

TIME TO MOVE PAST MEMOIR

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For many authors and other creators, blindness exists solely as a metaphor: blind faith, blind love, blind justice. The word's connotations turn individuals who are blind into abstractions of morality and misfortune. To undo these associations, the time has come for fiction written by blind authors whose protagonists are blind but whose stories are not primarily about blindness.

Those dread associations made some sense for much of history, as reflected in the famous last line of John Milton's [Sonnet XIX](#), written about 1655: "They also serve who only stand and wait." History was hard on blind people, casting them outside the city walls, consigning them to back rooms and even asylums, and reducing them to street beggars. Even so, there have always been blind people with exceptional memories and highly developed other senses who attained a degree of independence despite a lack of resources that can be counted on today. A fine example is Jacques Lusseyran, who wrote a memoir of his first twenty years in *And There Was Light: Autobiography of a Blind Hero of the French Resistance* (1963).

In America, national organizations dedicated to helping blind people achieve independence came into being midway through the twentieth century. The American Foundation for the Blind (AFB), created in 1921, initiated a talking book program in 1932, although in the early decades the number of books was tiny. Today's two leading advocacy organizations founded and run by blind people, the National Federation of the Blind (NFB) and the American

Council of the Blind (ACB) began life in 1940 and 1961 respectively. They provided then, as they do now, what today we call networks, where blind people share resources and experiences. The NFB and ACB are also legislative and court advocates.

The acceleration of personal independence can be dated back to World War II, when America and other countries committed to providing blinded veterans with training in mobility and daily living skills. These services soon extended to children, students and their families. By the mid-sixties the tape recorder became widely available, followed in the seventies by the more portable cassette recorder. Blind students could engage people to record texts so that they could read at their own speed and in their own time.

Exponentially greater independence came with speech-synthesized personal computers in the eighties, then with accessible email in the nineties, and, more recently, smart phones. It used to be that blind people had to get friends or family members to read the letters they received. Thanks to email, they can now read correspondence without a third party coming between them and the people they write to. Beyond email, online [listservs](#) have vastly expanded communication among blind people around the country and the world. Through these listservs, blind people meet other people with an unlimited array of viewpoints from all walks of life. Members can ask questions, find solutions and share experiences.

Such is a snapshot of a complicated past and a possibly even more complicated, though more hopeful, present. Much local color and detail are added when blind people tell their stories, and many have been eager to do so.

In fact, there has been a near outpouring of memoirs by blind authors. (In this essay, I use “memoir” loosely to cover both memoir and autobiography.) They include John M. Hull’s *Touching the Rock: An Experience of Blindness* (1990), Stephen Kuusisto’s *Planet of the Blind*

(1997), Robert Russell's *To Catch an Angel: Adventures in a World I Cannot See* (1962) and Ved Mehta's numerous memoirs, such as *Sound-Shadows of the New World* (1986). These memoirs read rather like the accounts by the nineteenth century's great explorers.

Touching the Rock describes how Hull, a theologian, lost his vision in his thirties and navigated into a world the sighted do not inhabit. To my mind, it is a very alien place. Kuusisto journeyed through youth pretending away his deteriorating vision to arrive at self-acceptance in satisfying work.

Russell, who became a college professor before the age of personal computers and even portable tape recorders, was also a wrestler and got around without a cane. Mehta left a comfortable home in India for the Arkansas School for the Blind and proceeded almost on a straight line to *The New Yorker*. Russell and Mehta represent the apogee of the "super blink," as Kuusisto humorously calls blind people who have had exceptional lives.

These memoirs raise the question of how much, or rather little, vision is covered by the definition of blindness. The standard [legal definition](#) encompasses varying degrees, from none to relatively useful. This variation naturally influences how each blind person functions, but also how they're perceived in mainstream society. It used to be that a totally blind person could expect a range of reactions from pity to respect. Someone with functional but manifestly limited vision (the cartoon character *Mr. Magoo* comes to mind) was teased, even mocked. As blind people increasingly participate in mainstream society, these reactions are changing—a subject in itself.

