



AUTHOR PHOTO BY SWEET SHOTS BY LONI

KALA GODIN

YOUNG ADULT BOOKS WRITTEN BY AUTHORS LIKE ME...

Are almost impossible to find

No matter who you are, writing a book is hard. Publishing that book? That's even harder.

Publishing is a little like fashion. People always ask the same questions.

What's trending?

And,

Where does this fit in the market?

Let me give you some background here. I'm 24 and I live with a severe physical disability called Spinal Muscular Atrophy Type 2 (SMA). This means I am a quadriplegic and a wheelchair user. If you do not know what SMA means, that's fine. I have no use of my arms or legs. Someone else has to help me with everything I do in my day-to-day life.

I have always been a voracious reader. But the first time I read a book with a character similar to me was *Me Before You* by Jojo Moyes, published in 2012. I would have been around 14. Spoiler alert: the disabled character chooses Medical Assistance in Dying (MAID). I remember people's outrage surrounding this book. *Why would you have your disabled character choose to end his life? The author doesn't have any experience with this.*

I never judged the book for either of these criticisms. A story was told, and it's valid. The next book I read about someone like me was in 2019, *Laughing at My Nightmare* by Shane Burcaw, a memoir by a man living with SMA. This book is hilarious.

It's now 2022, and I haven't read another book with a character like me, or anything written by somebody like me, not for lack of trying. Books with characters like me are hard to find. Books written by authors like me are almost impossible to find. Disabled writers are often pigeonholed as memoir writers, as though we don't have other stories to tell.

I've wanted to be an author since I read *Twilight* by Stephenie Meyer. That sounds cliché, but it's true. I wanted to do what she had done. People cared about those characters so much. She also changed the YA genre. Things didn't have to be the same as before. Vampires could eat animals instead. They could sparkle too, because, why not?

Literature changes with time, just like everything else in life. Nosferatu and Dracula are incredibly different. Literature will always adapt. We've seen it. At

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one time, women had to publish under more masculine pseudonyms. Now, they dominate YA.

There's more LGBTQ2S+ and BIPOC inclusion than ever before. And yes, there has been more inclusion of disabled people. However, few YA stories have characters who have severe physical disabilities. An article by Kelly Jensen, “20 Must-Read YA Books with Disabled

Characters” *Book Riot* 2019, lists books with a disabled character:

- A physical disability, not wheelchair dependent: 10
- A mental illness or neurodivergence: 8
- An allergy: 1
- Wheelchair users: 2

Source: bookriot.com/ya-books-with-disabled-characters/

A few of these overlap. Let me break down the two books with wheelchair users. One is the memoir that I mentioned. The second book has a character who has no legs, but has entire control of his upper body. Disclaimer: I’m not saying any of this to make anyone feel as though their disability is “less than.” That is not the case. Every disability is valid. I’m only breaking this down to show unequal representation. I went through 15 different other lists to find one that has a character or author in a wheelchair.

In 2020, The Publishers Association (UK) stated their disability and inclusion report had risen to eight percent (arkbound.com/disability-representation-in-the-publishing-workforce/). The Diversity Baseline (U.S.) in 2019 stated that 11 percent of people working in publishing self-identified as disabled (blog.leeandlow.com/2020/01/28/2019diversity-baselinesurvey/).

Breaking that down further, 22 percent of that 11 percent self-identify as physically disabled. What does that mean? That means that in the U.S., 2.42 percent of people working in publishing are physically disabled. Most of them are book reviewers.

These are incredibly low numbers. Yes, they have increased since previous years, but this still isn’t equality in the book publishing industry.

On social media platforms like Twitter and Instagram, people are open about their experiences with publishing, particularly the querying process. I’ve noticed that agents don’t want characters who are “too disabled.” They find the characters hard to relate to, specifically for the general public. They don’t know how to sell these stories and there’s no spot in the current YA publishing market. Simply because our stories haven’t been given a chance.

Here’s the thing though: you can make a spot at the table for us. It’s as simple as taking a chance. Maybe we’ll even surprise you. ■

Kala Godin is a 24-year-old author living with a physical disability (Spinal Muscular Atrophy Type 2) and is a wheelchair user. She’s had two poetry collections published, as well as several short horror stories. Halloween is her favourite holiday. Godin likes tattoos, chocolate, and witchcraft.