

Resisting the Disability Gaze in Amy Webb's Picturebook *Awesomely Emma*

Reham Almutairi

The Department of English Language and Literature
College of Humanities and Social Sciences
King Saud University, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia
Email: rehamfm.85@gmail.com

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Abstract

Recently, the (mis)representation of disability and disabled people has become a key topic of conversation within disability studies. These misrepresentations result from the disability gaze—depicting disability and disabled people in literature and popular culture from the perspective of non-disabled people that often cast disabled people in myriad stereotypical representations. Therefore, this study aims to investigate how the disability gaze is negotiated in *Awesomely Emma* (2020), a children's picturebook by Amy Webb, illustrated by Merrilee Liddiard. Drawing on disability studies and visual analysis scholarship, this study highlights how the disability gaze is resisted and destabilized in this picturebook by using staring back—a strategy of resistance developed by disabled people that involves looking back at non-disabled people to demand recognition and resist silencing and marginalization. The study demonstrates how *Awesomely Emma* employs the process of staring back at the visual and verbal levels as a tool for resistance and activism against the rhetoric of disability discrimination and stigmatization, thereby significantly contributing to disability counternarratives. The significance of this study lies in its manifestation of the role the process of staring back can play in transfiguring entrenched, negative ways of disability representation to propose alternative means of understanding and reimagining disability.

Keywords: activism, Amy Webb, *Awesomely Emma*, children's literature, disability, gaze, picturebook, resistance, stigma

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Introduction

Physically disabled people have always been objects of unwelcome stares from their non-disabled human fellows. This stare entails the process of communicating a message through the eye from the starrer, the staring person, to the staree, the person being stared at (Garland-Thomson, 2009). By staring at disabled people, non-disabled people compare disabled people's bodies to their own "normal" bodies to determine to what extent they deviate from or conform to them and interpret and understand their non-normative bodies. Thus, staring assigns negative meanings and values to disabled bodies for failing to conform to the average body; it follows that disability is seen as an inferior state of being and disabled people as deviant and abnormal—inferior and less worthy (Davis, 1995). This stare can thus cause a sense of shame, marginalization, and inferiority in the staree, for when one is being stared at, it feels "as though the soul suddenly assumes a face and must hide it, turning away wordless, cast off" (Berger, 1996, p. 135). The type of message communicated between the starrer and staree entails stigmatization and discrimination. In other words, this stare becomes an othering stare; it becomes the stare that creates the normal, non-disabled/abnormal, disabled dichotomy (Chemers, 2008).

Most disability representations are introduced through an othering stare that frames disability and disabled people within stigmatizing harmful stereotypes. Therefore, in most disability representations, disabled people are commonly framed either as victims, perpetuating the stereotype that disabled people are helpless and in need of saving by non-disabled people, or as villains/monsters whose disfigurements or non-normative bodies are a source of horror (Mitchell & Snyder, 2001). In these representations, disabled people's stories are told by non-disabled people instead of being offered a platform to tell their stories and change the stereotypical narratives woven around their bodies. They are passive receivers of the stare.

However, there has recently been a push against the othering stare. Disabled people resist this unwelcoming stare by being the subject of the staring counter (the one who stares) between themselves and their non-disabled starers. They challenge their staree to look at them as fellow humans, not as devalued others, and to rethink their attitudes and misconceptions toward them (Garland-Thomson, 2000). By staring back, disabled people can reclaim their agency over their bodies and assert their identities. Drawing on critical disability studies and visual analysis scholarship, this paper will highlight how staring back is used as a tool for resistance and activism in *Awesomely Emma*, a picturebook by Amy Webb (2020) and illustrated by Merrilee Liddiard. It will highlight how the book's disabled protagonist, Emma, is empowered to stare back at her starrer (both characters in the book and readers themselves) to resist silencing, marginalization, and stereotyping. She also inverts the staring encounter to demand her right to exist in public spaces and claim her disability identity.

