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ISSN 2278-9529
Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal
www.galaxyimrj.com

Beyond the Gaze: Portrayal of Disability and Identity in the Narrative Landscape of *Not If I See You First* by Eric Lindstrom

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<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14108475>

Article History: Submitted-22/09/2024, Revised-15/10/2024, Accepted-20/10/2024, Published-31/10/2024.

Abstract:

It is a subject of debate that the contemporary period is witnessing an unparalleled level of acceptance and endorsement for individuals with disabilities. This era marks a greater awareness of the challenges faced by people with disabilities. Over the years, there has been a significant increase in the number of publishing outlets that focus on disability titles, as well as a surge in the popularity of Disability Literature (both Fiction and Non-Fiction), particularly from the 1990s onwards. It has created a much-needed space for disabled individuals to articulate their experiences and has also brought in a wider audience. As a result, novels and plays featuring protagonists with disabilities or themes related to disability have become increasingly prevalent. The literary and cinematic points of view have also been changing positively to create self-sufficient characters, who are not prisoners of their disability, instead they establish that it can be used to their advantage. Eric Lindstrom's novel *Not If I See You First* delves into the intricacies of disability and the pervasive issue of societal devaluation faced by individuals with disabilities. The protagonist, Parker Grant, who is blind, navigates a world that often underestimates her abilities and diminishes her worth based on her disability. From Parker's perspective, the novel illuminates the challenges of living with a disability in a society that frequently overlooks or marginalizes individuals with disability. This paper through the lens of Disability Identity theory traces how Parker's characterization defies stereotypical portrayals of blindness as a limitation, instead, it presents her as a complex individual whose blindness shapes her identity and worldview. She has been portrayed as an individual whose identity is not confined within the constraint of her disability. Parker's character also challenges the devaluation that people with disability face when she decides to join her school's track team.

Keywords: Disability, Devaluation, Blindness, Young Adult Fiction, Awareness, Disability Literature.

Disability representation in literature holds a significant historical value, tracing back to ancient myths and epics. Unfortunately, characters with disabilities were often portrayed as symbols of divine punishment or moral defect. In Greek mythology, figures such as Oedipus and Tiresias illustrated the tragic consequences of blindness. Meanwhile, religious texts typically associate disability with sin or impurity. These early depictions established a pattern of stigmatization and devaluation that persisted for centuries. As far as the history of representation of disabled individuals goes, they have been reflected in a negative light, as plot devices to further the storyline, as lessons for non-disabled protagonists, or as sources of inspiration or reflection. This pattern perpetuates harmful stereotypes and reinforces the notion that disabled individuals should be pitied, feared, and judged based only on their disability rather than looking at their strengths, personalities, and attributes outside of their disability. However, there are instances of refreshing representation that challenge this status quo by providing authentic and empowering depictions of disabled characters. This kind of representation not only benefits disabled readers to identify with the characters positively but also raises awareness among non-disabled audiences. Young Adult Fiction is an emerging genre of fiction that has seen an accelerated number of positive portrayals of disabled individuals. Young adult fiction, as a distinct genre emerged in the mid-twentieth century, although its roots are traced back further. An essential aspect of disability representation in young adult fiction is the nuanced depiction of disabled characters. This entails capturing their strengths, weaknesses, ambitions, and emotions in a complex and comprehensive manner, irrespective of their disabilities. Throughout literary history, disabled characters have been subjected to devaluation, marginalization, and stereotyping, with changing times the narrative has been shifting toward a more positive portrayal of disabled individuals. Contemporary young adult novels feature disabled characters as protagonists with strengths, vulnerabilities, hobbies, and personalities irrespective of their disability. The characters are well-rounded with abilities unique to their personalities. They make decisions, mistakes, and moves that depict their thinking, approach, and how sometimes their disability shapes their ultimate character arc. One such character is Parker Grant, our protagonist from *Not If I See You First* by Eric Lindstrom.