My favorite but rarely discussed memoir by a blind author is Canadian Ryan Knightly's *Cockeyed* (2006). He was another blindness denier even as his vision deteriorated due to retinitis pigmentosa, a phase evoked in terrifying scenes where he operates a forklift truck. Later he goes

through a John Hull-like phase of turning away from the outside world, as he recognizes when he doesn't bother to look toward the window on hearing a noise in the street. In time, with his wife's prodding, he pulls out of his Hull-like world during a scene set in, of all places, an Ikea furniture store. The memoir mixes humor and good story-telling, is honest and appears free from agendas and moralizing.

Twentieth century blind fiction writers acknowledged their disability, but almost entirely in autobiographical asides. The Argentine writer, Jorge Luis Borges, wrote about his disability, such as in a 1977 lecture entitled "Blindness," but never elevated his work on the subject to art.

James Joyce and James Thurber also wrote with failing and eventually failed eyesight and are not known for their writing about it. Joyce's Stephen Dedalus has poor vision, but in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (published serially in 1914-15) his struggle to read a newspaper headline is only a nod to the issue.

I have found only three novels in print that were written by blind authors and that portray blind characters. The protagonist in Deborah Kent's young adult novel, *Belonging* (1978) is a blind teenager. James B. Garfield's *Follow My Leader* (1957) is a book for children. Donna W. Hill self-published another young adult novel entitled *The Heart of Applebutter Hill* (2013), but it does not appear to have reached a mainstream audience.

What does it signify that all three novels were written for young people? Explaining receptivity to memoirs by blind authors seems easy: Stories of success over perceived adversity are popular. Although memoirs reveal some of the difficulties blind people encounter, the essential story is the same and straightforward. Stories for young people are also relatively simple because of their intended audience. I don't mean simplistic. But I have to believe

publishers feel that the general public isn't ready for the complexity of a complex novel written with an adult audience in mind.

In a pair of articles cited in the endnotes, Kent, writing under her married name Deborah Kent Stein, discusses the two adult novels she could locate by blind authors with blind characters. She has reservations about them both that I suspect I would share, but they're out of print and I've been unable to find copies to read for myself.

I have always been disappointed, even frustrated, by the portrayals of blind characters in novels by mainstream sighted authors. A recent example is Anthony Doerr's acclaimed *All the Light We Cannot See* (2014). I enjoyed much about the novel, which at times is marvelously atmospheric. Because of Doerr's attention to historical detail, it is typically treated as a realistic World War II novel, but I read it as a cross between a modern fairytale and a medieval quest story. Mythical elements include the young Werner's untutored radio-building ability, the gemstone subplot and the idealized father.

Likewise, Doerr's blind, pure-hearted character, Marie-Laure, has no apparent counterpart in real life. Besides, the details of her portrayal are implausible. Doerr has her count paces to navigate on her own, an unreliable measure because our stride changes as we grow tired or when we're carrying heavy loads. A blind person is more likely to rely on a change from brick wall to wooden fence or the shift in air flow at an intersection. Also, when her father builds a replica of their neighborhood, she can detect the miniature buildings' details. As the blind protagonist reflects in a story of mine called "[The Portrait](#)":

I recalled a moment from the time when my vision was fading. I'd closed my eyes, held a leaf and traced its moist undulations with a fingertip. Then I'd opened my eyes and observed the even tinier striations and gradations of green. Sight discerned the millimeters that touch glided over.

More distressing, Marie-Laure is practically helpless. She needs her father to button up her coat and help her bathe even when she's sixteen years old. But as Sheri Wells-Jensen complained in a [March 22, 2016 essay](#) that she wrote about the novel for the San Francisco Lighthouse: "The assault on the dignity of blind people is not that this character has strange adaptive techniques, or even that there are so many things she does not do for herself; it is that she is utterly without agency as a character."

Wells-Jensen writes that Doerr researched the lives of two blind people as preparation for his Marie-Laure character. In this light (so to speak), his inability to get past his pre-existing perceptions to the realities of those lives suggests that blindness remained for him a mystery. This mysteriousness must explain why blind characters in contemporary fiction fail to resonate as real people and continue to serve inspirational or metaphorical ends. Hence the lack of individuality, or Wells-Jensen's agency, among blind characters.

