The Future is Disabled.

Science fiction (SF) is often seen as a progressive genre due to its speculations on future societies. That progressiveness seems to be lacking when it comes to the portrayal of people with disabilities (PWD) due to SF's reliance on the medical model of disability. This model implies PWD need to be cured so they can lead productive lives. For SF to be progressive in portraying PWD, the social and complex model of disability should dominate. This essay will argue that SF's claim to be progressive is diminished by its frequent use of the medical model of disability.

Many fans of SF say it is progressive, some say it is too progressive, as shown in recent debates about the Hugo Awards (Italie, 2015). Author Ken MacLeod (2003, 231) states, "Science fiction is essentially the literature of progress", while writer/editor Adam Roberts (2013) argues there is a split between left-wing progressives interested in a better future and conservatives looking to the values of the past. Author/academic Noga Applebaum (2010, cited in Jonathan Ball, 2011) thinks young adult SF's technophobia makes it more conservative. Author/Academic Ball tries to counter Applebaum by saying young adults can still read more progressive adult SF. Author/academic Aaron Santesso (2014) warns the fascist conservatism of American pulp fiction SF from the 1920-1940s still subtly influences the genre today. He argues that SF consists of many sub-genres and that certain tropes have the "DNA of fascism" (Santesso, 2014, p. 139). The progressiveness of SF also depends on the author; some, like Kim Stanley Robinson, are widely acknowledged as politically progressive, while others, like Orson Scott Card, are more conservative. Clearly, not all SF is socially progressive, even if it seems to have a fascination for characters with disabilities.

The prevalence of characters with disabilities in SF appears to be on the rise. Academic Michael Berube (2005, 568) says, "I now consider it plausible that the genre of SF is as obsessed with disability as it is with space travel and alien contact". Part of this obsession with disability is probably due to the rise of genres like apocalyptic SF with worlds full of people injured or dying. The relatively new cyberpunk genre, typified by novels like *Necromancer* (Gibson, 1984), frequently has characters with disability (Moody, 1997). Cyberpunk is generally set in decaying worlds dominated by computer networks and out-of-control capitalism. This increasing number of characters with disabilities can be categorised into real-world models of disability.

There are three models of disabilities: medical, social and complex or cultural (Arndt & Van Beuren, 2013; Ellis, 2016). The medical model sees disability as something to be treated or cured by medical professionals. This puts all the responsibility of dealing with the disability on the individual. Disability author Simi Linton (Arndt & Van Beuren, 2013) claims the medical model blocks seeing disability as a political issue. The social model, according to Arndt and Van Beuren, depicts society as the cause of disability by failing to create institutions and a built environment that enables PWD. The model spreads the responsibility for dealing with a disability across society. They go on to say the social model rejects the medical model's blaming of the person with the disability. They state the complex model of disability includes elements of both the medical and social models. It acknowledges society is disabling for the impaired, but their impairment is also a factor in them having a disability. In the complex model the responsibility for disability is both individual and society's. These models of disability are all reflected in SF literature.

One of the prevailing discourses of disability in SF is the medical model. *The Ship Who Sang* (McCaffrey, 1969) is seen by many as a seminal work in SF and is widely cited as a "positive representation of people with disabilities" (Graham & McReur, 2016) and studied by academics. Disability studies academic Ria Cheyne, (2013) disagrees with it being a positive representation as the novel portrays PWD as having no value to society until their disability is cured. In the story, a child is born with multiple impairments, but her brain is "normal". The parents are given a choice of killing her or having her brain removed and placed in a shell where it can be trained to control a spaceship. The parents consent to her brain removal, and Cheyne argues only then is the child seen as being able to lead a productive life. The medical model is also used to stereotype disability as a tragedy, showing life as not worth living with a disability. PhD candidate Derek Newman-Stille (2013) argues that this tells the reader with a disability that they are the problem and that they need to change, not society.

