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## **Reading Disability: A Conversation with Michael Bérubé**

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Michael Bérubé is Edwin Erle Sparks Professor of Literature at Pennsylvania State University, where he teaches disability studies and cultural studies. From 2010 to 2017, he was the Director of the Institute for the Arts and Humanities at PSU, and served as president of the Modern Language Association in 2012. In this interview, Bérubé, who will be lecturing at NTNU and other institutions around Taiwan in May 2018, discusses the state of disability studies today: its implications for understanding literary, academic, and political narratives, its value in our personal lives, and its growth into a truly global discipline. The interview was conducted by Justin Prystash, with additional questions by Iping Liang of NTNU's English department.

**Justin Prystash:** In your most recent work on disability studies, *The Secret Life of Stories: From Don Quixote to Harry Potter, How Understanding Intellectual Disability Transforms the Way We Read* (2016), you argue that we need to move from content to form: from a focus on individual characters with disability to the disabling effects of literary texts. This tension is crucial to your argument, and yet it seems to introduce a problem: if the subject of disability studies includes disability with a capital D—if disability is to be found not only in characters or people with definable disabilities (granting that such “definitions” are often troubling and always inexact), but also whenever we reach a state of incoherence or defamiliarization—then “disability” threatens to become a ubiquitous, and therefore enervated, term. If intellectual disability is marked in part by incomplete or deferred communication, by the misreading and misapprehension of those around us, and by a feeling of isolation, aren't all characters, people, and texts disabled? How do we maintain a proper balance between the disabled individual and disability in general?

**Michael Bérubé:** I want to say I'll have that worry when we get there, because right now I don't see that there's any strong possibility that disability studies will dissolve into water vapor by moving away from the diagnosis of characters. The last

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few book manuscripts I have read have been all about characters with identifiable diagnoses, and all about what their representation means for the perception of people with disabilities. We're still very much in "images of disability" mode, by and large. So I have not exactly inaugurated a paradigm shift away from that model of disability studies just yet. But you're right—if we imagine disability *entirely* as a matter of literary form, we run the risk of emptying the term of any plausible relation to human beings.

I don't think I'm going that far. Tobin Siebers made a fascinating argument about seeing the built environment as disabled in *Disability Aesthetics* (2010), and Janet Lyon has written a fascinating essay on disability and the nonhuman in the works of Leonora Carrington. Those arguments seem to go a bit further than I do in rendering disability as something other than the intellectual or somatic condition of humans. With regard to intellectual disability more specifically, I wouldn't argue that every form of misreading, misapprehension, incomplete or deferred communication can be construed as disabled or disabling. I think the threshold has to be pretty high, such that temporality and/or causality is deranged as it is in texts like *Martian Time-Slip* (1964).

**JP:** Your critical writing style is characterized by narration, deferral, and humor—as when you depict the battles that have unfolded between various scholarly readings—so your work is a good example of how theory is itself, in addition to its other aspects, an aesthetic or literary endeavor. Unfortunately, literary criticism can also be clogged by jargon, garbled in an approach to a difficult topic (you point to narrative theory in this regard), and unaware of its own incoherence (or banality). To what extent can disability studies reinvigorate what you call in *The Secret Life of Stories* the "routine and stultifying" tendency of theory, which always begins as a creative impulse to play? Does or should disability studies have a certain style or manner?

**MB:** I try not to be prescriptive about this, which is why I largely stayed out of the 1990s debates about "bad writing." It seems to me that some forms of difficult prose are genuinely productive, compelling readerly attention to the very fabric of a text, whereas other forms of difficult prose are just . . . bad writing.

That said, *Secret Life* is a little more freewheeling than most of my work. I debated whether to include the opening section on my (now adult) children, or the following section on my exchanges with Rob Spirko and Phyllis Anderson-née-Eisensohn—let alone my "joke" footnote and my "joke" index entry (both of which are nevertheless, I think, thematically appropriate!). I wouldn't want that kind of writing to become some kind of desideratum in the field.

But I hope there will always be a place for narrative in disability studies. Like other identity-based forms of theory, disability studies is populated by scholars who care deeply about the social treatment of people with disabilities; it's impossible to imagine someone in the field saying, "I don't really care one way or the other about people with disabilities, I just want to do some clever things with texts." So whatever writing strategies help us retain that connection to lived experience, or give us a sense of the vividness and the immediacy of the issues in the field, are fine with me.

