

# Find your voice: a list of books featuring disabled children

Written by Joanna Sholem, Ambassador for Inclusive Minds



These books are all excellent examples of the portrayal of disability in children's literature. Rather than asserting that this is a definitive 'Best Of' list, I would like to present the following to you not as THE list but a 'Where to Start' list.

## Joanna's story

The start of the journey was in 2008 when I came across a promotional leaflet about Scope's *In the Picture* project. I instantly thought it sounded like something I would love to be involved with, prompting me to volunteer and later work for the charity. The project also indirectly introduced me to Alexandra Strick who would go on to co-found Inclusive Minds, for whom I am an Ambassador.

But the pivotal, life-changing moment came some months later when I went to a reception at The Foundling Hospital, celebrating the exhibition of the artwork from the *In*

*the Picture* project. One of the sample illustrations on display was by Quentin Blake in his characteristic style of drawing. Its entry in the exhibition catalogue reads:

“A happy and independent young girl who happens to be wearing leg splints or ankle-foot orthoses. Very few splint images exist.”



Illustration © Quentin Blake.

Quentin's simple image took my breath away. It could have been of me. Once upon a time, I too was a blonde child wearing a leg splint. I stood there transfixed and struggled to hold back tears. These were bittersweet. I was thrilled to see myself in an illustration but also overwhelmed by the realisation that not only was this was the first time I had done so

(I was 33), but that I'd hadn't ever felt the lack. I was crying for my younger self, who'd never seen herself in a children's book.

## **Books in which I saw myself (or at least recognised myself in a similar impairment\*)**

I have a condition called hemiplegia, which is a type of cerebral palsy. Its effects are similar to those of a stroke in that the damage on one side of my brain affects my motor control, balance and dexterity on the other side.

### ***Small Steps (MG)***

**Author: Louis Sachar**

**Bloomsbury, 2007**

Why did I include it?

This was the first children's book which made me sit up and go... "Wait a second!" Even better, it's the indirect sequel to the very well-known *Holes*.

### ***A Curse So Dark and Lonely***

**Author: Brigid Kemmerer**

**Bloomsbury, 2019**

Why did I include it?

This is a YA novel, but it's here because of how thrilling it was to find Harper, a girl with hemiplegia to be not only the protagonist in a retelling of Beauty and the Beast, but one adept in horse riding and sword-fighting.

### ***Pea's Book of Holidays (MG)***

**Author: Susie Day**

**Red Fox, 2014**

"...young readers will relish the gentle humour of this entertaining, contemporary take on the classic family story." [Enid Blyton] BookTrust

## ***The Crackedawn Dragon (MG)***

**Author: Abi Elphinstone**

**Simon & Schuster, 2021**

“Fast paced and funny, this otherworldly adventure is a heart-warming tale of friendship and loyalty.” BookTrust

Why did I include them?

Both of the above are books on which I acted as consultant, helping to shape characters with hemiplegia and a visual impairment respectively. Both Susie and Abi wanted me to read their manuscripts, not merely to ensure these depictions were accurate, but to help develop their characters. They generously encouraged me to suggest ideas from my own perspective and experience, enabling me to help make Ryan and Oonie even richer and more authentic.

## ***The Treasure Under the Jam Factory (MG)***

**Author: Chrissie Sains**

**Illustrator: Jenny Taylor**

**Walker, 2022**

The second book in a hilarious, jam-packed new adventure series starring Scooter, the inventor, who has hemiplegia, and his top secret alien sidekick.

Why did I include it?

Because of the sensitive and ingenious way Chrissie made Scooter’s disability (and how he handles it) an integral part of the story, without overpowering it. And if I say more it would be a spoiler. Because of the detail in Jenny Taylor’s illustrations which mean, more than ever before, I can see myself in a book. One such detail is the difference in how Scooter’s hands grip the handlebars of RALPH, his quad bike.

And it’s lovely to have a great story aimed at the younger end of middle-grade being shorter and illustrated throughout. While we need more inclusive books across the age range, this series hits the sweet spot since there are few early reader books that feature disabled characters.

# Lived experience

## ***Loud! (PB)***

**Author: Rose Robbins**

**Scallywag Press, 2021**

When Abigail can't concentrate in class, she gets bored and is naughty. But just when things are about to go wrong yet again, a teacher discovers exactly what to do to engage this little girl, and Abigail ends up finding a special voice of her very own. Rose Robbins is an autistic author and illustrator.

## ***Like a Charm (MG)***

**Author: Elle McNicoll**

**Knights Of, 2022**

"...a typically imaginative and compassionate story of an Edinburgh full of magical creatures - and the only girl who can see them" (Waterstones). Elle McNicholl is an autistic and dyspraxic author.