Not If I See You First by Eric Lindstrom is a young adult novel focusing on Parker Grant, a visually impaired teenager who grapples with loss, emotions, societal expectations, and prejudices. Parker challenges stereotypes and sheds light on the complexities of navigating the world without sight. Lindstrom's nuanced exploration of Parker's experiences delves into the emotional and psychological aspects of living with blindness, highlighting the importance of authenticity in storytelling. Parker, throughout the novel, has not been victimized by the author. She stands up for herself and is confident. She is not a very likeable protagonist at the start. Parker is not someone who stays in her lane or is bothered by people's perception of her. Instead, she has this dynamic personality that makes her stand out. Parker is loud and is not afraid to express her discomfort over things or opinions. She thinks she can get away with being mean and rude to people because she has a visual impairment, which points to using disability in her favour. The first few chapters of the novel establish that at the age of seven, in a car accident, she lost her mother and her eyesight as well. Parker's father was also found dead with an overdose and nobody knew if he committed suicide or if the overdose was a miscalculated mistake. Parker Grant's character has depth because she has gone through some traumatic incidents in her life, but she decides not to let her disability power over her emotional sensitivity. After discovering a bottle of pills and traces of medicine in her father's dead body, the insurance company refuses to pay his life insurance because of which Parker's aunt Celia and her family move in with her. This situation that Parker deals with here is complex because she not only has to process her grief of losing her father but also navigate around and settle with Aunt Celia and her family. The initial impression of Parker that readers form after reading the first few chapters is that she is a blunt and assertive high school student with strict rules for others to follow. She is unapologetically direct in her speech and believes that her blindness has contributed to her intelligence. She has made this set of rules, which extends to infinity, and she wants everyone to follow them irrespective of the fact that not many people know about these rules. If someone breaks these rules, he/she is shunned from her life forever. She considers these rules to be not as much as rules but as common knowledge that people should know and abide by if they are talking to or are in the vicinity of a visually impaired individual like her. Some of these rules include not deceiving her using her blindness, not touching her cane or moving her things, not helping her unless she wants to be helped, not talking extra loud with her because she is blind not deaf, not speaking for her, not treating her as if, she is stupid, and the most important one is betrayal which is unforgivable and she doesn't give second chances. The rules symbolize the walls that she has created around herself because of the loss she endured and the pain she felt. She has distanced herself from people by creating these rules

to avoid getting too attached or hurt. Parker, initially, is assertive, knows what she wants, tries to communicate but not well enough, and sometimes comes off as unapproachable. These qualities make her like any other teenager going through high school. The author has done a commendable job in making the character of Parker realistic, not entirely defined by her blindness, resilient, and fiercely independent. Lindstrom has not only endowed Parker with an identity beyond her blindness but has also meticulously developed supporting characters with the same level of care and detail as he has with Parker and her agency. Parker's social network consists of a small, trusted cohort of individuals. This group includes Sarah, who is noted for her emotional maturity and availability. Faith, although somewhat uptight, shares a complex relationship with Parker. Conversely, Molly is characterized by her wisdom, understanding, and adept listening skills. Apart from these characters, even those who are mentioned just for the sake of the plotline have also been artistically created and described. One such character is Molly's sister, Dana. In her discussion, Molly asserts that the subject possesses the favorable genetic traits of her family and is a fashion model. However, despite her success, she experiences feelings of isolation and apprehension about being exploited for her physical appearance and wealth, leading her to confide in Molly through tearful phone conversations. Lindstrom subtly suggests that even individuals who achieve success and possess everything they desire may encounter circumstances beyond their control. Some things play the way they do to shape our personalities and build our character. Molly and Parker become friends because Molly is assigned her guide in school. Trust is something that doesn't come quickly for Parker because she has been deceived in the past. So, when she tells Molly about that unimaginably horrific event that scars her, she says, "The suffocating feeling of trusting someone so completely, drinking them in, and having them suddenly turn to burning hot poison" (Lindstrom 62). This traumatic event she describes to Molly is about a boy, Scott Kilpatrick, who has been Parker's best friend since fourth grade. In a later segment of the novel, Scott provides his perspective, shedding light on the fact that the situation was not entirely his fault, as both individuals were naive thirteen-year-old teenagers at the time. Despite Scott's attempt to communicate his viewpoint, Parker remains unwilling to listen, resulting in a prolonged period of silence between them. It is not until high school, when Scott transfers to Parker's school, that they resume communication. The specific incident in question serves as a pivotal moment in the novel, significantly influencing Parker's perception of the world and those in it. Scott Kilpatrick is the love interest. In a scene where they are thirteen years old in a room in the school and are going to kiss, Parker realizes they are not alone. Prior to Scott being able to convey his perspective, she presumes that Scott intentionally brought his friends into the