The researcher chooses this picturebook because it, as will be demonstrated throughout this paper, significantly contributes to the ongoing conversation about the workings of the othering stare in producing stigmatizing stereotypes about disabled people. In 2020, *The Witches*, a children's film based on Roald Dahl's book with the same title, was released. In this film, the main characters, the witches, are presented with limb differences, a physical disability medically known as limb deficiency or limb abnormality, which refers to the partial or complete absence or malformation of arms and legs. They were given this disability to make them look scarier, framing limb differences as something to fear. This film has sparked a backlash from the disability community for its demeaning representation. This backlash adds to the ongoing discussion on how

to counter and challenge stereotypical representations of disabled people. As a film directed at children, this representation is more damaging because children's literature plays a pivotal role in shaping young people's attitudes toward disability from an early age (Golos & Moses, 2011). When children consume such negative, enfreaking stereotypes, their attitudes toward disabilities and disabled people will be difficult to dislodge. Therefore, it is crucial to push against the othering stare by examining how disability narratives in children's literature challenge and destabilize this stare.

Awesomely Emma was published around the same time *The Witches* was released. It is the second book in the *Charley and Emma* series. The book features a physically disabled protagonist girl, a wheelchair user with a limb difference. Emma is born without hands in the book, and her legs are of different lengths. The picturebook, aimed at children aged three to eight, follows Emma's story as her class goes on a school trip to an art museum. During the visit, Emma discovers that the museum is not accessible and that she has to enter via the back door. Emma decides to write a petition to the museum to urge them to ensure the accessibility of their building and to encourage her classmates to sign it. At the end of the book, the class receives a letter from the museum thanking them and promising to implement the necessary steps to make the museum more accessible.

Readers and children's literature scholars have positively received the book. However, its contribution to the ongoing conversation that has sparked the representations of limb-different people has received little critical attention. Its power in disrupting the othering stare and introducing a new framework for children to teach them how to examine and discuss disability and non-normative bodies beyond stereotypes has not been acknowledged. Therefore, by analyzing this book, this paper aims to demonstrate how the disability narrative in this book "remind[s] readers of problematic representations, and then ... challenge, complicate, and overturn them" (Meyer, 2022, p. 6). By using staring back as a tool for resistance and activism, this paper highlights that *Awesomely Emma* represents a remarkable example of counternarratives that challenge dominant stereotypes and reimagine disability.

Literature Review

Within disability studies, valuable scholarship has been conducted on the phenomenon of the gaze and its role in casting disabled people as the other in various settings, from freak shows to medical theaters and public spaces (Bogdan, 1988; Chemers, 2008; Garland-Thomson, 2009; Hevey, 2006). Disability studies scholars point out that this gaze categorizes and assigns meanings to the disabled body, transforming disabled people into spectacles by choreographing the distance between disabled and non-disabled people. In other words, the stare can invalidate the disabled body by situating it as inferior and less than average. The disability writer and poet Fries (1997) notes the power of the gaze in disabling people with disabilities by writing:

Throughout history, those who live with disabilities have been defined by the gaze and needs of the nondisabled world ... the defining of the disabled individual by what he or she cannot physically achieve, how productive he or she might or might not be, comes with great psychic cost. When the only choices deemed viable—kill it or cure it—are choices that would erase the disability, what does this say about how society disvalues disabled lives? (pp. 4–5)

Similarly, disability scholar Chemers (2008) terms this gaze “the disabling, enfreaking gaze” (p. 134). He argues that by failing to conform to the ideals of the “normal” body, disabled people have become prey to the stare that categorizes and assesses their bodies. This stare, he adds, is socially isolating and othering disabled people by constructing a dichotomy between “them” and “us” (p.134).

The power of this stare to objectify and assign meanings to disability and disabled bodies reveals power dynamics between the object (staree) and the subject (starer). Disability critic and theorist Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (2009) scrutinizes this power dynamic to demonstrate how imbalanced the power is in the staring exchange between a non-disabled starrer and a disabled staree. Garland-Thomson (2009) argues that “[w]hen persons in a position that grants them authority to stare take up that power, staring functions as a form of domination, marking the staree as the ... other” (p. 42). The non-disabled starers assume power over the disabled staree using their “normalcy.” They hold power over the disabled staree because the former deviates from the norm; thereby, they are inferior to the non-disabled starrer. Thus, staring becomes an act of discrimination and “the ritual enactment of exclusion from an imagined community of the fully human” (Garland-Thomson, 2000, p. 335). Under this gaze, disabled people are silenced, disempowered, dehumanized, and enfreaked.