**Iping Liang:** When I taught a Toni Morrison seminar in the fall of 2017, I found that disability studies has made inroads into Morrison scholarship. At least four critics have engaged in critical studies of Morrison from the perspective of disability studies. In chronological order, they are Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (1997), Ato Quayson (2007), Sandra Kumamoto Stanley (2011), and Alice Hall (2012). While Garland-Thomson and Stanley examine Morrison in the context of American literature, Quayson and Hall place her in the midst of Samuel Beckett, Wole Soyinka, and J. M. Coetzee. In her reading of Morrison's only short story, "Recitatif," Stanley argues that Maggie, being both deaf and mute, is "a figure who is entrapped within social boundaries reinforced by what Lennard J. Davis calls the 'hegemony of normalcy,' yet she also disrupts these specific boundaries" (72). Hall argues that there's always a disabled character in every Morrison novel—there are Eva Peace, who's amputated; Pauline Breedlove, who has a limp; and Lula Ann Bridewell, whose skin is blue-black. Can you talk about these "extraordinary bodies" in Morrison and also the conflation of race and disability in her novels?

**MB:** I think these scholars—especially Quayson, whose work on Morrison is wonderfully generative of further readings—have offered fine readings of Morrison's extraordinary bodies. I'm particularly struck by Quayson's reading of *Beloved* as a text in which slavery produces disability, which opens out onto questions of "slow death" (Lauren Berlant) and "debility" (Jasbir Puar) as well. But I also want to ask, as is my wont, about intellectual and psychosocial disability: Shadrack's PTSD (in the parlance of the time, "shellshock") structures the very narrative of *Sula* from beginning to end, and his gnomic utterance "always" winds up being the text's central interpretive mystery. I always think Morrison is inviting us to read it—and Shadrack—in all ways.

**JP:** Your response suggests that disability studies offers a powerful way to analyze sociocultural and political structures/narratives that may or may not have an obvious connection to disability. For another example, one might consider the anti-vax movement, which has as its motivating force the fear of disability (or perhaps more specifically, the idea that some disabilities, like autism, are worse than others,

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like the hearing loss or blindness that may result from measles). I wonder if you see a connection between conspiracy theories, which rely on counternarratives that purport to reveal some hidden truth, and the desire to disavow the universal epistemological disability that blocks us from a complete narrative of reality. To put it another way, does disability studies provide a technique for reading conspiracy narratives that could help us better understand their operations and better disable them?

**MB:** You're taking me back to my dissertation/first book, when I relied on Leo Bersani's wonderful essay on paranoia as a hermeneutics of suspicion in Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973). But I don't think I can do better than to paraphrase Timothy Melley's argument in *Empire of Conspiracy* (2000), to the effect that conspiracy theories always involve a desire for the mastery of a narrative. In other words, the conspiracy theory shows that however malevolently the world may be organized (by the conspirators), it does in fact make sense, and the theorist is the one with the privileged insight into its workings. I'm not sure disability studies can improve on Melley's argument, but I suspect that it might well provide an enlightening and surprising angle from which to read conspiracies—since it already provides such enlightening and surprising angles on the threads of the social fabric.

**JP:** For me, one of the most provocative aspects of your approach to disability studies is the incorporation of ecocriticism: you imply that in order to understand disability, we must move beyond what “normal” means in a medicalized context to consider what “human” means, how this meaning is constructed and destabilized by evolution and our relation to other species, and how intellectual disability may provide insights into non-human consciousness. Do you believe that part of the value of attending to autistic perspectives is that they may be particularly suited to this more inclusive, more ethical vision of the world? Erin Manning points out, in *Always More Than One* (2013), that autistic modes of thought are less prone to separate the world into categories like “subject” and “object”; in Taiwanese writer Wu Ming-Yi's recent novel *The Man with the Compound Eyes* (2011, trans. 2013), an autistic character more easily adopts the kaleidoscopic, ecological vision of an insect. It seems that autism has much to tell us about intractable philosophical issues like epistemology and ontology.

**MB:** I hadn't really realized the implications of my work for ecocriticism, but this seems to me a very provocative and generative way to go. While I'm loath to attribute Special Insight to any form of disability (I mean, I love *Martian Time-Slip* but I don't really think children with autism can see the future), I think autism has

turned out to be a wonderfully generative trope for writers trying to imagine the human—and humans' relation to the nonhuman—*differently*.

