normal and what is not. Again, most modern scholars within disability studies have abandoned this method of analysis in search of more complex lenses through which to read literature. The freak/norm binary, however, is so central to *Geek Love* that it must be discussed at least

briefly. Hardin concludes that Dunn successfully breaks down the freak/norm binary by creating a fictional world in which normalcy is what is considered odd, and to be a “freak” is acceptable, and also by allowing her characters to embody characteristics reflective of both the freak and the norm category.

A different study of *Geek Love* suggests that Dunn is successful in her new, more accepting approach to disability because, not only does she muddy and therefore dispel certain binaries, but she also presents the Freak/Norm binary in the opposite manner to what would be expected. In "American Tall Tale/Tail: Katherine Dunn's *Geek Love* and the Paradox of American Individualism," Victoria Warren suggests that there is a narrow-mindedness present in the novel in which people see only a disabled person's disability, and not the person behind it. In this particular novel, however, the situation is flipped so that what is “freaky” is “normal,” and vice-versa. The absurdity that this flipped binary creates ensures that the readers will understand Dunn's message that so-called "freakery" is relative and ideas of normalcy are mere social constructions that hinge on bad habits. According to Warren, Dunn uses the simplistic binary of freak/normal to critique American culture's desire to conform, its lack of appreciation for individuality, and a common inability to see beyond surface-value. Dunn makes this critique through the use of fundamentally “abnormal” individuals as the normal members of society who look upon those without physical deformities as odd or unlovable.

Disability and Symbolism

Alice Hall addresses disability in modern-day literature in her book, *Disability and Modern Fiction: Faulkner, Morrison, Coetzee and the Nobel Prize for Literature* (2012), highlighting the reader's job in understanding the disabled character. Just as

Minaki pointed to the necessity for the author to create a better-rounded, realistic character who can remain disabled and still be a strong character without the need of a cure, Hall suggests that the reader must then accept this new, more lifelike portrayal rather than searching for deeper meanings or metaphors. Hall lauds modern fiction that opens up the possibility to understand the disabled characters as human beings who interact with the world in a different but equitably meaningful way. That being said, however, characters in fiction are just that—characters—and therefore generally do contain some form of symbolism or meaning beyond simple humanity. As previously discussed, literary criticism's role is to read the characters who populate fiction as symbolic in some way. The mere fact of symbolism, then, is not the issue; rather, how and what disabled characters symbolize (purity or amorality, heroism or martyrdom) is the problem. What Hall and other scholars wish to see for disabled characters is a different, more nuanced portrayal that can be symbolic, but the disability itself should not represent any specific morality or preachy inspiration or other form of lesson.

Adele Holoch's article, "Profanity and the Grotesque in Indra Sinha's *Animal's People*," addresses the question of what it means to be human and the requisites for human rights. Furthermore, Holoch looks into the Bhopal Union Carbide disaster of 1984, the nonfiction basis for the events of Sinha's novel. In researching the Bhopal disaster, Holoch discusses global capitalism and how the United States attempted to downplay the negative affects of the chemical leak. In Sinha's novel, we see from India's point of view an America that is, in a word, a bully. *Animal* is initially wary of the American doctor who comes to his town. Holoch writes, "His resistance stems from a recognition of the pattern of dehumanization in westerners' attitudes towards victims of

the explosion, as well as a sense of their troubling desire to collect or sensationalize the stories of their suffering" (n.pag). Holoch applies the theories of critics Mbembe and Derrida to her own analysis of *Animal's People* in order to effectively discuss possible answers to her research questions.

Holoch suggests that a major contending factor in *Animal's People* is the narrator's humor and self-awareness. Holoch states, "Animal's People uses the experience or condition of abjection to show that, behind the structures of highly stratified postcolonial or neocolonial environments, we are all united by commonalities of desires, of embodiment, of other basic human experiences and needs" (n.pag). Common humanity draws the reader into the story and links him or her with Animal, despite the many likely differences that would otherwise separate them. One of the most significant common qualities among all people is the desire for humor, and the positive effect of humor in almost any situation. Holoch writes, "in the laughter he (Sinha) seeks to evoke, he further works to challenge that distance, to involve us sometimes as participants [...] and sometimes as targets – at once humorously critical of, and complicit in, the systems he critiques" (n.pag). This humor serves as a challenge to the reader to realize the darker aspects of the story, such as the effects of global capitalism and how wealthy countries still retain strong and unhealthy holds on poorer countries, as well as the more positive aspects, such as the fact that there are many similarities between the narrator and the reader based on pure common humanity and despite the narrator's physical deformities.

