

VAMMAISUUS JA KANSALAIKUUS - TUTKIMUSPÄIVÄT
Suomen Vammaistutkimuksen Seura ry

PORTRAYALS OF INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY IN POPULAR CULTURE

Howard Sklar, PhD
University of Helsinki
howard.sklar@helsinki.fi

Imagining others

- .. What do fiction writers do when they imagine the lives of others?
- .. Some, like author Lionel Shriver, believe that it gives them complete freedom to enter those lives:
 - ⊗ “Briefly, my address maintained that fiction writers should be allowed to write fiction — thus *should not let concerns about ‘cultural appropriation’ constrain our creation of characters from different backgrounds than our own.* I defended *fiction as a vital vehicle for empathy.* If we have permission to write only about our own personal experience, there is no fiction, but only memoir. Honestly, my thesis seemed so self-evident that I’d worried the speech would be bland.
 - ⊗ “Nope — not in the topsy-turvy universe of identity politics” (Lionel Shriver, “Will the Left Survive the Millennials?” *New York Times*, 23.9.2016, emphasis added).

Imagining others

- .. Shriver assumes:
 - ⊗ That *writers* of fiction can understand the experience of others through *empathy*
 - ⊗ That our empathy as readers also enables us to understand the experiences of others *from the inside*
- .. But how much of the experiences of others *can* we understand?
- .. And what is *empathy*?

Two view of empathy

- Liisa Myyry (2003): “an affective response more appropriate to another’s situation than one’s own”
- Martha Nussbaum (2001): “imaginative reconstruction of another person’s experience”

Are there limits to what we can understand?

- In “Who Has the Right to Feel? The Ethics of Literary Empathy,” Kathleen Lundeen writes: “[I]n literature, as in life, there are **shared borders of identity that we are compelled to recognize but cannot cross**” (92).
- Lundeen suggests that there are limits to what we can understand about the experiences of another – that there are “borders” between us that limit our understanding.
 - ✧ Lundeen, Kathleen (2001) “Who Has the Right to Feel? The Ethics of Literary Empathy.” In Todd F. Davis and Kenneth Womack, eds. *Mapping the Ethical Turn: A Reader in Ethics, Culture, and Literary Theory*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia. 83-92.

Intellectual disability and authorship

- Two competing views:
 - That we *can* enter the lives of others through the imagination
 - That we are limited in what we can understand by the “borders” of our experience
- What does this mean in terms of the portrayal of **intellectual disability** in fiction?

1. On Terminology and Personhood

- .. One of the most difficult issues lies in understanding what we mean by the terms we use – what those terms imply about people we label as “intellectually disabled”
- .. So many different terms, each implying something slightly (or even radically) different:
 - ✧ *intellectual disability*
 - ✧ *cognitive impairment*
 - ✧ *developmental disability*
 - ✧ *mental retardation*
 - ✧ *learning difficulty*
 - ✧ *learning disability*

Tom Shakespeare on labelling

- Reliance on labels “means that the person’s individuality—not only their personality, but also other aspects of their identity such as gender, sexuality and ethnicity—can be ignored, as the impairment label becomes the most prominent and relevant feature of their lives” (71).
- ✧ Shakespeare, Tom (2006) *Disability Rights and Wrongs*. London: Routledge.

More on labelling



- .. And with these labels, it becomes possible to think of people with intellectual disabilities as types.
- .. (More on this in a moment...)

2. Some Representative Intellectually Disabled Characters

- .. Lennie Small, *Of Mice and Men* (Steinbeck)
- .. Benjy Compson, *The Sound and the Fury* (Faulkner)
- .. Charlie Gordon, *Flowers for Algernon* (Keyes)
- .. Forrest Gump, *Forrest Gump* (Groom)
- .. Mattis, *Fuglane* (or, *The Birds*; Vesaas)
- .. Chauncey Gardner, *Being There* (Kosinski)
- .. Maggie, "Recitatif" (Toni Morrison)
- .. Isaac, "Idiots First" (Malamud)
- .. Spiros Antonapoulos, *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* (McCullers)