However, staring can also be productive, and the locus of power can be shifted when the staree engages with the stare by staring back. Garland-Thomson (2009) proposes staring back as a resistance and visual activism tool. By staring back, disabled starees can balance power between themselves and the starers and undo the objectification of their bodies, asserting that they are not spectacles. When they refuse to avert their eyes when stared at and instead look back confidently at their starers, they maintain that their disability is not a stigma and should not be hidden. By staring back, they demand that starers reevaluate their attitudes and perceptions about disability and reinterpret what it means to have a disabled body. They resist others’ attempts to assign meaning to their bodies and resist being relegated to the margins of society. Staring back is not just the act of meeting the starrer’s eyes. Instead, it offers disabled people the chance to be masters of their narratives. For disabled people, challenging the disabling gaze is also essential to know themselves and reject “internalised shame” and “stigmatising language” about their bodies and disabilities (Cooper, 2020, p.120). In other words, when disabled people stare back, they refuse the disabling gaze’s definition of their bodies and existences. This resistance contributes to “the political and social emancipation of disabled children and adults” (Cooper, 2020, p. 2). Staring back demands recognition and acknowledgment.

Staring back also serves to protest against the shaming of disabled bodies in public spaces and the attitudes that deny them acknowledgment. It allows disabled people to position themselves in the same public space inhabited by non-disabled people. When disabled people “go public” and stare back at their starers, not only do they “claim disability as part of their public persona,” but they also “[stretch] our shared understanding of the human variations we value and appreciate and [invite] us to accommodate them” (Garland-Thomson, 2009, p.195). Emphasizing how he uses staring as a tool for resistance and activism, disability activist and scholar Preston (2016) writes:

I’ve always felt that staring was a powerful moment for me. I *want* people to see me, to acknowledge my existence; something that too often is denied to disabled individuals. I want them to see that I am not afraid to be seen. I want them to see that I am proud of who I am and the ways I move through *their* world. I want them to see that disability is not the

end of life but a reminder that life is not as generic as we sometimes imagine. (par. 3; emphasis in original)

Staring back has not only been used as a tool of resistance and activism in real-life encounters but also in art. For example, in examining selected portraits made by disabled artists working with disabled subjects, Auz (2022) demonstrates the power of staring back to destabilize the workings of the disabling gaze. Auz argues that these disabled artists resist silencing and marginalizing their disabled subjects by empowering them to stare back at their viewers. They use staring back to deconstruct both the power dynamics of portraiture and the gaze to invite non-disabled viewers to understand disabled people (Auz, 2022).

In short, when disabled individuals stare back, they elevate their voices and stories; they assert their agency, humanity, and autonomy and challenge starers to look anew at disabled people.

Analysis

“Me is an Awesome Thing to Be:” Staring Back in *Awesomely Emma*

In *Awesomely Emma*, Emma is positioned to take charge of the staring encounter between herself and the readers on both the verbal and visual levels to dislodge her disability and body from stereotypical, stigmatizing moorings. This essay argues that when Emma stares back at her staree, she destabilizes a long history of dehumanizing and silencing disabled people. The text thus contributes to generating disability counternarratives that expose the othering stare and its working by offering new, more accurate disability representations in which Emma, as a disabled individual, exists as an acting subject rather than a passive object.

However, before analyzing how staring back functions as a tool for resistance and activism in the text, it is necessary to briefly discuss how the concept of the gaze applies within picturebooks. Researchers working in the field of visual analysis and picturebooks have identified the implications of the presence/absence of a character's gaze in managing the reader's level of engagement and negotiating the power dynamic between the reader/viewer and the characters (Nodelman, 1988; Nikolajeva & Scott, 2001; Painter et al., 2013). They explain that when the character gazes directly at the reader, they are empowered to address the reader and resist being gazed at (or becoming a spectacle). In other words, the presence of the gaze positions the reader to acknowledge the gazing character and become involved with them. On the other hand, the lack of a character's gaze positions the reader to assume “the authority of ... viewing position” over the character (Nodelman, 2004, p.160). Adapting Kress and van Leeuwen's system of power and involvement in visual grammar, Painter et al. (2013) expand the discussion of the power of the gaze in picturebooks by analyzing the role that varying vertical and horizontal angles play in managing the relationship between the reader and the characters. They argue that different vertical viewing angles (such as high, low, and face-to-face) demonstrate the power relations between the characters and the reader/viewer. For example, when the reader is positioned at an angle where they have to look up at a character, even if the character does not look directly at the reader, the character is the one bestowed with authority and power and vice versa. Positioning the reader to look from a high vertical angle also places the story/experience of this character in a prominent focus. Painter et al. also examine how horizontal angles (frontal or oblique) determine the reader's level of engagement—whether the reader is positioned to align with (frontal angle) or detach from (oblique angle) the character. The following analysis draws on this scholarship on the gaze and