The combination of seeing disabilities as tragedies and burdens on society has many SF writers wanting to cure them, but why not change society so it is more accommodating for PWD? As Cheyne (2013) points out, the society in *The Ship Who Sang* could have used its superior technology to create devices that enabled children with profound disabilities to communicate and engage with the world rather than sever their brains from their bodies and incorporate them into machines. A SF author who takes the former option could explore issues around the quality of life of children with profound disabilities in the future and their use of technology as they go about living their lives. One of the main problems with the portrayal of PWD in SF is they are not shown as real people. Ellis (2016) says PWD should

be shown as having the full spectrum of human experience and having everyday problems. Perhaps if they were, SF writers would not be so quick to want to cure them. Author/academic Anna Felicia C. Sanchez (2014) wants more authors like Jane Stemp and Lois Keith, both of whom have disabilities, who show characters with disabilities living real lives.

Portrayals of characters with disabilities in cyberpunk use aspects of the various models of disability. Academic Nickianne Moody (1997) argues characters with disability are frequently used in cyberpunk as a metaphor for the fear that in the future we will all become disabled by implants and the technological extensions we need for our bodies to interact with computer networks productively. Moody says characters with disabilities in cyberpunk novels are frequently fitted with prostheses and implants and take drugs to enable them to work in an able-bodied world. She uses the example of John in *Elvissey* (Wormack, 1993), who regularly needs to replace his artificial legs required for his work. Moody claims inventors with disabilities, like Dr. Elizabeth O'Neil in *The Cybernetic Samurai* (Milan, 1987), frequently appear in cyberpunk worlds, suggesting they are searching for a cure/fix for their disability. In cyberpunk disability usually mirrors the medical model, as something to fear and an individual's problem. However, cyberpunk also offers social model elements of disability in the form of virtual reality where PWD can communicate on the same level as the able-bodied in virtual worlds, such as in the virtual legal hearings in *Arachne* (Mason, 1990). Moody says with both the able-bodied and those with disabilities having their bodies modified in order to work, cyberpunk suggests more equality of disability in the future, at least among the workers.

There are novels where disabilities are portrayed in the more progressive complex model of disability. *This Alien Shore* (Friedman, 1998) is one such novel, according to Katina Arndt and Maia Van Beuren (2013). Set in the future, the main character of the novel is schizophrenic. Experiments are conducted in an attempt to use her disability and employ her to navigate interstellar space. Ardnt and Van Beuren argue her schizophrenia is seen as valuable, and she is accepted more on this future earth than PWDs are in the present time. However, she is not entirely accepted and valued for her disability until she moves to another world, where society and a built environment have adapted for PWD. They point out that PWD in the novel are also given a choice to be cured (medical model). Some take the cure, others don't. The use of the complex model of disability in *This Alien Shore* means it has a progressive take on disability. Ardnt and Van Beuren say it shows how PWD might live in a

world where they are fully supported and accommodated. If this portrayal of PWD was typical in SF, then it could be claimed to be a progressive genre.

One thing that should be considered before judging SF too harshly is that disability rights and activism did not take off until the 1990s (Ellis, 2016). Before the 1990's, the medical model of disability, with its need for a cure and emphasis that disability is an individual's problem, was the dominant view. So, SF's attitude towards people with disability over history may be generally similar to other genres and literature. For example, *The Ship Who Sang* was written in the 1960s, while the more disability progressive *This Alien Shore* was written in 1998. Even so, for SF to be judged a socially progressive genre it should be ahead of other genres in portraying PWD, with current authors speculating on a post-complex model.

This essay shows SF's claim to be progressive is diminished by its frequent use of the medical model of disability. The medical model of disability has been discredited as devaluing PWD. The medical model occurs in novels like *The Ship Who Sang* and genres such as cyberpunk. If SF is to be seen as progressive as a genre, the complex model of disabilities, as shown in *These Alien Shores*, should dominate, and SF authors should be exploring more progressive ways of portraying PWD. Those explorations might lead its readers to build a more inclusive world for PWD.

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