Perhaps more important than the religious aspect, however, is the impact of American capitalism on a third-world country such as India, particularly a marginalized town such as the one in which Animal lives. The fictional town in Sinha's novel is based

upon the town of Bhopal, to which Quayson directly refers in *Aesthetic Nervousness*. He writes, "If we recall the [...] chemical leakage at the Union Carbide Plant in Bhopal in 1984 and the terrible impairments incurred [...], we see a worrisome link between global capitalism and local disabilities" (3). The very disaster to which Quayson alludes is the basis for Sinha's fictionalized account; indeed, both Quayson and Sinha wish to express the potential dangers of global capitalism and how it can affect, and even create, disabilities. Global capitalism, then, fits in with the culture not just of a particular town or country, but the entire world. Disasters such as the explosion in Bhopal often directly cause disease and disability within the local population, and those disabilities and deformities can carry on decades after the disaster, depending on the strength of the chemicals. Sinha suggests his disapproval of global capitalism not only through his unrelenting depiction of the results of a chemical plant explosion, but also through the fact that Animal ultimately refuses to go to America, the largest seat of capitalism.

In *Animal's People*, despite the rather positive fact that Animal chooses to forego surgery and learns to accept his disability as simply part of himself, there remains the understanding that he will essentially become "stuck" within the afflicted little town in which he lives, and will have difficulty being able to connect with anyone outside of his circle. Still, Sinha seems to suggest this is not necessarily a bad thing. Animal, although initially filled with desire to change his situation, ends the novel in a relatively happy place.

For the majority of the novel, Animal believes the societal reaction that his body is not normal and needs to be remedied. Toward the end, however, Animal realizes that society's understanding of his situation and the situations of all those in his village who

suffer similar fates is not necessarily a correct or justified understanding. He learns to look beyond society's reaction to his body and to realize that he does not need to be cured in order to live a fulfilling life. The ending to *Animal's People* poses an interesting problem within disability studies. Scholars such as Mitchell and Snyder suggest that disabled characters within fiction almost always need to be "cured" or possibly die, as with Colin in *The Secret Garden*. Often, the narrative arc of a novel with a disabled character involves that character either fighting against and overcoming his or her disability or fighting and losing to that disability. Animal, on the other hand, maintains his disability throughout the novel and even accepts it, which then defies the central arguments of many key works within disability studies scholarship.

Chapter Three: Results and Discussion

Morality and Disability

One of the most frequently discussed problems in disability studies is the idea of moral superiority. Authors often portray disabled characters as either possessing a moral compass that is superior to able-bodied characters, as with *A Christmas Carol's* syrupy-sweet and innocent Tiny Tim, or authors may use disability to represent evil or corruption, as with characters in C.S. Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (1970). Lewis describes the "bad" characters as appearing "strange" and "deformed" (173), thus insinuating that the corrupt nature of those characters is somehow reflected in their physiques. Both moral superiority and amorality pose problems for literature involving disability, and authors may have trouble working their way around these rather ignorant clichés. Over time, authors of fiction and scholars of disability alike have moved away from the fixation on normal versus abnormal and have begun exploring deeper, more complex issues within disability studies. Many scholars note that there is almost always a desire to fix or cure the disability whenever it appears in fiction and, if the disability cannot be cured, then the afflicted character often dies. The necessity to cure is a core focus for scholars within disability studies, which makes *Animal's People* and *Geek Love* interesting novels to study, because they both manage to avoid that problem.

Both Indra Sinha and Katherine Dunn escape the traps of both moral preaching and the need to cure through their human, realistically flawed characters who retain their disabilities through to the end of the novel and either do not ever seek a cure, as is the case with *Geek Love*, or ultimately decide against a cure, as is the case with *Animal's People*. Dunn's characters in particular do not demonstrate morality of any high degree—

in fact, it could be said that her characters have little to no morals at all. While this apparent lack of morality could become problematic, causing Dunn to fall into the stereotype that physical disability is a mark of internal evil, the author is careful to include genuine complexity into the characters and her story so that readers cannot look at her work through such a black-and-white lens. The characters, particularly the narrator, Olympia, possess fully human qualities, both good and bad, and despite the apparent absurdity of their situation, they are relatable in their humanity and their thoughts. The narrator states, "A creature like me has no virtues or morals" (Dunn 156). Referring to herself as a "creature" suggests that Olympia sees herself as different from the rest of the human race, a belief held in common with Animal in *Animal's People*. The difference between the two novels, however, is that Olympia and her family view themselves as superior to "normal" human beings. The narrator's brother, Arty, a boy who has fins rather than arms and legs, draws vast audiences to his tank as he preaches his philosophy. A cultish religion called "Arturism" develops, and Arty's followers go to such drastic measures as having their limbs severed to be more like their master.