Intellectually Disabled Characters as “Archetypes”

- .. The Animal (Lennie, Benjy)
- .. The Wise Fool (Chauncey Gardner, Forrest Gump)
- .. The Uncontrollable Monster (Lennie, Benjy)
- .. The Big Oaf (Lennie, Benjy)
- .. The Cipher (Benjy, Isaac) (cipher = “nonentity”)
- .. The Blank Slate (Benjy, Forrest Gump)
- .. The Slovenly Dullard (Antanoupolos)
- .. The Genial Simpleton (Charlie, Forrest Gump)
- .. The Overgrown Child (all)

Intellectually Disabled Characters as “Archetypes”

- .. These types imply certain features popularly assumed to be connected with intellectual disability
- .. They can also serve as *metaphors* for larger ideas about in society – what Mitchell and Snyder (2000) call *narrative prosthesis*

Narrative Prosthesis

.. Mitchell and Snyder have coined the term *narrative prosthesis* to describe the ways that many disabled characters in fiction serve as “a crutch upon which literary narratives lean for their representational power, disruptive potential, and analytical insight” (49).

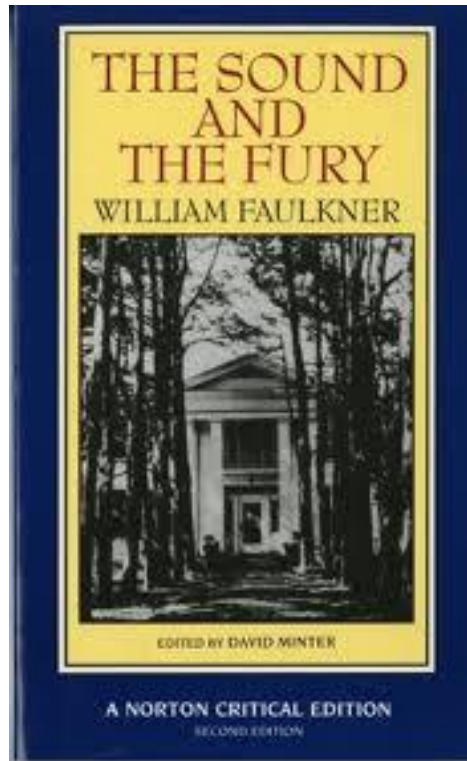
⊗ Mitchell, David T. and Sharon L. Snyder (2000) *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.

Some examples



- .. Let's look at some examples of how these notions are used in fictions that portray people with intellectual disabilities...

2.1 Faulkner: *The Sound and the Fury*



Published in 1929



William Faulkner
1897-1962

Benjy's section



- .. The first section of the novel represents the stream of consciousness of Benjy, an adult son of the Compsons.
- .. There are a number of features that suggest his intellectual disability, as in this excerpt:

The Sound and the Fury

Faulkner, William ([1929] 1995) *The Sound and the Fury*. London: Vintage.

"Hello, Benjy." Caddy said. She opened the gate and came in and stooped down. Caddy smelled like leaves. "Did you come to meet me." she said. "Did you come to meet Caddy. What did you let him get his hands so cold for, Versh."

"I told him to keep them in his pockets." Versh said. "Holding on to that ahun [iron] gate."

"Did you come to meet Caddy." she said, rubbing my hands. "What is it. What are you trying to tell Caddy." Caddy smelled like trees and like when she says we were asleep.

The Sound and the Fury

What are you moaning about, Luster said. You can watch them again when we get to the branch [of the river]. Here. Here's you a jimson weed. He gave me the flower. We went through the fence, into the lot.

"What is it." Caddy said "What are you trying to tell Caddy." (4, emphasis original)

Features of Benjy's consciousness

- .. People talk *about* Benjy, but he doesn't speak
- .. He often *tries* to speak, as when Caddy, his sister, "What are you trying to tell Caddy?" (Also, in other passages we are *told* that he is trying to speak.)
- .. He doesn't seem to understand what the others say to him.
- .. His thoughts are drawn by sensory impressions – Caddy's smell, for instance.
- .. Sometimes, these impressions cause him to drift into the memory of past events (indicated by the italicized passages).