classroom so that they could catch a glimpse of them. This leads her to completely cut Scott from her life and assume the worst in other people. She extends her disbelief to everyone after that incident. Scott endeavored to elucidate to her that his actions stemmed from foolishness rather than an intention to defraud her. In his portrayal of Parker, Lindstrom skillfully depicts her as a young, naive teenager who experiences heartbreak, as well as a visually impaired person whose trust in others is shaken. The central plot of the novel revolves around trust issues and lost love interests. However, the novel delves deeper into the life of a visually impaired teenager as she navigates through the challenges of high school and life. Lindstrom has made the portrayal of Parker realistic and her outbursts valid. The novel portrays Parker's growth through the perspective of disability identity theory, highlighting the process of self-acceptance and empowerment. This theory highlights the significance of accepting disability as a fundamental aspect of one's identity instead of something to conceal or conquer. Throughout the narrative, Parker refuses to be pitied or treated differently, displaying her ability to shape her own story and defy societal norms regarding disability. Her personal growth reflects her efforts to confront internalized ableism, defy limiting stereotypes, and come to terms with her blindness as an essential aspect of her identity rather than a defining characteristic. The novel delves into Parker's relationships and her evolving self-perception, portraying the process of developing a positive disability identity while highlighting themes of resilience, self-reliance, and the intricate nature of human connections. This exploration of identity and relationships provides a powerful and insightful narrative that resonates with readers on a deep and emotional level.

Eric Lindstrom has created a myriad of characters throughout the narrative who represent the various types of people in society and their reactions toward disability. Isaac Walters and Gerald Gibbons are two bullies who were present in the classroom that day with Parker and Scott, and they also bully Parker in high school. They take her phone and make comments about her appearance and personality. Through these characters, Eric shows that some people simply do not change and choose to remain ignorant. Whereas characters like Molly and Jason Freeborn, whom Parker goes out with for a bit, are individuals who understand their boundaries and are respectful, empathetic, and attentive. They do not treat disabled individuals any differently than non-disabled people. For instance, when Parker goes to buy new shoes for running, Jason does not make her feel uncomfortable or ask her questions related to her disability he simply helps her like he would any other individual. On the contrary, Aunt Celia's treatment of Parker, by inviting her to accompany her to buy shoes due to a fear of

Parker being scammed, creates a sense of differentiation. Paradoxically, Aunt Celia allows her daughter Shelia to venture to the mall unaccompanied. In the narrative, Aunt Celia expresses apprehensions regarding Parker's unsupervised morning activities and his desire to join the track team. Through her character, Eric elucidates the phenomenon of individuals who, without malicious intent, allow their concerns to proliferate, leading to the devaluation and discrimination of people with disabilities. Additionally, Parker's cousin Sheila initially shows indifference toward him upon relocating to her family's residence. Eric makes Sheila's character insensitive towards Parker at the start of the novel because he wants his readers to understand the meaning of empathy and sensitivity in the context of treating people with disabilities. When Sheila picks up Parker from school, she comments on Molly's body and how she can lose a few pounds. The character of Sheila is important because Sheila learns and changes her behaviour when Parker communicates about her being indifferent to her needs as a disabled individual. Parker says, "What I want is to be treated like everyone else" (Lindstrom 99).