Perhaps this absurd cult is a comment on naïveté when it comes to disability. People often assume disabled individuals have access to some secret wisdom that "normal," able-bodied people do not. As Arty himself says, "The more deformed we are, the higher our supposed sanctity" (Dunn 114). Arty's followers are not drawn to his words or message so much as they are simply fascinated by the spectacle of the "fish boy" and assume blindly that his words must be filled with truth and wisdom. Dunn then seems to be aware of the common misrepresentation of disabled individuals as pure, sage people and draws attention to the issue by presenting the reader with the extreme case of

Arty and his disturbing hold on people. One wonders then if Dunn goes too far in the opposite direction, with essentially all of her disabled characters seeming to lack a moral compass, but again the characters' complexities, in particular the narrator's, manage to save Dunn from venturing too far to the opposite side of the moral spectrum.

Sinha's novel presents an interesting case for morality. Set in India following a chemical factory fire that smothered the Indian town in a poisonous smoke, the story is vastly different from *Geek Love*, while at the same time dealing with some of the same problems. The narrator, Animal, is a boy who has been disfigured as a result of the toxins released from the factory fire. His spine is twisted and he must walk on all fours. Dunn's novel is set in North America where, although people may give a second glance to a disabled person, political correctness and society's belief in equality and decency would not allow us to make outward judgments about one's character based solely on his or her physical appearance. In India, however, especially in parts where Hinduism is the popular religion, one common belief is that disabilities and deformities result from bad karma, or are punishment for some evil done in a past life. Another common occurrence in literature involving disabled characters is the "overcoming" of their disabilities.

Overcoming or Succumbing

Similar to the stereotypes involving a surplus or lack of morality, disabled characters often possess some superhuman mental or physical strength that allows them to achieve wonderful goals "despite" the obstacle of their disabilities. There is nothing inherently wrong with the trope of overcoming one's disability, but it is perhaps slightly disingenuous in most instances. Rather than viewing disabilities as obstacles that one must hurdle in order to fulfill a goal or a dream, scholars of literature and disability

studies say that disabilities should be represented more as simply a part of life for some people, and those people already possess the tools necessary to lead a meaningful, successful life without needing to "overcome" their disabilities. If a disability must symbolize something, let it be something original rather than symbolizing obstacles that must be overcome.

Once again, both Dunn and Sinha avoid falling into this cliché. Their characters do not appear to be superheroes who overcome their disabilities with immense effort and strength of mind and body; rather, the characters are simply human beings who happen to have a disability or physical deformity, and those disabilities or deformities exist as a mere fraction of who the characters are. In Sinha's novel, Animal does not want people to view him as superior any more than he wants them to view him as inferior. If he were to discuss overcoming or rising above his disability, that may indicate that either society or he himself views him as somehow inferior due to his physical deformity. If he views himself as equal to everyone else, rather than inferior or superior to them, then there is nothing for him to overcome. Animal states that "What really disgusts me is that we people seem so wretched to you outsiders that you look at us with that so-soft expression, speak to us with that so-pious tone in your voice" (Sinha 184). The pity with which able-bodied people tend to treat disabled people is, in Animal's eyes, worse than the discrimination, because that pity is what leads able-bodied individuals to view any small accomplishment achieved by a disabled person as heroic, or an example of someone overcoming adversity. Pity stems from acknowledgement that there is something wrong with the disabled individual; this same acknowledgement by the disabled person himself or herself leads to the idea of overcoming.

One of several key moments in *Animal's People* occurs when Animal meets a friend who "never seemed to notice I was crippled, nor pretend I wasn't" (Sinha 22). This complete lack of acknowledgment in either direction helps eradicate the need to "overcome," or to be or do anything "despite" the disability. Animal's friend's disinterested attitude toward the disability is more empowering than any other attitude, because it allows for Animal to be comfortable with himself without having to either address the disability or awkwardly attempt to pretend he is "normal." It is what it is and, like any other physical features such as hair or eye color, it need not be mentioned. In this manner, Animal does not need to "overcome" his disability, because, in the eyes of his friend, there is nothing to overcome.