How Benjy is described

- In the fourth section of the novel, which is narrated in the third person, we get a very detailed description of how Benjy appears to others:
 - ✧ "...Luster entered, followed by a big man who appeared to have been shaped of some substance whose particles would not or did not cohere to one another or to the frame which supported it. His skin was dead-looking and hairless; dropsical [swollen] too, he moved with a shambling gait like a trained bear. His hair was pale and fine. It had been brushed smoothly down upon his brow like that of children in daguerreotypes. His eyes were clear, of the pale sweet blue of cornflowers, his thick mouth hung open, drooling a little" (233).

The “Archetypes” again

- .. The Animal (Lennie, Benjy)
- .. The Wise Fool (Chauncey Gardner, Forrest Gump)
- .. The Uncontrollable Monster (Lennie, Benjy)
- .. The Big Oaf (Lennie, Benjy)
- .. The Cipher (Benjy, Isaac) (cipher = “nonentity”)
- .. The Blank Slate (Benjy, Forrest Gump)
- .. The Slovenly Dullard (Antanoupolos)
- .. The Genial Simpleton (Charlie, Forrest Gump)
- .. The Overgrown Child (all)

What features – archetypes – do we find?

- .. “a big man” (The Big Oaf)
- .. “shaped of some substance whose particles would not or did not cohere to one another or to the frame which supported it. His skin was dead-looking and hairless (The Cipher, The [Uncontrollable] Monster)
- .. “dropsical too, he moved with a shambling gait like a trained bear” (The Animal)
- .. “His hair was pale and fine. It had been brushed smoothly down upon his brow like that of children in daguerreotypes. His eyes were clear, of the pale sweet blue of cornflowers” (The Overgrown Child)
- .. “his thick mouth hung open, drooling a little” (The Slovenly Dullard)

Steinbeck: *Of Mice and Men*

Steinbeck, John ([1937] 2006) *Of Mice and Men*. London: Penguin.

- We see a similar type of portrayal in John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*:
 - ✧ "...a huge man, shapeless of face, with large, pale eyes, with wide, sloping shoulders; and he walked heavily, dragging his feet a little, the way a bear drags his paws. His arms did not swing at his sides, but hung loosely" (2).
- Although Lennie is very verbal (unlike Benjy), he does conform to some of the archetypes:
 - ✧ The Big Oaf ("a huge man")
 - ✧ The Animal ("the way a bear drags his paws")
 - ✧ The Uncontrollable Monster ("he walked heavily, dragging his feet a little" – and Lennie actually does kill, even if he doesn't mean to)

Association of intellectually disabled with animals

- According to Martin Halliwell, in *Images of Idiocy: The Idiot Figure in Modern Fiction and Film* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2004):
 - “Lennie’s ‘shapeless’ features and ‘heavy’ walk mark him out as an idiot figure, with his large size, his proximity to animals (bear)...reinforcing his lack of freewill and rationality” (Halliwell 2004: 144).

Zunshine: Theory of Mind

- .. According to Lisa Zunshine, in *Why We Read Fiction: Theory of Mind and the Novel* (Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2006), these features lead us to assume certain things about Lennie's mental capabilities or mental state.
- .. Zunshine claims that we "ascribe to a person a certain mental state on the basis of her observable action (e.g., we see her reaching for a glass of water and assume that she is thirsty" (Zunshine 2006: 6).
 - ✧ "We all learn, whether consciously or not, that the default interpretation of behavior reflects a character's state of mind, and every fictional story that we read reinforces our tendency to make that kind of interpretation first," (3-4).

Benjy's limited cognitive ability

- Returning to *The Sound and the Fury*, we get a more precise sense of the limits of Benjy's cognitive ability in other parts of the narrative.
- For instance, he lacks the word "ice" and even the concept of what makes it ice:
 - ✧ "'It's froze.' Caddy said, 'Look.' She broke the top of the water and held a piece of it against my face. 'Ice. that means how cold it is'" (9).