subject–reader dynamics in picturebooks to critically analyze how the presence of the stare functions in the book to resist and challenge disability stereotypes.

In *Awesomely Emma* (2020), staring back is used to assert the value of Emma's disability identity, resist mainstream stereotypes about people with limb differences, and emphasize the need for inclusion. Emma's agency and control over her disabled body and disability narrative are initiated on the book's cover. Before the readers/starers open the book, they meet Emma on the cover, looking directly at them. She is introduced against a white background, riding her black electric wheelchair and wearing a redwood dress. At first glance, the readers/starers may only notice Emma's/staree's wheelchair but cannot specify her specific disability. This subtle depiction of Emma's disability prompts readers/starers to know more about Emma/staree. Thus, it is only when the readers/starers engage with Emma/staree and look at her in her wheelchair and how she is depicted, compared to the children happily cheering to her left, that they can finally learn about her limb difference. None of the five children have a visible disability (if we exclude the girl wearing eyeglasses); they appear to be standing upright and have hands with functioning fingers. On the other hand, Emma's legs are of different sizes, and she does not have hands. Emma has a limb difference (see Figure. 1). This subtle depiction of the visual markers of Emma's disability is central to creating a staring encounter between Emma/staree and the readers/starers for two reasons. First, Garland-Thomson (2009) explains that staring becomes a natural physiological response when a novelty enters one's environment, whether in the form of a person or an object. Staring at a novelty is a desire to see and know more. Thus, by vividly representing Emma's wheelchair, the readers/starers are enticed to acknowledge Emma's/staree's disability from the beginning by looking for and knowing more about her disability; thereby, the illustrator ensures that the readers/starers are engaged with Emma/staree. This engagement, in turn, creates an opportunity for Emma/staree to invite them to "know more" about her disability and teach them "a generous lesson in tolerance and empathy" and how to look at her as an incredible little girl, a fellow human (Garland-Thomson, 2009, p.182). Second, and more importantly, it allows Emma/staree to confront the readers/starers and affirm that her disabled body and assistive device are not shameful and should not be hidden or erased. Emma's presentation on the front cover, in other words, asserts that public space needs to embrace all kinds of bodies. In short, Emma is empowered to forge a new meaning for her body, a meaning that disrupts the common understanding of disability and teaches people how to look at and talk about disabled people.

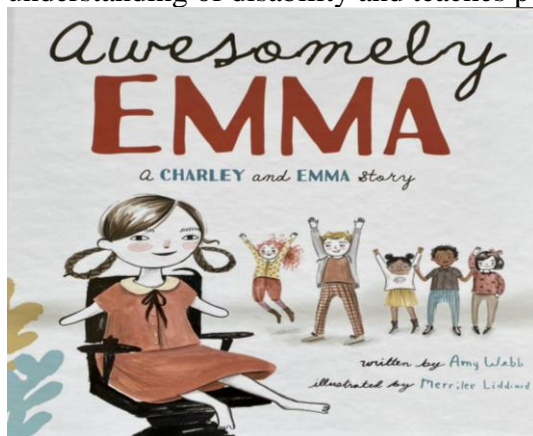


Figure 1. Cover illustration of *Awesomely Emma* (Webb, 2020) Copyright © 2020 by Beaming Books. Reprinted with permission