In *Geek Love*, the narrator, Olympia, says, "how proud I am, dancing in the air full of eyes rubbing at me uncovered, unable to look away because of what I am [...]" They thought to use and shame me, but I win out by nature, because a true freak cannot be made. A true freak must be born" (Dunn 20). Olympia, rather than being embarrassed into dancing "despite" her disability, embraces that disability as a unique and even a desirable part of her physique. She feels no need to prove anything to the spectators, and she feels no shame because she sees nothing wrong with the way she is. In this manner, both Sinha and Dunn manage to avoid the cliché of overcoming disability.

Normalcy

What is normal? This existential question is one that both *Animal's People* and *Geek Love* raise through their separate but similar explorations of normality and abnormality, and the implications of those two rather abstract terms. The question of what exactly "normal" means creates a whole host of problems in literature involving

disabled characters. Normality is a largely subjective idea. What one culture considers normal is completely alien elsewhere. What was abnormal just a few decades ago— interracial relationships or women in the workforce, for example— is now largely considered socially acceptable or "normal." Normality, then, is not only subjective, but it also lacks stability. What people consider normal changes. Yet one of the most long-standing dichotomies in both society and literature is that of normal versus abnormal, and people with physical disabilities often find themselves on the "abnormal" side, while those who can walk, talk, and behave the way the majority of human society does are considered "normal." As a result, the "abnormal" characters often fight against their abnormality, either overcoming it or succumbing to it.

Authors often incorporate this idea of overcoming abnormality into novels involving disability, as Indra Sinha does. Animal knows that other people view him as different and so he feels he must be abnormal. *Animal's People* begins with the statement, "I used to be human once" (1), indicating that Animal's abnormality is so strong that it completely robs him of his humanity. The world of *Animal's People* reflects a familiar society in which walking upright is perceived as normal, and those who cannot walk upright wish to change themselves. Animal brings to light the dichotomy when he states, "If I agree to be a human being, I'll also have to agree that I'm wrong-shaped and abnormal" (208). He calls himself "Animal" and almost believes that he truly is a wild animal, because otherwise he would have to accept society's definitions of normality and abnormality. Sinha, however, does not give into the normal/abnormal dichotomy. He acknowledges its existence and then, after many chapters of Animal agonizing over his differences and planning to go to America for corrective surgery on his back, Animal

ultimately decides that, "if I am an upright human, I would be one of millions" (366) and he does not want to lose what he does have only for the sake of blending in with the societal norm.

In *Geek Love*, the typical normal/abnormal dichotomy is flipped, so that what is generally perceived as abnormal becomes the norm and vice versa. Early in the novel, the circus family prepares to abandon their baby because he has no physical deformities (Dunn 8). They end up keeping the child for his mental capacities, and one of the older children, Arty, bullies his younger brother for being a "norm" and lacking any physical "specialty." This behavior, of course, is quite the opposite of what one might expect from real life in which tragedies abound involving abuse of physically or mentally challenged children at the hands of parents or siblings. The family considers the physically normal child an "embarrassment" and he is "generally depreciated for his lack of abnormality" (221). In his family's world, abnormalities measure worth and specialty. Unlike Animal in *Animal's People*, and indeed unlike most literature containing disabled characters, none of Dunn's characters desire a "normal" body or a "normal" life. Just as society sometimes terms people with disabilities or deformities as "freaks," the characters of this novel use "norm" as a derogatory word for the able-bodied community. These characters are completely unapologetic and see themselves as beautiful, not disabled. As Olympia states, "we are masterpieces. Why would we want to change into assembly line items?" (282). This line essentially sums up the entire crux of Katherine Dunn's novel and highlights the problematic notion of normality. What is normal is not worldwide, and it cannot be answered with the same definitive answers as might be given to questions such as "What is today's date?" or "What is Sweden's capital?" Because there is no definitive

definition for what is normal, then perhaps it is time for society to allow certain oddities or inconsistencies into the mix, and for authors to incorporate disabled characters into their fiction without attempting to teach a moral lesson or to have the character overcome the disability or die trying.