Benjy's emotional life

- Even though the entire section of the book portrays his thought processes, we only get brief glimpses of his feelings about things.
- Here, he delivers a written message to a neighbor:
 - ✧ *"When I saw her eyes I began to cry. You idiot, Mrs Patterson said. I told him never to send you alone again. Give it to me. Quick,"* (10, emphasis original).
- Benjy's crying suggests that he's afraid of her, but it never becomes transparent – his own views are only implied.

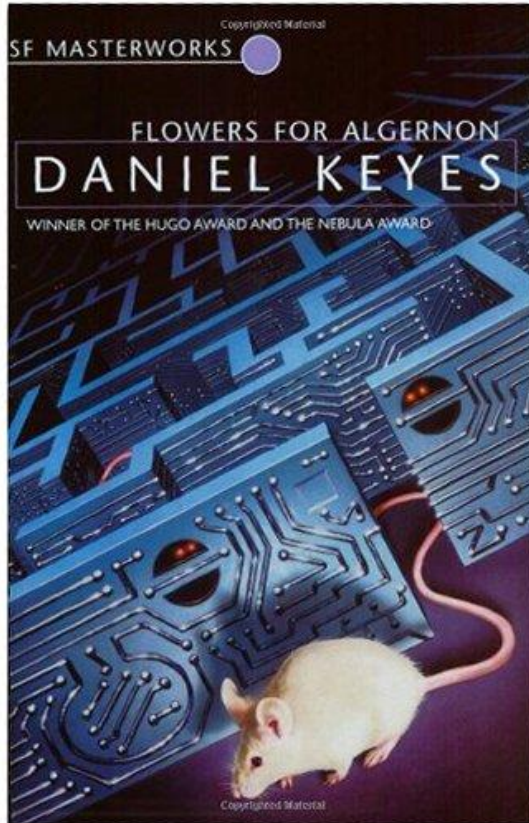
On the novel as a work of art

- Scholes and Kellogg (*The Nature of Narrative*, Oxford University Press, 1966) suggest that the narrative is “a kind of super stream of consciousness in which the character’s limited mind accounts for an excessive distortion of normal thought patterns, which communicates all the more effectively on **a level well above anything the character himself may be supposed capable of achieving**” (199-200).
- In other words, the disability of the character himself is highlighted by the difference between what we as readers understand, and what “the character himself may be supposed capable of achieving.”
- So, does the character have agency – the ability to control his own life, to speak for himself?

A second example

- .. In the next example, we'll see a character that also lacks agency – until he takes control of his own life by becoming *hyper-intelligent*...