**JP:** What do we gain by positioning disability studies against “evocriticism”? In *The Secret Life of Stories*, you critique Brian Boyd and others for reductively applying evolutionary psychology to literature. For instance, you point out that when Boyd privileges the alluring function of literature over its meanings, he is ironically belittling or even precluding some of literary criticism's richest material. But aren't you fundamentally in agreement that literature has aesthetic effects not reducible to meaning? That literature affects in a non-cognitive, non-articulable way—that it often disables access to meaning? In other words, do you feel that critics like Boyd are essentially correct, but just don't go far enough in recognizing their narrow focus on the eliminative side of evolution (natural selection) rather than on its positive, productive side (sexual selection and differentiation)? Or is this too generous a reading?

**MB:** Well, in my case, you gain a concluding chapter for your book! That chapter feels like a bit of an add-on (at least one largely sympathetic Amazon.com reviewer thinks so), but since evocritics are in the business of making proclamations about humans as a species, I thought the time was ripe for them to start thinking seriously about intraspecies difference—something their work to date adamantly refuses to do.

I do agree that literature (like other forms of art) has aesthetic effects that are not captured by theories of meaning; there are works of art that give me goosebumps, or make me recoil in disgust, in ways that you might want to consider sub- or pre-hermeneutic. I also agree with the evocritics that we are hard-wired for art, and that this hardwiring goes back thirty or forty thousand years and is distinctive to *Homo sapiens sapiens*. But I don't think that when you've said these things, you've said anything very interesting about any specific work of art. They seem to think otherwise; they seem to think that when they say “art is an adaptation, and it has survival value for us as a species,” they are grounding the arts and humanities in something real, and saving the whole enterprise from allegedly blank-slate Theory people. But there are three things wrong with this, by my count. The first is that you can't actually prove the adaptationist thesis—it's just an article of faith. The second is that you don't get very far, with individual works of art, by saying “and this too helped us survive as a species . . . and this too helped us survive as a species,” and so on *ad infinitum*. The third is that the argument makes no distinction between oral or visual culture and *writing*, even though the evidence seems pretty good (at least

according to Maryanne Wolf's *Proust and the Squid* [2007]) that the invention of alphabetic writing rewired our brains to do new things with words.

So I would disagree with your final question above. I think the evocritics give plenty of attention to sexual selection and differentiation. I just don't think much is gained by arguing, as do so-called "literary Darwinists" and Margaret Atwood's character Crake, that art is basically the human version of the bullfrog trying to amplify his voice.

**JP:** I'd like to follow up on the simple pleasures of reading. As many of your readers know, a lot of your theoretical insights derive from interactions with your son, Jamie. One of the activities you enjoy doing together is reading and discussing stories, and this began when Jamie was young. Indeed, children's literature continues to make an appearance in your work, and I wonder if you could explain this genre's aesthetic or theoretical appeal.

**MB:** I'm so glad you asked! I was just reading a brilliant short essay by David Burr Gerard, "How a Book about Grover Introduced Me to the Wide World of Literature" (2017). It's about *The Monster at the End of This Book* (1971) by Jon Stone and Michael Smollin, which must be the first attempt at metafiction for the five-and-under crowd. (The book consists of lovable furry old Grover realizing that he is in a book titled "The Monster at the End of this Book," and imploring the reader not to turn the pages so that we will never meet the monster. The monster, of course, turns out to be Grover himself. The epiphany is really quite poignant.) Gerard links this quite deftly to Joyce's "The Dead" (1941), and along the way, makes a version of my argument about *Pale Fire* (1962), namely, that metafiction can be cerebral and heartbreaking at the same time.

In my MLA Presidential Address I talked about some of my formative reading experiences as a child—*Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass* as a young child, *A Wrinkle in Time* (1962) as a tween. I think that those of us who were captivated by books like that—or by *The Monster at the End of This Book*—are smitten most of all by the realization that such other worlds are possible, that an old woman can turn into a sheep and back again, that you can serve the cake first and cut it later, that there might be two-dimensional planets and tesseract. The world hasn't settled yet for young children; anything is possible, and songs of innocence abound. I think if you introduce children to great YA literature when they're still figuring out how to do things with words, you'll widen their worlds immeasurably.