Chapter Four: Conclusion

After studying Indra Sinha's *Animal's People* and Katherine Dunn's *Geek Love* with a specific focus on the portrayal of disabled characters, this study has found that these two modern authors are leading the way into a more accepting, knowledgeable time both in literature and in society. Although these novels still contain traces of the problems inherent in previous works involving disability, namely the absence of any morals in some of Katherine Dunn's characters, for the most part these novels indicate a shift in attitudes and beliefs concerning disabled characters. Also, with regard to Dunn's novel, one could argue that her complete dismissal of "reality" as a construction of fallible human minds necessitates the absence of morality, for morality must be just as fallible and relative as every other manmade "reality." Indra Sinha and Katherine Dunn break the stereotypes often placed on disabled characters by letting their characters have a strong sense of independence and confidence without overcoming seeing defeated by their disabilities, and without being either highly moral or completely amoral. Both novels have a disabled first-person narrator and both deal with the issues of normalcy and abnormality, accepting a difference or changing to fit the mold of society, and ultimately taking pride in themselves just as they are.

The different settings, however, provide interesting contrasts between the two novels. Sinha's setting is familiar from a sociological standpoint, meaning that readers are accustomed to a society in which disabled or deformed individuals are considered abnormal, while Dunn's novel flips this perspective, at least from the main character's point of view and that of her family. As for the actual, physical settings of the novels, Sinha's novel has more sociopolitical or worldwide implications because it takes place in

an impoverished part of India that suffers as a result of poisonous pollutants. Dunn does not address these larger issues in her novel, and so sociopolitical ramifications are not quite considered in her work. Regardless of these differences, however, both novels point toward an advancement in understanding and appropriate representation for the disabled community. The authors create characters who defy stereotypes and clichés that mar the representation of most disabled characters in fiction, and hopefully many more authors will follow them. A change is coming in literature and other media that will hopefully change society. In books, in television, and even in dolls on the shelves of children's toy stores, disabled people are finally receiving representation in a manner that neither demonizes nor deifies, but rather, simply humanizes.

Each of the protagonists deals with isolation and loneliness as a result of the societal reactions to their respective disabilities. Animal and Olympia share certain qualities in their attitudes toward their disabilities, while they also have vastly different opinions and beliefs as well. Both possess a certain arrogance, a belief (or at least a front) that they are better, smarter, and/or more interesting than other people; however, it seems that this attitude is affected on Animal's part, at least to some degree. He may be compensating for what he initially believes is his inferior body by claiming to have a superior mind. In both novels, the narrators are writing or speaking to a specific audience, rather than a general, unnamed one. Animal tells his story over a series of tapes and often draws attention to the audience, saying that he imagines what they look like and how they might react to certain things Animal says and does. He loves to shock his listeners, showing contempt for societal beliefs of "propriety." As he changes throughout the novel, he gradually becomes warmer with his audience and even begins to regard them as

friends. Similarly, he befriends the American doctor although he was initially wary of her. Animal's changing attitudes, his initial distrust for everyone around him, but particularly the Americans, and his eventual trust and friendship with those around him indicates that he does not enjoy being isolated. Although he speaks and behaves arrogantly, there remains a longing to reach out, to belong to some group of people.

The biggest way in which Animal deals with his isolation, though, is through humor and irreverence. He learns to stop caring so much about what others think, which is meant to save him from feeling hurt or resentful toward people. Animal states, "If this self of mine doesn't belong in this world, I'll be a world complete in myself" (Sinha 350). Animal effectively denounces the rest of the world if it will not accept him the way he is. It seems, however, that despite this apparent complacency with his situation, Animal still does desire a connection with other people. Although he certainly does form tentative connections with a few characters in the novel, the reader must keep in mind the structure of the story, and the fact that the audience actually plays a role in the story and, in fact, perhaps serves as the most important connection for animal. Throughout the book, Animal refers to his unknown, unseen audience as "Eyes," because he imagines a person's eyes watching him as he tells his story (12-14). Trying to focus on one imagined person, and then conveying his story to that one person indicates Animal's desire to connect. Although he still maintains a certain distance by calling the imagined figure "Eyes" rather than some other, more usual human name (yet another societal construct), he conveys his desire to talk to someone, to have someone hear and understand his story. When reflecting on his reasons for recording his thoughts, Animal states, "I will tell this story, I thought, and that way I'll find out what the end should be" (365). Like many

people, Animal desires to speak to "Eyes" to learn about himself and reach some form of personal conclusion or awareness while telling his listener about his life. His connection to "Eyes" is, of course, completely fabricated in that no audience is physically there with him, but Animal feels that connection nonetheless and it is still beneficial to him in his isolation.