For me, the most compelling physically disabled character I have yet encountered in fiction is Cormoran Strike, the private eye created by J.K. Rowling, writing under the pen name Robert Galbraith. (The first title in the projected seven-novel series is *The Cuckoo's Calling*, 2013.) Here is a man struggling daily with an artificial leg and all its inconvenience, discomfort and sometimes pain. He is by turns confident and insecure, open and defensive. He is always in control, except when he isn't. Sometimes he admits to the pain and exhaustion caused by the artificial limb chafing against the stump, at other times he seeks to conceal it. His assistant, Robin, must cope with these mood changes as her own feelings range from affection to exasperation. Sometimes she hides her recognition of his discomfort; at other times she is direct

about it. This isn't to say their ways of managing his disability are the same as everyone else's, but they are credible in the context of Strike's character and setting.

Admittedly, I haven't exhausted the instances of physically disabled characters in fiction, and of course, Strike isn't blind. But I offer his character as a satisfying contrast to Doerr's maddening portrayal of Marie-Laure.

My concern in this essay is with literature. However, film and television dominate culture today, and visually impaired commentators on those media have made relevant points about the portrayal of blind characters. Georgina Kleege's *Sight Unseen* (1999) is a combination of memoir (she was another blindness denier) and criticism. In Chapter 2, she analyzes several films with blind characters. Based on my interpretation of her assessments of those characters, here are some undoubtedly simplistic encapsulations:

- Demented-looking blind man rescued from suicide but rendered meek (*Scent of a Woman*, 1992)
- Sighted woman selflessly sacrifices herself because her husband cannot see to appreciate her beauty (*The Paradine Case*, 1947)
- The chaste blind man (*Places in the Heart*, 1984, and *Proof*, 1992)
- Stumbling blind woman dependent on others with sight (*Jennifer 8*, 1992)
- Clumsy blind woman welcomes being treated paternalistically by sighted husband (*Wait Until Dark*, 1967)
- Sexuality in blind women is abnormal (*Blink*, 1994)

If that list sounds harsh, it may be my excessive compression or a reflection of Kleege's anger. She entitles that chapter "Blind Nightmares" and writes, "If I want to have nightmares I go to movies about the blind."

Someone more qualified than I might analyze movies with blind characters released since 1999, when Kleege's book appeared. However, based on her discussion, and also on my own impression, I'm struck by the allegorical nature of movies in general and their presentation of blind characters in particular. These metaphor-driven characters serve to reinforce the dread that the adjective 'blind' has inspired over the centuries.

Incidentally, in Chapter 3 of *Sight Unseen*, Kleege makes observations about several literary classics, and here again, she finds that characters function as metaphor, such as how the biblical Samson's loss of sight represents loss of virility. And then there's poor old Oedipus...

In a *Braille Monitor* article entitled "[As Seen on TV](#)" (2014), Grace Warn reviews several television shows and finds problems, but also positives, in the portrayal of blind characters. The series she likes are *Longstreet* (1971-1972, where the character named in the title is a blind insurance investigator), *McGyver* (1985-1992, where the Pete Thornton character's glaucoma tracked the real-life actor's diminishing vision), and *Becker* (1998-2004, where the Jake Malinak character is the blind owner of a newspaper stand inside the diner). In only one of these shows, *Longstreet*, is the main character blind. I've watched two television series, both short-lived, where the main characters are blind. One was *Growing up Fisher* (2014), which is saccharine, and the other *Blind Justice* (2003), about which all that need be said is that the main character is a gun-toting blind cop. (In her chapter on movies, Kleege writes extensively about a fascination with blind men and guns.) Unlike movies, these television shows are episodic series, less susceptible to reductive archetypes. They give talented actors more latitude to play blind

characters with degrees of credibility. Even so, this is a small sample relative to the diverse population of blind people, and as Warn shows, many other television portrayals of blind people cause concern. For example, numerous shows have depicted characters who experience temporary blindness and who handle it miraculously well. As Warn says, “Coming to terms with losing vision, much less getting training organized and begun, is not something that happens overnight.”

Television is a powerful but inherently limited medium. Accentuation of the visual usually simplifies storylines, whatever the subject. You may see people complaining about Federal Reserve actions, but you’ll rarely see a detailed analysis of monetary policy. This is not a criticism of television, although it could be construed as a suggestion that television addicts devote more time to reading.

Cartoons are a medium that has given at least one physically disabled artist, [John Callahan](#), a quadriplegic (1951-2010), a foot in the mainstream door. One of his cartoons shows a beggar wearing a sign saying, “Please help me. I am blind and black, but not musical.” Humor is a wonderfully disarming way to address difficult subjects. However, it is only one form of expression. By design it can be stark and two-dimensional, which is to say, cartoonish.