And as for the tween lit—can it be a coincidence that so many YA fictions start in tiny, enclosed spaces (Meg huddled in the attic, Harry Potter living under the stairs, Lyra Belacqua hiding in a cupboard) and open gradually out onto worlds known and

unknown? Something similar structures *The Lord of the Rings*, even though Frodo is fifty in hobbit years: we start in the tiny, isolated world of the Shire and gradually learn that there are world-historical forces swirling about us. These are allegories of growing up—though they’re not only that. I go back to a book like *A Wrinkle in Time* today and think, “oh yes, I remember that sense of bewilderment and frustration. Meg, *ma semblable, ma soeur*.”

**JP:** Speaking of gradually opening onto the world, I’d like to finish by asking you about disability studies in the global context. Because disability is always a social formation, disability studies needs to account for social differences. In *The Secret Life of Stories*, you raise the issue of “how we are to understand historical and national variations on [intellectual disability].” So how does disability studies open onto historical, national, cultural, and linguistic differences? More specifically, how and why should scholars in Taiwan approach disability studies, and why should universities here open courses in this field?

**MB:** The study of disability, I think, is not only the study of human variation as such, but the study of systems of intraspecies classification. Henri-Jacques Stiker’s *A History of Disability* (1999) is probably the most ambitious and sweeping account, but for shorthand, I usually tell students that the ancient Greeks had very little concern with mild intellectual disability but were horrified by congenital deformity, that medieval Christians did not distinguish strongly between disability and illness and poverty, seeing them all as material for Christian charity, that many forms of mild intellectual disability became legible (and subject to administration) only after the Industrial Revolution, and that no one really knows how to distinguish disability from disease to this day, since there is a great deal of overlap between them. You could probably write a book solely on the ways humans have understood and dealt with epilepsy over the centuries, and I wish someone would!

I’m sorry to say I don’t know enough about Taiwan to answer the more specific part of your question. I would have to retreat to generalities about Taiwanese scholars gaining perspective on disability by adopting a comparative outlook derived from Western disability studies, the better to gauge the status of people with disabilities in Taiwan and other East Asian cultures. Indeed, I am coming to Taiwan in part to learn more about the status of people with disabilities (and the study of disability) in Taiwan.

**IL:** I have a family story to share. My late brother, En-en, was diagnosed with Down syndrome when he was three years old. Growing up with him, we knew that he had a special condition, but it never struck us that he was “disabled.” He was able to read, write, talk, and do chores. He was a diva singer and enjoyed movies a lot. He

was also a voracious reader and could write very well in longhand. He was humorous and liked to play tricks. He was not disabled: he was only different. In the last ten years of his life, he isolated himself from the world—sleeping during the day and watching TV and eating junk food at night. That was the most difficult time for our family, with our parents getting older and siblings busy making their own families. En-en chose a way to have as few interactions as possible. He literally lived the life of Bartleby. We never heard of “disability studies” in those days. Now, in retrospect, I realize that it was his way of freeing us from the time and labor of taking care of him. It’s actually his way of taking care of us. So I think Kristeva is right: we are not disabled; we are just vulnerable. Now, the social welfare system is much improved in Taiwan. Down syndrome children can work in bakeries, libraries, and civil offices and have become more visible. Though disability studies is still little known in Taiwan, we have had the experience of living with disability. The only difference is that we do not seem to have the intellectual jargon and academic discourse to put a name to its existence. That seems to me a major difference between Taiwan and the US.

**MB:** Thank you so much for this story—and the lesson you draw from it, that En-en’s increasing isolation was in fact his own decision to care for his family. And we in the US had centuries of living with disability before we started devising a language of “disability studies,” so welcome to a still-unfolding field!

**JP:** Do you have any suggestions for how Taiwanese scholars interested in disability could apply for study opportunities in the United States?

**MB:** This is something I know very little about—indeed, my visit to National Taiwan Normal University will mark my first trip to a non-US university, and I have not looked into how Taiwanese scholars could come to the US. I would suggest inquiring at and applying to universities with well-developed disability studies programs, like Berkeley and Temple, for starters.

**JP:** Where do you see the future of disability studies?

**MB:** Going global, like so much else. I would point to books like *Loneliness and Its Opposite* (2015), by Don Kudlick and Jens Rydström, a comparative study of disability and sexuality in Denmark and Sweden; Nirmala Erevelles’s book *Disability and Difference in Global Contexts: Enabling a Transformative Body Politic* (2011); and especially Robert McRuer’s forthcoming *Crip Times: Disability, Globalization, and Resistance* (2018). These are books—and I am sure they will influence the field for the foreseeable future—that show us another world is possible.





The Lyon-Bérubé family, left to right: Jamie, Michael, Nicholas and Janet.