On the cover, Emma's/staree's unhesitant stare demands that the readers/starers stop and look at her carefully while she smiles confidently at them from her wheelchair. Through her stare, she challenges the readers'/starers' preconceived notions about limb-different people like herself by introducing a positive image—she is not the ugly, evil, or pathetic disabled person typical of mainstream disability narratives, like the witches in *The Witches*; instead, she is presented as a charming, self-assured little girl who has several friends who love and support her. While discussing focalization's role in establishing contact between a character in a picturebook and the reader, Painter et al. (2013) explain that a character's direct gaze at the reader encourages and invites the reader to interact with the character. This direct gaze demands readers'/starers' attention, inviting them to listen to and share the character's experiences. It creates a powerful personal connection between the character (staree) and the readers (starers). Hence, the readers/starers are invited to form a relationship with Emma/staree even before they open the book.

As is the case with a lived encounter, to effectively stare back at readers/starers, Emma /staree needs to balance the power dynamic in this staring encounter and ensure the readers'/starers' involvement and participation. Therefore, through several visual strategies, the illustrator manages how the readers/starers see and interact with Emma/staree. First, Emma's/staree's relationship with the readers/starers is deepened by positioning the readers/starers to experience the image via a mid-shot. According to children's literature scholar Perry Nodelman (1988), the shot choice determines the degree of involvement and the distance between characters and readers. In the case of the mid-shot, he clarifies that this shot creates a balance between intimacy and detachment. In other words, this type of shot engages readers with the characters while simultaneously keeping them at a distance. In the book, via this mid-shot, the readers/starers are positioned to look at Emma/staree and her friends from a distance. They can observe that Emma and her friends seem happy and cheer as if they have won or succeeded in doing something. In most children's books, disabled characters are depicted as sidekicks or outsiders and rarely presented as equals to non-disabled characters (Brittain, 2004). In contrast, the readers/starers can notice how Emma/staree stands in an equal relationship with the other non-disabled children in this illustration. She displays the same emotions that the other children show and is depicted in relative proximity to them—they share an equal friendship. Thus, as close observers, the readers/starers are enticed to look at Emma/staree within her environment and revisit what they know about people with her disabilities. Nevertheless, while it allows the readers/starers to stare at Emma/staree from outside, this subject position does not disempower Emma or position her as a powerless spectacle because she still looks directly back at them; hence, she acknowledges their stare and invites them into her world.

Both the gaze and the choice of the shot are related to the readers'/starers' angle of vision. In their discussion of the reader-character relationship, Painter et al. (2013) apply Kress and van Leeuwen's systems of involvement and power to picturebooks, explaining how these systems "are further ways of positioning the viewer, and these depend on the use of perspective, which creates a 'subjective' position by requiring the character to be viewed from a particular angle" (p.16). According to the system of involvement, positioning readers to see the character from an oblique horizontal angle detaches them from the character. In contrast, a front-on angle maximizes their involvement and brings them into the story's world. The system of power can also be realized through vertical angles: "what the viewer looks up to has power or authority, while what we look down on appears weak or vulnerable" (Painter et al., 2013, p. 17). On the cover of *Awesomely*

Emma, the readers/starers are positioned at a horizontal front-on angle, which increases their involvement with Emma/staree. However, positioning the readers/starers to see also through an oblique vertical angle regulates the power dynamic between them and Emma; the readers/starers, who look up at Emma/staree and the other children, do not hold power as starers over Emma. They do not look at her from an authoritative position. All these visual strategies are crucial in empowering Emma/staree to engage the readers'/starers' stare and thus invite them to reimagine limb differences by rethinking the stereotypes within which different people are framed. In short, the author empowers Emma to take control of the staring encounter, thereby playing a part in furthering the conversation about deconstructing the othering stare.