2.2 Daniel Keyes: *Flowers for Algernon*



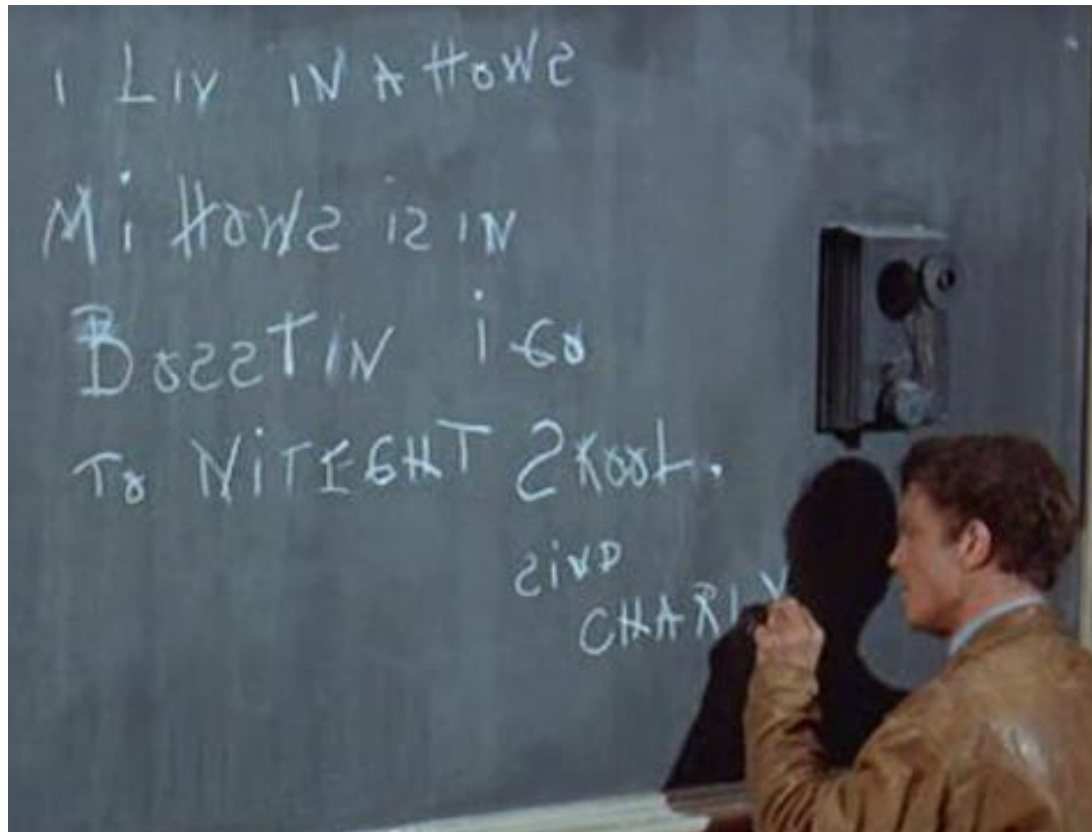
Published in 1966



Daniel Keyes

Ralph Nelson: "Charly" (1968)

Cliff Robertson as "Charlie"



Flowers for Algernon: a work of science fiction

- .. The novel is made up of the journal entries of a man named Charlie Gordon, who, we are told by the character himself, is “retarded.”
- .. Charlie has been selected to receive an experimental operation that, if successful, will make him highly intelligent – a genius.
- .. The journal entries become more and more analytical as his intelligence increases.
- .. The following is from the first entry, prior to the operation:

Keyes: *Flowers for Algernon*

Keyes, Daniel ([1966] 1994) *Flowers for Algernon*. London: Gollancz.

progris riport 1 martch 3

- Dr Strauss says I shoud rite down what I think and remembir and evrey thing that happins to me from now on. I dont no why but he says its importint so they will see if they can use me. I hope they use me because Miss Kinnian says mabye they can make me smart. I want to be smart. My name is Charlie Gordon I werk in Donners bakery where Mr Donner gives me 11 dollars a week and bred or cake if I want. I am 32 yeres old and next munth is my brithday.

progris riport 1 martch 3 (continued)

- .. I tolld dr Strauss and perfesser Nemur I cant rite good but he says it dont matter he says I shud rite just like I talk and like I rite compushishens in Miss Kinnians class at the beekmin collidge center for retarded adults where I go to lern 3 times a week on my time off. (1)

Here we see:

- .. The desire to be “smart” and not “retarded”
 - ⊗ = intelligence as an absolute value
- .. The progress reports are meant to be a reflection of what he’s thinking (“rite just like I talk”)
- .. Misspellings and other features of grammar are used to convey lack of intelligence.

The assumption of insight

- .. Charlie eventually realizes that he has unique insight into his own disability.
- .. In a scene late in the novel, after he has become highly intelligent, he looks at himself in the mirror and sees his reflection – but in the form of the “old” Charlie, who was intellectually disabled.

The mirror image of Charlie:

- “I don’t know how I knew it was Charlie and not me. Something about the dull, questioning look in his face. His eyes, wide and frightened, as if at one word from me he would turn and run deep into the dimension of the mirrored world. But he didn’t run. He just stared back at me, mouth open, jaw hanging loosely” (175).

Some common tropes:

- .. Charlie notices that his earlier self had a “mouth open, jaw hanging loosely” (175).
- .. In our earlier example from *The Sound and the Fury*, we saw similar features that convey intellectual disability.
- .. We see this in the film version, as well:



**- You wear them.
- That's right.**

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EtHUTDxViwU&index=1&list=PLvD_DVMGPYa-C1yOFHiKKqIY4mr_pp91t

The Genial Simpleton

- In this video clip, we see one way in which Charlie conforms to the archetypes described earlier:
 - ⊗ He is kind, but simple.