Despite Animal's insistence on his uniqueness, he still does long for some human connection. His natural desire for a human connection indicates that, although Animal manages to accept his disability without fixing it or rising above it, he is still affected by the reactions of society at large. He will always be somewhat lonely and the general public will always view him as "different" or "strange" in comparison to able-bodied individuals. Therefore, Sinha suggests that, even though Animal managed to go against societal expectation with regards to the surgery, he is still acutely aware of his loneliness. He has come to terms with his disability, but this does not mean that the rest of the world shares his view. In the end, societal reactions still maintain their toxic hold on reality, a view similarly expressed in *Geek Love*.

In *Geek Love*, Olympia turns to family in her isolation from the rest of the world as she grows up with her parents' "freak show." As an adult, however, she lives in the same apartment complex as her daughter, Miranda, but conceals her identity. Olympia keeps a close watch on her daughter and eventually reveals her identity in a letter that Miranda receives after Olympia dies. The importance of family is central to this novel, yet it manifests itself in strange ways; there does not seem to be much love in the family. Rather, there is competition and a desire for power that eventually tears the family apart. Still, though Olympia feels isolation, she does not feel shame. She is proud of her family,

even after the horrible massacre in which Chick kills almost all of his relatives. In the posthumous letter to her daughter, Olympia writes, "I can't be sure what the trunk (of family possessions) will mean to you, or the news that you aren't alone, that you are one of us. Yet I hope that someday you will come to collect us all [...], open our metal jars and pour all the Binewski dust together" (Dunn 348). Although isolated from the world, Olympia feels very much part of her family, so much so that she desires to quite literally be part of them in death. Loneliness seems only to become a major part of her life after her family disperses and she lives near to Miranda. She longs to be close to her daughter, yet now that she is in a place away from the "Freak" culture, a place in which Olympia is very much considered abnormal, she resists the urge to reach out to Miranda. Thus, she feels truly lonely and isolated in her adulthood, surrounded by people who are not like her.

Despite individual differences, members within a family still maintain some commonality, and when the rest of the world does not understand, going home and being with family are common reactions seen both in literature and in real life. As an adult, Olympia no longer has that familial connection, thus feels truly alone. She deals with this through her ability to listen to strangers who wish to speak with her. Olympia says, "People talk easily to me. They think a bald albino hunchback dwarf can't hide anything [...]. They go too far because I am one listener who is in no position to judge or find fault" (150). In an odd way, Olympia's isolation and loneliness are quelled by the openness of strangers. At the same time, however, that openness highlights how alone she truly is and how society sees her as not quite human, being in "no position to judge." Judging, of course, is a fundamental part of being human. Assuming Olympia cannot

judge, then, suggests that she lacks certain human qualities. It seems almost that Olympia does not mind being alone. Although she longs for a connection with her daughter, she seems to believe that her daughter is somehow better off without her--at least while Olympia is alive. While Miranda is painting a portrait of Olympia, Olympia muses, "Watching her work is comfortable. I feel invisible again. She is not interested in my identity. She doesn't notice it" (30). Olympia's position as a mother puts her in a vastly different situation from Animal in *Animal's People*. Olympia is torn between the natural desire to be part of her child's life and the equally natural desire to provide her child with the best possible life, which, Olympia believes, is only attainable if Miranda remains unaware of their connection while Olympia remains alive. Animal, still young at the end of Sinha's novel, has an undetermined future. Sinha in no way implies that Animal's future is particularly bright--indeed, because he remains disabled and remains in India suggests quite the opposite--but Animal has only himself to look after as far as the readers know. His actions and decisions are for his benefit, which certainly liberates him to live, to a degree, however he chooses. Olympia, on the other hand, grew up as part of a tight-knit family, therefore it makes sense that she would have a sense of familial duty as an adult. Just as Sinha indicates that society's beliefs and ideals still reign supreme, Dunn suggests the same through the end of *Geek Love*. Olympia ultimately refrains from revealing her true identity to her daughter for fear that Miranda will be somehow afflicted by the truth, that because her mother is "abnormal" in society's eyes, Miranda will suffer. In the end, both Sinha's and Dunn's novels represent forward movements in the field of disability studies while also admitting that the dominance of general society's acceptance of what is right and wrong, normal and abnormal remains an uphill battle.

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