The frame, the white background, and the line are significant visual-focusing strategies the illustrator uses to manage the staring encounter and deepen the readers'/starers' engagement with Emma/staree. Children's literature scholars Moebius (1986) and Nodelman (1988) discuss the role frames, negative backgrounds, and lines play in involving or detaching readers. Moebius (1986) points out that when the illustration is unframed, it "constitutes a total experience, the view from 'within'" (p.150). In other words, an unframed picture invites readers into the world of the picturebook. Similarly, Nodelman (1988) notes that surrounding an object or a character with white space or outlining it with heavy lines serves to bring this character or object into focus: "When an object is isolated from the surrounding objects, it suggests that this object is the main object the reader is supposed to be interested in" (p.132). Graham Collier also argues that "the heavier the weight of a line, the more frontal dominance it and the surrounding space will have" to demonstrate the role of heavy lines in drawing readers' attention to a particular object on the page (As cited in Nodelman, 1988, p. 132). Thus, by illustrating the cover of *Awesomely Emma* without any frames, Liddiard draws the readers/starers into Emma's/staree's world to meet and acknowledge her stare. Moreover, the white background (the space surrounding the characters) and the heavy black lines with which Emma/staree is outlined foster readers'/starers' participation and involvement with Emma by focusing their attention on her.

Significantly, the process of staring back can also be mediated not only in real-life encounters or visually in photographs and other visual media but also through verbal narratives. Garland-Thomson (2009) argues that when disabled people talk or write about their disability experiences and depict the reality of living with a disability, they subvert the expectations of their readers/listeners and guide them instead of imagining disability differently. By taking charge of their stories, disabled people can destabilize mainstream disability narratives and forge more positive images of their disabled bodies (Garland-Thomson, 2009). Similarly, although published a few years before Garland-Thomson's study on staring, Fries's (1997) anthology *Staring Back: The Disability Experience Inside Out* introduces different literary pieces to stare back at the dominant stereotypical representation of disability. Fries uses "staring back" as a metaphor for how disabled people themselves can express their disability experiences. He explains how, when historically silenced and marginalized disabled people take control over their bodies and narrative and tell their own stories, they "[challenge] us to look anew" at disabilities and "to realize we are all part of one world ... not as separate and disparate as we might think" (pp. 2-3). In other words, by narrating their own stories, disabled people stare back.

Similarly, I extend the concept of staring back to the verbal content of Emma's story to demonstrate that her story works as a means of "staring back" at the insidious stereotypical narrative of disability woven around people with limb differences, thereby encouraging people to

change the way they deal with disability and disabled people and teaching them a lesson of disability respect. Within the book, Webb brings Emma's/staree's voice to the forefront. Building on the confidence and authority over her body that the illustrator establishes for Emma on the cover, Webb shows Emma/staree within the book as prepared to narrate a day in her life as an "awesome" disabled little girl. Inside the book, she demonstrates how her life as a disabled person is beautiful and worth living. She subverts disability misconceptions by offering an alternative image of disability. The story is narrated through a third-person narrator focalizing on Emma. When a story is internally focalized, readers "will be more likely to sympathize with [the character], even to accept [the character's] beliefs. Although internal focalization ... provides the readers the right to disagree with the focalizer, readers seem apt to accept the focalizer's version of reality" (Yannicopoulou, 2010, p. 77). Through internal focalization, the readers/starers are presented only with information filtered through Emma/staree. Their access to the story's world is restricted, and their perceptions of the story are limited to Emma's/staree's perspective. In the book, Emma's/staree's voice is warm and cheerful when she talks about her family, friends, and the arts, and at the same time, it is firm and assertive when she talks about accessibility. Emma/staree introduces to the readers a new, positive image of disabled people. The readers/starers are thus more likely to revisit their understanding and attitudes toward disabled people and disability. Therefore, because the readers/starers listen only to Emma/staree, they are brought closer to her, and their emotional attachment to Emma and her world is strengthened. In other words, as Yannicopoulou (2010) argues, the readers/starers are aligned with Emma's/staree's point of view. In short, this third-person perspective at the verbal level, while privileging Emma's/staree's perspective, also engages the readers/starers, enhances their intimacy with Emma, and fosters their empathy for and understanding of her disability.