Using his dual insight

- .. However, he also realizes that he inhabits both “worlds,” both intellectual ability *and* disabilities:
- .. “I’ve got to use my knowledge and skills to work in the field of increasing human intelligence. Who is better equipped? Who else has lived in both worlds?” (139).

Similar to life stories of intellectually disabled

- .. One famous example appears in Robert Bogdan and Steven J. Taylor's seminal *The Social Meaning of Mental Retardation: Two Life Stories* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1994).
- .. In his life story, "Ed Murphy" describes an experience similar to that of Charlie:
- .. "I'm talking like an expert. I had to live it.... Experts are people who have lived it" (30).

But this is not *Charlie's* narrative, but *Keyes's*

- .. Keyes, the author, is not himself intellectually disabled.
- .. What does the act of speaking for – or *through* – Charlie mean?

Like a postmodern folklorist?

- On the one hand, Keyes – like a postmodern folklorist whose aim is “in providing a space in which previously unarticulated folk-positions might finally achieve voice” (Ritchie 1993: 366) – seems committed to giving voice to Charlie.
- ✧ Ritchie, Susan (1993) “Ventriloquist Folklore: Who Speaks for Representation?” *Western Folklore* 52.2/4: 365-78.

Risk of “ventriloquism”

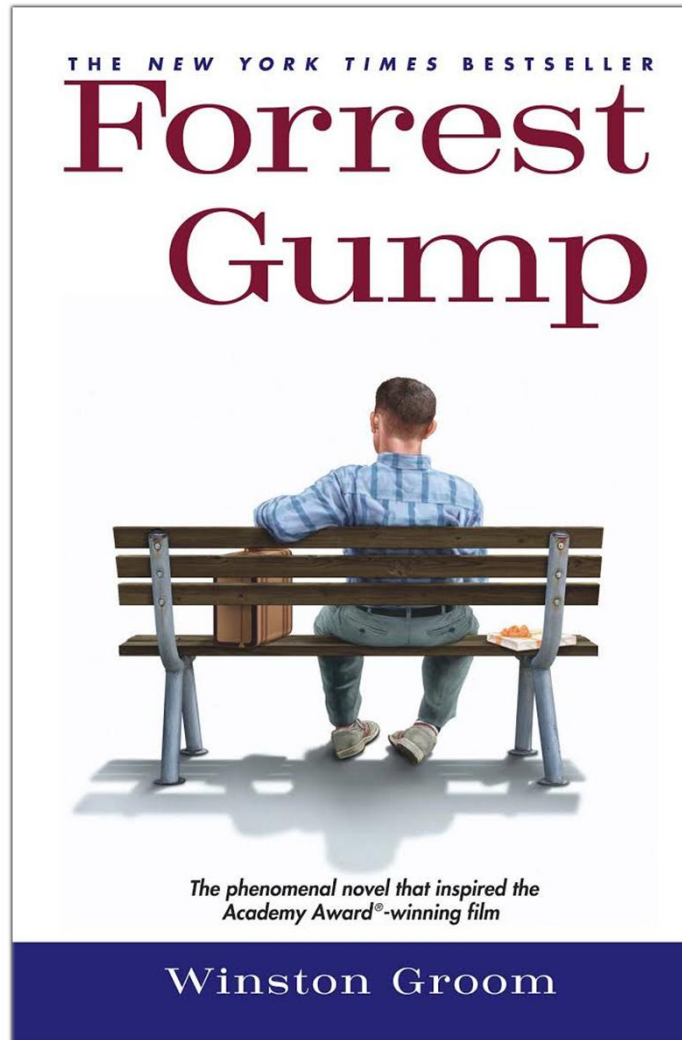
- However, Susan Ritchie argues that there is a risk that, in assuming that voice, one will adopt “ventriloquist strategies of representation, where folklore presumes to speak on the behalf of some voiceless group or individual” (366; cited in Lundeen 2001: 90).
- ✧ Ritchie, Susan (1993) “Ventriloquist Folklore: Who Speaks for Representation?” *Western Folklore* 52.2/4: 365-78.