## ***What Happened To You? (PB)***

**Author: James Catchpole**

**Illustrator: Karen George**

**Faber, 2021**

A ground-breaking picture book with a radical message of how a disabled person might want to be spoken to. Author James Catchpole lost his right leg as a baby due to an illness.

## ***The Secret of Haven Point (MG)***

**Author: Lisette Auton**

**Puffin, 2022**

A salty and spellbinding adventure set on the shores of a magical sanctuary for any disabled person who needs somewhere to belong. Author Lisette Auton's impairment means she walks with a stick.

Also books by authors such as Ade Adepitan, Cerrie Burnell, Rosie Jones and Samantha Baines – although, as it should be, not all of their books feature disabled characters. Just because one is disabled doesn't mean it is one's entire focus. We contain multitudes. To that end, some disabled authors don't have any disabled characters in their stories; for example, Vanessa Harbour and Sue Hendra.

## Co-produced with children

### ***What the Jackdaw Saw (PB)***

**Author: Julia Donaldson**

**Illustrator: Nick Sharratt**

**Macmillan, 2015**

An excited Jackdaw is just desperate to tell everyone about his birthday party. So he flies over land and sea, city and forest, inviting all the animals to come. However, one after another, various creatures respond by simply touching their heads. Whatever are they doing? This book was written by Deaf children together with Julia Donaldson who herself has a hearing impairment.

### ***You Can! (PB)***

**Author: Alexandra Strick and Steve Antony**

**Otter-Barry Books, 2021**

A picture book full of inspiration and empowerment – real children contribute their hopes and dreams. Through several years of consultation, young people aged 8 to 18 were asked what they would say to their younger selves to inspire, reassure and enthuse them about the future. *You Can!* represents their answers.

# Consultation and / or thorough research in action

## ***See What I Can Do! (PB)***

**Author: Jon Roberts**

**Illustrator: Hannah Rounding**

**Graffeg, 2021**

In this gently-told but immensely informative new diverse and inclusive picture book, Jon Roberts tells the stories of a number of children with a variety of disabilities inspired by the real-life experiences of his daughter, Kya, who is on the autistic spectrum, and some of her friends.

## ***Max and the Millions (MG)***

**Author: Ross Montgomery**

**Faber, 2018**

"There's a rich vein of Pythonesque humour on display here but also a keen satirical edge...A marvellously funny and original novel." *Financial Times*

## ***Katy (MG)***

**Author: Jacqueline Wilson**

**Puffin, 2015**

Katy's life changes in dramatic and unexpected ways after a serious accident. Inspired by the much-loved classic, *What Katy Did*.

## ***I Talk Like a River (PB)***

**Author: Jordan Scott**

**Illustrator: Sydney Smith**

**Walker, 2021**

When a boy who stutters feels isolated, alone, and incapable of communicating in the way he'd like, it takes a kindly father and a walk by the river to help him find his voice. Like his protagonist, author Jordan Scott has a stutter.

### ***We Are Giants (MG)***

**Author: Amber Lee Dodd**

**Quercus, 2016**

A brilliantly funny and wonderfully warm-hearted story about love, family, and what it means to be distinctive. Sydney thinks her mum Amy is the best mum in the world – even if she is a bit different. When everyone else kept growing, Amy got to four feet tall and then stopped right there. The perfect height, in Sydney's opinion: big enough to reach the ice cream at the supermarket, small enough to be special.

## **Intersectional representation**

### ***We're Going to Find the Monster (PB)***

**Author: Malorie Blackman**

**Illustrator: Dapo Adeola**

**Puffin, 2021**

A lovely slightly fairy tale-inspired story about a family with two younger siblings and a teenager getting ready for breakfast, featuring the wonderful storytelling and word wizardry of former Children's Laureate Malorie Blackman and the brilliant eye for family dynamics from prize-winning illustrator Dapo Adeola. It's also worth noting that Adeola has illustrated the character of Charlie as having the skin condition vitiligo, which is rarely (if ever) depicted in children's books, and there's a note at the beginning of the book signposting readers to [The Vitiligo Society](#) for more information.

### ***One, Two, Three...Jump! (PB)***

**Illustrator: Carol Thompson**

**Childs Play, 2013**



Carol Thompson's exquisite illustrations allow us to share and explore the struggles, achievements and sheer delight of children learning to manage and explore early movement challenges.

***Just Like Me: 40 Neurologically and Physically Diverse People Who Broke Stereotypes (MG)***

**Author: Louise Gooding**

**Illustrators: Melissa Iwai, Caterina delli Carri, Angel Chang and Cathy Hookey**

**Studio Press, 2021**

This book celebrates remarkable disabled people.

## **Gems in libraries and bookshops**

These were unexpected finds, as opposed to specific books I'd heard about elsewhere. I scoured the collections of Upper and West Norwood Public Libraries, Lambeth Libraries network, as well as the shelves of a local independent children's bookshop, Tales on Moon Lane. I read most picture books and much of the Junior Fiction to create a display at Upper Norwood Library to mark Disability Pride Month (July). Time after time, finding unexpected representation, especially if done beautifully, made me gasp out loud.