The narrator begins the book by telling the readers that Emma/staree is a great artist and that she is blessed with loving family and friends. The narration then proceeds to describe Emma's excitement about the upcoming school trip and her subsequent disappointment with the museum's lack of accessibility. In the story, the readers/starers hear and watch Emma/staree as she enjoys drawing and spending time with her friends. Behaving like any child the readers/starers might encounter in real life brings Emma/staree closer to them. However, Webb is cautious not to downplay the disabling environment that Emma/staree deals with as a wheelchair user. One of the book's goals is to expose the disabling environment and foreground the issue of accessibility. Thus, Webb insists on drawing an authentic experience of disability wherein the disabling environment is frequently part of it. Therefore, the author emphasizes that while Emma/staree is like any other child enjoying similar activities, she is still a disabled child who navigates the world differently from non-disabled people. She also amplifies Emma's/staree's voice to resist silencing or framing her as a helpless, pitiful figure who cannot function without protection, as the dominant stereotypical narrative continually frames disabled people. Hence, within this simple story, Webb blends friendship and kindness with empowerment and activism, and the readers/starers are given a chance to engage with Emma/staree and see how her daily life, with its blessings and challenges, unfolds. Two main elements in the story highlight the power of staring back to rethink disability: embracing the word disability and combating inaccessibility.

The word disability is mentioned several times in *Awesomely Emma* to emphasize Emma's reclamation of her disability identity. Andrews et al. (2019) argue that disability is not a bad word and should not be erased from the vernacular vocabulary. They point out that erasing the word

disability implies it is something to be ashamed of and reinforces the stigma surrounding disability. It also denies disabled people the chance to identify as disabled and to take pride in being members of the disabled community. The authors assert that embracing the word disability and self-identifying as disabled empowers disabled people and sends a message of acceptance and recognition of disability as an identity. Therefore, when Emma/staree refers to her limb difference using the word disability, she counters the dominant disability narrative that attempts to erase the word disability by replacing it with euphemism. She is staring back. As has been suggested by Andrews et al. (2019) and other disability studies scholars, avoiding the use of the word “disability” by using euphemisms, such as “special needs” or “physically challenged,” “reveal[s] discomfort with disability and reinforce[s] the implication that disability is a negative and undesirable state” (p. 113).

The first time the word disability is mentioned in *Awesomely Emma* is when the narrator introduces Emma/staree to the readers/starers. Emma/staree is not referred to with infantilizing or patronizing terms, such as “differently-abled” or a “special need” child. Instead, the first time she mentions her limb difference, she reclaims her disability as part of her public persona, emphasizing that “her disability [is] part of who she [is]” (Webb, 2020, p. 4). She deconstructs the mainstream conception of disability as entailing suffering, a diminished life, and a life that is not worth living by self-assuredly announcing, “I love being me! Because ME is an awesome thing to be” (Webb, 2020, p. 5). Throughout the book, each time she faces any barrier, whether attitudinal or architectural, she summons this sense of dignity and pride in her body.

Similarly, when her friend Charley refers to her limb difference with the word “disability,” Emma is not afraid or ashamed of being known and referred to as a disabled little girl. If mainstream culture avoids using this word, thereby “validating the negative, undesirable connotation of the word,” Emma reclaims the term and encourages her non-disabled friend to use the word “disability” (Andrews et al., 2019, p. 115). Moreover, by choosing to refer to herself as a disabled person, Emma resists imposing stereotypes and assigning meaning to disabled bodies. Instead, she can interpret her limb difference and name it. Thus, her authentic disability narrative can positively impact children’s perceptions of limb differences and foster conversations about disability.

On the other hand, by exposing inaccessibility at the museum, Emma resists othering her disability. Her decision to write a petition protesting the museum’s inaccessibility confronts the sentimental rhetoric of disability. One of the rhetorics within which disabled people are commonly framed is the sentimental rhetoric of disability. This rhetoric “produces the sympathetic victim or helpless sufferer needing protection or succor and invoking pity, inspiration, and frequent contributions” (Garland-Thomson, 2002, p. 63). It builds on the myth of the disabled person as a helpless victim. Therefore, by writing the petition, Emma/staree challenges this stereotypical rhetoric. She is not a victim. She takes charge of the situation. Although she shares her decision to write the petition with her classmates and is happy with their support, she does not wait for anybody to help her or decide for her how she is supposed to generate change. By standing up for herself, Emma/staree confronts the readers/starers with an image of a powerful, “awesome” girl and teaches them a lesson in disability activism. Thus, the verbal text deepens Emma’s/staree’s complex and multidimensional character, which she affirms through her stare on the cover and allows the readers/starers to cultivate a new understanding of disability and disabled bodies.