A third example: less obviously “intellectually disabled”?

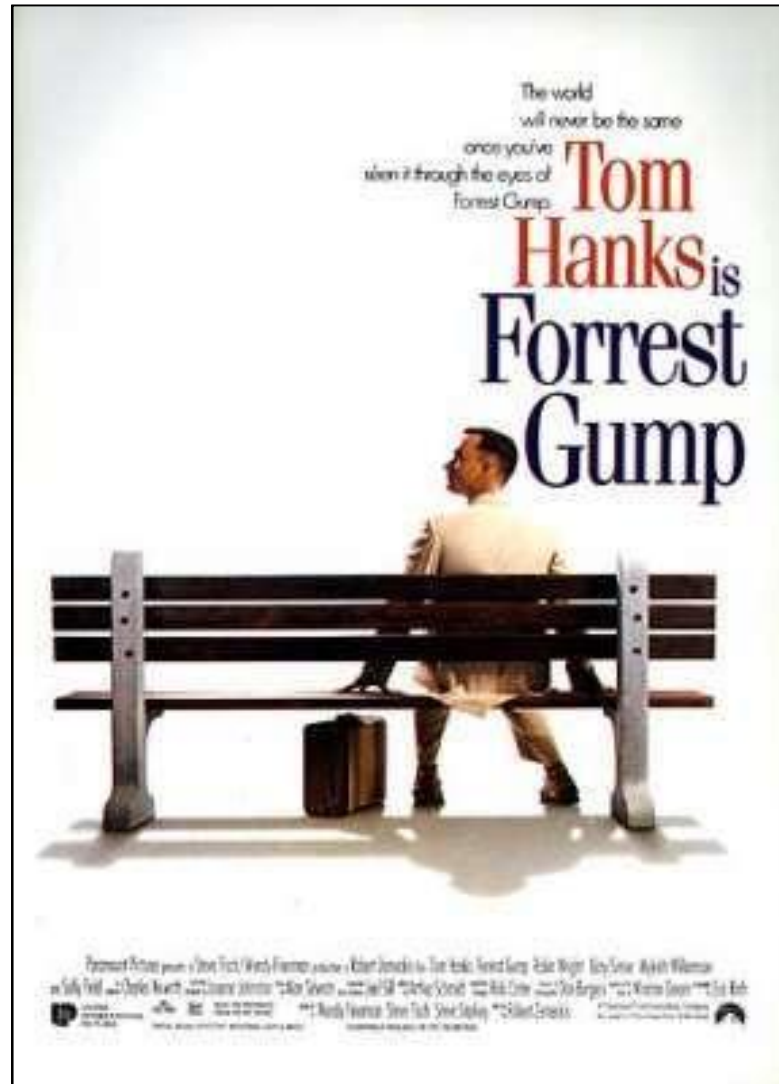


- .. Another example holds a strong place in the popular imagination...

2.3 Winston Groom: *Forrest Gump*



Robert Zemeckis: "Forrest Gump"



Novel versus film

- In the novel, Forrest talks about his own intellectual disability directly, and even mentions a number of examples of intellectually disabled characters in fiction (including Lennie, from *Of Mice and Men*, which he claims is his favorite).
- In this sense, the novel is similar to *Flowers for Algernon*, in that Forrest tells about his own life – or, at least, Groom has imagined what he might say.

Novel versus film

- .. In the film, Forrest talks a lot, tells a lot about himself, but mostly we witness the things that happen to him.
- .. Sometimes, as when he “needs to pee” when he meets President John Kennedy, his adventures serve as comic relief – his lack of understanding provides momentum for the story.
- .. At other times, as when he fights in the Vietnam War, his experiences and commentary symbolize the period in which he lives.
- .. Thus, he is often a “prosthetic” character, in the sense that Mitchell and Snyder describe (see earlier slide).