***Ali and the Sea Stars (PB)***

**Author: Ali Stroker**

**Illustrator: Gillian Reid**

**Harper Collins, 2022**

Tony Award-winning actress Ali Stroker captures the magic and community of theatre in her debut picture book, about a spirited girl in a wheelchair who stages a show for her hometown. Based on the pivotal summer Ali performed in her first musical!

***Some Days: A Tale of Love, Ice Cream and my Mom's Chronic Illness (PB)***

**Author: Julia A. Stamm**

**Illustrator: Chamisa Kellogg**

**T.HE. Experiment**

Warm and uplifting, *Some Days* gently introduces young readers to the concept of having a loved one with a chronic illness. Although some days are fast, and some are slow, each day is still an adventure filled with love, excitement, and fun – not to mention ice cream!

### ***The Boy Who Made Everyone Laugh (MG)***

**Author: Helen Rutter**

**Scholastic, 2021**

Billy's starting secondary school. It's a different one from most of his primary school classmates, but that suits him just fine – Billy's keen for a fresh start. He has a stammer, and he's determined that it won't dictate how he is viewed at this new school.

## **Non-fiction**

### ***The Great Big Book of Feelings (PB)***

**Author: Mary Hoffman**

**Illustrator: Ros Asquith**

**Frances Lincoln, 2013**

This fresh, optimistic look at all the feelings we experience in family life, at school and everywhere else, is told with warmth, wit and sensitivity.

### ***I Am Not a Label: 34 Disabled Artists, Thinkers, Athletes and Activists From Past and Present (MG)***

**Author: Cerrie Burnell**

**Illustrator: Lauren Baldo**

**Wide-Eyed Editions, 2020**

This book celebrates remarkable disabled people. Cerrie Burnell was born with her right arm ending slightly below the elbow.

### ***Proud to be Deaf: Discover My Community and My Language (MG)***

**Authors:** Ava, Lilli and Nick Beese

**Illustrator:** Romina Martí

**Hachette, 2019**

A wonderful child-led book that celebrates Deaf culture and introduces children to British Sign Language.

## **Incidental inclusion**

### ***My Must-Have Mum (PB)***

**Author:** Maudie Smith

**Illustrator:** Jen Khatun

**Lantana, 2022**

Jake's mum is different from most other mums: she loves to collect things that have been thrown away and transform them into something else entirely. "A sweet environmentally conscious tale of unconditional love." *Kirkus*

### ***The Grunts All At Sea (MG)***

**Author:** Philip Ardagh

**Illustrator:** Axel Scheffler

**Nosy Crow, 2013**

"Philip Ardagh's Grunts are the 21st century Twits and his wonderful wordplay is as fabulous as ever in *The Grunts All At Sea*." *Telegraph*

# Accessible books (not necessarily portraying disability, but designed for disabled people)

## *Off to the Park (PB)*

Illustrator: Stephen Cheetham

Childs Play, 2014

“Stephen Cheetham's highly interactive board book takes the reader on a fun-filled journey through the park with lots of sensory stimulation, encountering laces to tie, smooth buttons to press and much more - including a special treat at the end! The simple rhyming text also provides lots of repetition and plenty of opportunities to join in”.  
BookTrust

## *Toad Attack (MG)*

Author: Patrice Lawrence

Illustrator: Becca Moore

Barrington Stoke, 2019

A brilliantly quirky comedy caper with a diverse and inclusive cast of characters. Publisher Barrington Stoke produce a host of specialist features, such as font and page colour, designed to help dyslexic and reluctant readers.

## Impairment or Condition

You'll note I don't have a category listing books under impairment or condition. This is deliberate; I have decided that for our purposes, one would be too cumbersome to include. But if you're curious, here's such a [list from the U.S.](#)

## For more recommendations, here are some places to start:

- [Bookmark: Disability and Books](#)
- [Bookseller Disability Issue](#) (October)
- [IBBY Collection for Young People with Disabilities](#)
- [Inclusive Minds](#)
- [Outside In World](#)
- [We Need Diverse Books](#)

- [Letterbox Library](#)
- [Schneider Family Book Award](#)
- The Catchpoles on Instagram and via their [website](#)
- [CBC list of disability awareness books](#)

#DisabilityPrideMonth

## Written by Joanna Sholem

As well as being an ambassador for children's literature collective Inclusive Minds, Joanna Sholem is an advocate for disability representation in books and has worked as a Reading Helper for Coram Beanstalk. Inclusive Minds offers training and consultancy to promote inclusion, diversity, equality and accessibility in children's literature, and they are committed to changing the face of children's books.