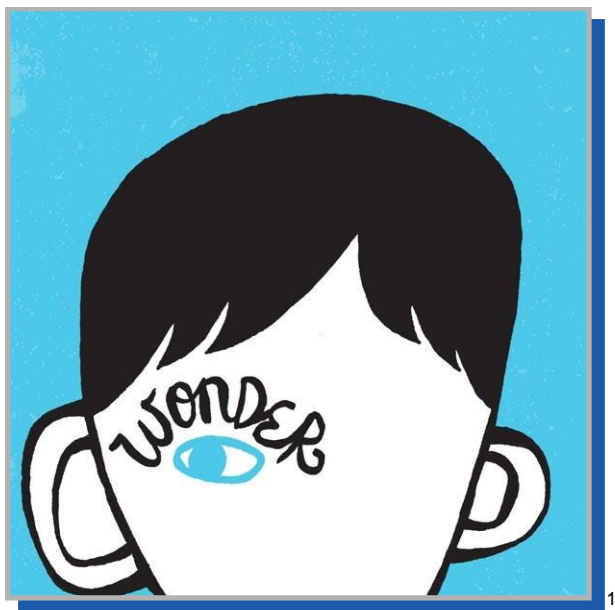


WONDER: A BOOK REVIEW

BY NATALIE GOVIND



The novel *Wonder*, written by R.J. Palacio (2012) was inspired by the author's fortuitous encounter while on a holiday with her children. While buying an ice cream they saw a little girl with facial disfigurement. Palacio's children reacted so badly that she began to think about what the child must encounter on a daily basis.

Wonder is the story of August (Auggie) Pullman a delightful ten-year-old boy that has Treacher Collins Syndrome, a genetic disorder that causes cranio-facial deformities. Auggie dreams of being '*ordinary*', but even after nearly thirty surgeries, his facial disfigurements are so pronounced that people who see him for the first time do '*that look-away thing*' to hide their shock. '*Whatever you're thinking, it's probably worse*' Auggie says about his face at the beginning of the book.

Auggie had been home schooled because of his parent's concerns about how children might respond to his appearance. Auggie's mother has decided that it is now time for him to enrol in a mainstream school but Auggie is terrified about how the other students might react to him. *Wonder* describes Auggie's experiences as he transitions from home school to the fifth grade, as well as the experiences of his classmates, teachers and family.

As the book unfolds, Palacio captures the characters' perspectives by switching narrators every few chapters. For example, Auggie's sister Olivia (Via) describes how she wrestles with her resentment, guilt and concern, saying:

'We circle around him [Auggie] like he's still the baby he used to be.'

¹ *Wonder* [online image]. Retrieved September 9, 2018 from: http://2.bp.blogspot.com/-tfV93yg7aPM/Tycw9XkmoCI/AAAAAAAAhSA/0LSMpJ_k8QI/w1200-h630-p-k-no-nu/wonder.jpg

The fifth-grade politics play out and many of the children laugh at Auggie behind his back. There is a 'game' called the plague going around where children 'catch' a 'disease' if they touch him. Julian, who leads the bullying attacks, is the sort of child that adults find charming, but in reality, he is cruel to anyone who is different. Fortunately, Julian's bullying campaign doesn't succeed, and several of Auggie's classmates demonstrate support for him by defending him when students from another school attack him because of his appearance. In the end, Auggie has a successful year at school, and receives an award for courage, which he doesn't understand but says:

'If they want to give me a medal for being me, I'll take it.'

DISCUSSION/REFLECTION QUESTIONS

In an interview with Palacio in 2017, she says:

'The theme of kindness runs throughout the book. Kindness is compassion, empathy, tolerance, forgiveness — and love — for those who are different. All of those things, in the times we're living in now, seem to be ridiculed. What happened to kindness toward refugees? Kindness toward people who need health care? Kindness toward people who can't afford basic necessities? The mark of a great country is how well it takes care of its weakest citizens.'

1. What literary devices does Palacio use to elicit empathic responses by the readers of Wonder?
2. Why do you believe empathy an important character strength, particularly for healthcare professionals?
3. Do you think people are naturally empathic, or is it something that we need to be taught (or both)?
4. Palacio's goal in writing Wonder was to promote empathy, which she calls '*the antithesis of bullying*' (Walsh, 2013, p. 1). In the book, Julian is an unlikeable character. Why do you think he behaves in such a cruel and unkind manner towards Auggie?
5. What does Via mean she says, '*I'm always going to be the sister of a kid with a birth defect; that's not the issue. I just don't always want to be defined that way.*'
6. What did you think of Via's character in the book? Did you empathise with her?
7. What sacrifices does Via have to make in her relationship with her parents?
8. Why do you think that Via, who is so protective of Auggie, is at the same time resentful of him?
9. Do you think Via's reaction is typical of siblings of a person with a disability/deformity?

RELATED STUDY

At the end of Wonder, Mr Tushman, the school principal, explains the importance of the award given to Auggie:

'Courage. Kindness. Friendship. Character. These are the qualities that define us as human beings, and propel us, on occasion, to greatness.'

Guarisco and Freeman (2015) suggest that the prosocial qualities Principal Tushman describes require empathy: the ability to recognize, understand, and share another's feelings. Consequently, these authors conducted a study to determine if reading Wonder, combined with related classroom activities on characterisation, perspective, and empathy, could increase the empathy levels of 80

sixth grade students. Davis' (1983) Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI) (Davis, 1983), a validated measure of general empathic tendencies was used pre-post intervention.

Students' Perspective-taking (one of the IRI sub-scales) scores showed a small but significant (5.8%) increase after the intervention, compared to their initial score. Although, the scores of the other empathy subscales did not change significantly, the researchers concluded that participation in the empathy unit allowed students to see themselves as more able to adopt other peoples' psychological viewpoints.

LINK

Wonder was recreated into a film by Stephen Chbosky in 2017. This is a trailer to the film:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7fbaTI604KA>

This SBS Insight episode presents the varied views of sibling carers - people whose brothers or sisters have a disability, and the complex mix of associated emotions (love, loyalty, shame, angers, guilt, resentment and grief):
<https://www.sbs.com.au/ondemand/video/981972035757/insight-sibling-carers>

REFERENCES

Davis, M. (1983). Measuring individual differences in empathy: Evidence for a multidimensional approach. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. 44, 113–126.

Guarisco, M. & Freeman, L. (2015). The Wonder of Empathy: Using Palacio's Novel to Teach Perspective Taking. *The ALAN Review*. Fall. 56-68.

Palacio, R. (2012). *Wonder*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

Walsh, C. (2013) Schoolyard scourge: *Talk on bullying covers impact of technology, prevention efforts*. Retrieved from: <http://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2013/03/schoolyardscourge/>

This review forms one component of the Virtual Empathy Museum funded by an Australian Technology Network Grants Scheme for Excellence in Learning and Teaching (2018) -
<https://www.virtualempathymuseum.com.au/>