The story also highlights the inclusivity of other characters as they navigate Parker's blindness with varying degrees of sensitivity, understanding, and respect. For example, Parker's best friend, Sarah, demonstrates genuine inclusivity by respecting Parker's boundaries and adhering to her rules without infantilizing her. Sarah engages with Parker as an equal, offering support when needed without making her blindness the focal point of their friendship. This dynamic showcases an authentic, inclusive relationship centred on mutual respect.

Conversely, characters like Scott, Parker's former boyfriend, undergo a more complex journey toward inclusivity. His earlier actions, which caused Parker to feel betrayed, stemmed from a misunderstanding of genuine respect and autonomy for a person with a disability. As the story unfolds, Scott shows growth by learning to interact with Parker in a way that honours her independence and acknowledges her experiences at the same time not making her feel different. Several characters initially find it challenging to meet Parker's expectations. For instance, Molly initially struggles with Parker's rules but eventually learns to adjust and appreciate them. This transformation in how characters interact with Parker highlights broader themes of disability awareness and inclusivity, emphasizing that true inclusion necessitates a readiness to learn, adjust, and honour the experiences of individuals with disabilities.

As the novel unfolds, Parker's character undergoes significant development, growing more mature, understanding, and less mean, while retaining her fierce confidence. Parker

exhibits her own set of fears and vulnerabilities, humanizing her and making her relatable to other teenagers. Finding solace in her morning runs at Gunther Field, she seeks refuge in this routine. Another noteworthy character is Coach Underhill, a sports teacher at her school, who stands out for his supportive nature and his ability to assist Parker without patronizing her or making her feel different. Parker runs at six in the morning in Gunther's field so no one can see her running. Running helps her mentally and physically. During one of her running sessions, Coach Underhill takes note of her performance without her knowing. Subsequently, when Parker is sitting with her friends in the school cafeteria, Coach Underhill approaches her and inquires about her running. Parker's reaction to the question is noticeable as her face becomes pale because she wasn't aware, she was being watched that morning. When Coach Underhill asks why she does not want people to know about her running, she says,

"Please don't! Running in Gunther Field is a major ingredient in my sanity soup. If people find out and come to gawk, or worse, come in so I can't even be sure if the field is empty...I'd have no way of knowing they were there like this morning. I'd have to stop. It's just private. And I am not blind to the fact that it is a freak show. I don't want an audience. Please don't tell anyone" (Lindstrom 55).

This dialogue demonstrates Parker's vulnerability, which is both separate from and intertwined with her disability. Through the framework of Disability Identity Theory, we can observe that despite Parker's confidence, she views herself in a negative light in relation to her running and the movement of her body while running, as she is unable to see herself running. Additionally, she is self-conscious about others observing her while she runs. She thinks she cannot run for her track team because she has made this image of herself in her mind that she is not good at it. Everyone else thinks she runs like the wind, but she has limited herself. Running for her is about maintaining her mental health. It also represents something that will always connect her and her father because he taught her to run and gave her pointers. Running may also symbolize a way of Parker processing grief every day, a little bit. When she runs in front of everyone, with Molly guiding her on the phone, it marks a milestone for her. She also accepts Scott's apology, apologizes for her lack of communication, and tries to move on knowing that is what her father wanted for her to do.