The blind character [Toph Bei Fong](#), in the animated television series *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, is an interesting case. The backstory is that Toph fought against her sheltering parents in order to achieve her potential and ultimately rises to police chief. However, she has extraordinary powers that more than compensate for her disability, making her Kuusisto’s “super blink” to a factor of ten.

Depictions of characters with extraordinary powers that negate their blindness may reinforce a mainstream perception of real blind people as “other.” Blind characters need to be

brought down to earth where pragmatism prevails and obstacles are not glibly passed over; where they are neither more nor less heroic than most people, which is heroic enough.

And also where they are shown to be individuals. Blind people's lives and attitudes are as diverse as those of any group in the general population. For some, blindness is an inconvenience, while others feel it as a dividing wall. There are those who applaud society's efforts at accommodation. Others contend it is society that is disabling, the root of the problem being vision-dependent transportation systems and subjugation to print. Some welcome offers of assistance across the street; others resent them. Meanwhile some blind people are Canadian, some Indonesian. Some are tall, some short. Some are exercise freaks; others spend much of the day at their desks. Some are outgoing, others quiet. Some are argumentative, others persuaded by sheer charm, yet others are rude. Some hate Mr. Magoo, others find him harmless.

Aside from their metaphorical value, Kleege asserts that blind characters in films exist not so much for themselves, but to show something about sighted people and vision. The same can be said for Doerr's Marie-Laure. Indeed, the same can also be said for the way sighted people read works written by blind authors.

Take a column entitled "Powers of Perception" that Judith Shulevitz wrote in 2003 for *The New York Times*. Analyzing Helen Keller's early writings, Shulevitz states:

Keller violates a cardinal rule of autobiography, which is to distinguish what you have been told from what you know from experience. She narrates, as if she knew them firsthand, events from very early childhood and the first stages of her education—neither of which she could possibly remember herself, at least not in such detail. She puts what she has been told on the same epistemological plane as what she has learned through direct observation.

Shulevitz admits, “Keller had a defense. Her ability to experience what others felt and heard, she said, illustrated the power of imagination, particularly one that had been developed and extended, as hers was, by books.” By contrast, Shulevitz praises Hull’s *Touching the Rock* because “... it consists entirely of direct observation, both of sensory perceptions and of internal reactions to the condition of being blind.”

Shulevitz does disabled writers the credit of subjecting them to the rigorous analysis she gives all writers. Her premise that memoirs should reflect immediate experience is indisputable, or at least standard writing course advice. But even if Hull’s depiction of the experience of blindness is widely shared, which I question, his insistence on a divide between the two worlds of sight and blindness is troubling. By contrast, Keller’s use of color and music analogies point to her desire to participate in a united world.

Shulevitz’s focus suggests that writing by blind people should be aimed at satisfying sighted readers’ curiosity about not seeing, as opposed to portraying fully realized human beings. But when a work by a blind author is valued only for its insights into non-visual experience, the blind author’s scope is severely circumscribed.

The literary world must allow disability to be only one of many factors in their characters’ lives, as real blind people aim for it to be in theirs. It requires that blindness be cast off from metaphor. Having mapped what was until lately *terra incognita*, blind people are no longer heroic explorers. With their growing participation in the wide world comes the power to speak not just as disabled people, but for all humanity. In literature that is a role less for memoir than fiction. Unencumbered by constraints of literalness and privacy, fiction can hew closer to truth than any set of facts.

My thanks to *Disabilities Studies Quarterly* for publishing the original version of this essay in 2004. Here, I have substantially revised and updated my previous 2015 version. In this new version, I have frequently inserted links to supporting documents in lieu of inclusion in the references section, which I've reserved primarily for books. I have retained *DSQ*'s references format.

REFERENCES

Note: Except where indicated, all of the fiction and memoir titles in this list are available in braille or audio download, or in some cases on cassette, at the Library of Congress's National Library Service (NLS), whose search page is: http://www.loc.gov/cgi-bin/zgate.nls?ACTION=INIT&FORM_HOST_PORT=/prod/www/data/nls/catalog/index.html,z3950.loc.gov,7490&CI=083300

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