To establish this narrative of “staring back” effectively, both the illustrations and the verbal text work to engage the readers/starers and empower Emma/staree as a potential staree to take charge of the exchange. The illustrator employs several visual strategies to develop the readers’/starers’ sense of intimacy and emotional involvement with Emma/staree. Thus, while listening to Emma’s/staree’s story, the readers/starers are invited by illustrations into Emma’s world. The pictures give them further insight into Emma’s/staree’s world, where they can see her carrying herself confidently around. The readers/starers are mainly positioned to see Emma/staree through long shots; she is surrounded by a detailed environment and interacts with her family and friends. Nodelman (1988) points out that this type of shot implies objectivity and distance; it emphasizes “the figures’ relationship with places and other people, their social situation” (p. 235). Thus, this shot positions the reader/starer to watch and listen to Emma/staree as an unmediated outside observer. However, the illustrator still ensures they remain engaged with the story by using a white background and positioning them to see the action unfolding frontally and at eye level. The white background, as discussed earlier, serves to bring readers/starers into the story world, while the frontal perspective maximizes their emotional participation. Engaged, the readers/starers can see how Emma/staree is positioned near the other characters. She does not feel less than her peers. She interacts with them in all the pictures and even steers the conversation herself.

Moreover, as Emma/staree proudly identifies as disabled, and uses the word “disability” to refer to her limb difference, every time she appears in the illustrations, her disabled body and wheelchair are represented. This resistance to the erasure of disability is a form of visual activism. By not only referring to her disability verbally but also visually depicting it, the author and the illustrator “make the public accountable for knowing the reality of [Emma’s] body” and promote the acceptance of diversity (Garland-Thomson, 2009, p. 193).

The culmination of Emma’s staring encounter in *Awesomely Emma* occurs in the closing illustration when Emma/staree reappears, staring directly at the readers/starers (see Figure. 2).



Figure 2. Emma appears confident in her wheelchair, staring back at the readers. (Webb, 2020) Copyright © 2020 by Beaming Books. Reprinted with permission

Surrounded by a white background, she appears by herself, this time in her electric wheelchair, wearing a different dress of the same color as the one she wears on the cover. As on the front cover, the illustrator's visual choices contribute to making this staring encounter productive. In addition to using a white background and heavy lines, Liddiard positions Emma/staree in the center, occupying almost the entire page. Bang (2016) argues that "[t]he center of the page is the most effective center of attention" and that "[t]he larger an object is in a picture, the stronger it feels" (p. 62). Thus, by positioning Emma/staree in the center, the illustrator draws the reader's/starer's attention to her, and by upscaling her image, she empowers Emma/staree. She also boosts the reader's/starer's perception of Emma's agency and control. In this illustration, Emma/staree stares back at the reader/starer in pride that she is the master of her life. She has the power to have guided them to see and hear what she wants them to know about her, not what they expect to see and hear. By staring back, Emma entices her starers to unlearn negative stereotypes and reimagine limb differences.

Conclusion

This paper demonstrated how *Awesomely Emma* utilizes the concept of staring back as a tool for resistance and visual activism. It showed how, by staring back, Emma resists silencing and othering, reclaims her story, and creates a positive representation of disability. It also highlighted how the protagonist stares back at her starrer to insist on disability visibility and amplifying disabled people's voices and presence in public spaces. This paper showed how this concept has been effectively utilized in this picturebook by examining how the visual and textual narratives in the book work in tandem to produce narratives that subvert disability stereotypes and reimagine disability. It, particularly, emphasized the role that visual strategies in the book play in positioning readers to reevaluate their conceptions and understanding of disability. More importantly, the analysis of this picturebook highlighted how *Awesomely Emma* is a powerful narrative that not only challenges the dominant disability narrative but also reimagines disability. In other words, it contributes to constructing a counternarrative to the dominant negative narratives associated with limb differences and disability. As a counternarrative that introduces a positive, authentic representation of a disabled child, *Awesomely Emma* can improve children's attitudes toward people with disabilities.

About the Author:

Reham Almutairi is a Ph.D. candidate in children's and young adult Literature at King Saud University, Saudi Arabia. She is a lecturer at Qassim University, Saudi Arabia. Her area of interests are children's literature, disability studies, medical humanities, and representation of children's trauma. ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6529-6741>

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