When Parker inquired why Coach Underhill didn't speak to her while she was running, his response showcased a profound understanding of disability, a clear respect for boundaries, and a recognition of the importance of treating disabled individuals with equality. He says,

“You have had no reason to believe I’m a teacher instead of some random stranger talking to you with no one else around. I didn’t want you to feel unsafe” (Lindstrom 55). Then, Coach Underhill inquires about Parker’s blindness and asks her if she has had any professional training. All the while, keeping the conversation disability friendly. Parker has experienced a range of emotions throughout the conversation, but she understands that Coach Underhill is doing his best and cuts him some slack. The entire conversation between Parker and Coach Underhill in the cafeteria is written and staged to be as realistic as possible, highlighting Parker’s reactions and portraying Coach Underhill as an inclusive character. When Coach Underhill takes a practice session to gauge how fast Parker can run. Parker surprises everyone because she runs fast. This particular segment of the book sheds light on the limitations faced by this community, which are often overlooked or misunderstood by society. Lindstrom highlights the societal restrictions that are imposed upon people with disabilities. In the past, visually impaired runners relied on guide wires to navigate their path. These wires were connected to both the guide and the runner, and the guide would call out to the runner if they veered off course. Nevertheless, it was not ideal because it slowed the runners. In modern times, visually impaired runners are provided with guide runners to assist them during races. The guide runners can either hold hands with the visually impaired runners or be connected via a rope. Visually impaired runners must participate in races with a guide runner. Parker says,

“It stinks. First off, you need a partner or you can’t run, which sucks all by itself. Then your guide needs to be able to keep up so already you are admitting you can’t win because you can’t enter unless you bring someone who is faster than you. So much for empowering the disabled” (Lindstrom 140).

Looking through the Social Model of Disability, here the problem lies in the societal structure rather than with the disabled individual, aka Parker. It is the lack of accessibility, of not having a more convenient, inclusive system that supports disabled individuals to participate and showcase their talent, in this case of Parker not being able to run alone because she is fast, and finding a partner who can keep up with her is difficult.

Given the preceding analysis, it is safe to say that Eric Lindstrom has created a very compelling, confident character of Parker. Parker is not limited because of her visual impairment; instead, she considers herself smart. She has been through a lot of physical and mental pain and yet she tries to be courageous, makes jokes, and is full of wit. Parker has her own set of insecurities. Although Lindstrom has acknowledged her incredible qualities that

make her independent and fierce, he has also pointed out through specific conversations that Parker is ultimately still a teenager in high school. Lindstrom has not made Parker a supercrip. Instead, because of her emotional teenage-level limitations, he has made her realistic and relatable. For instance, in a conversation with Molly, Parker says, “I’m sure people look at me all the time. The resident hallway obstacle. The bull in the China shop” (Lindstrom 59).

Lindstrom succeeds in crafting a compelling narrative that resonates with readers on a profound emotional level while advocating for more excellent representation and understanding of diverse experiences in literature. *Not If I See You First* contributes to the growing body of disability literature by foregrounding the importance of authentic representation and diverse voices within storytelling. Lindstrom's novel, through the character of Parker, expertly explores themes of independence, resilience, and identity, both within and outside the context of disability. By featuring a blind protagonist in a young adult novel, Lindstrom challenges literary conventions and encourages discussions around diversity and inclusion. This groundbreaking approach paves the way for a more inclusive and diverse representation in literature. Eric Lindstrom has crafted a compelling narrative that entertains and educates readers on the complexities of living with blindness through his poignant storytelling and well-rounded characters. *Not If I See You First* stands as a testament to the power of literature in fostering empathy, promoting diversity, and sparking meaningful conversations about inclusion for all individuals. It is also essential to recognize the depth and complexity of portraying a character with visual impairment. The novel challenges traditional stereotypes and perceptions surrounding blindness, offering a nuanced portrayal that delves into the protagonist's inner thoughts, emotions, and struggles beyond their disability. It provides a compelling and humanizing perspective that encourages readers to reconsider their preconceived notions about individuals with visual impairments. The narrative invites readers to empathize with the protagonist's experiences and gain a deeper understanding of the unique challenges they face in navigating relationships, society, and personal growth.

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