Archetypes

- .. He also fits a number of the archetypes that we've discussed:
 - ⊗ The Wise Fool: He often makes wise comments without realizing their wisdom.
 - ⊗ The Blank Slate: He serves as a reflection of other people's dreams and desires, and absorbs impression from things and events around him.
 - ⊗ The Genial Simpleton: He is kind and simple – which sometimes leads people to pity him, others to take advantage of him.
 - ⊗ The Overgrown Child: His enthusiasm for everything is like that of a child.

Yet, genuine moments of empathy and sympathy

- .. In the school bus scene – and later in the military bus scene – we walk with the young Forrest down the aisle.
 - ✧ We see the unkind reactions of most of the children.
 - ✧ Then we see Forrest's reaction, then the children again, then Forrest.
 - ✧ We are inside his experience (empathy) and outside of it, looking at his suffering (sympathy)
 - ✧ This seems a particularly sensitive expression of his experience.
- .. Let's see the clip:



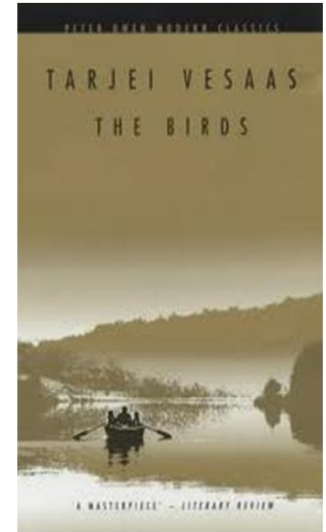
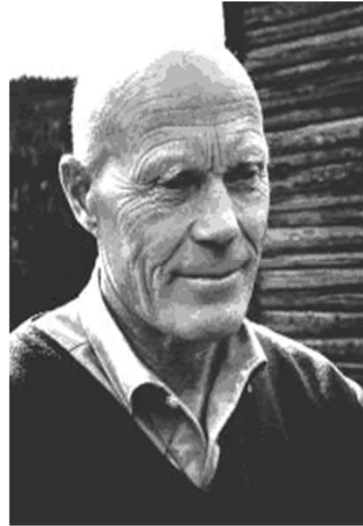
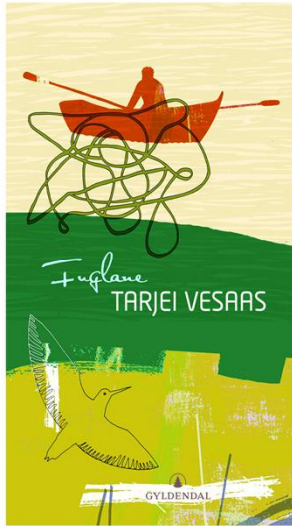
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TdINyRBIKVo>

A fourth example



- .. This seems a particularly nuanced and expressive portrayal of intellectual disability:

2.4 Tarjei Vesaas: *Fuglane* (*The Birds*)



- Tarjei Vesaas: 1897-1970
- From Vinje, Norway
- Wrote in "nynorsk" (New Norwegian)
- *The Birds* (*Fuglane*): 1957
- *The Winds* (*Vindane*, containing the story "The Half-Wit" / "Tusten"): 1952
- Nominated several times for Nobel Prize for literature

Vesaas: *Fuglane* (*The Birds*)

Vesaas, Tarjei ([1957] 2005) *Fuglane* [*The Birds*]. Oslo: Gyldendal Norsk Forlag.

_____. (1969) *The Birds*. Translated by Torbjørn Støverud and Michael Barnes. New York: William Morrow.

- .. “You don’t need to worry, Hege, I know what I can and can’t do” (1969: 214 / [1957] 2005: 198).
- .. ““Do you suppose I haven’t been *thinking*?” The word they normally avoided for Mattis’s sake—and here he was using it himself, carefully and deliberately” (1969: 215 / [1957] 2005: 199).

Mattis's awareness

- .. In this example, Mattis seems aware of his abilities ("I know what I can and can't do"), but also seems frustrated by the assumption that he can't think.
- .. Like Charlie, he is frustrated that others are clever but that he isn't:
 - ⊗ "Everyone was clever except him," he thinks at one point (1969: 97 / [1957] 2005: 91).
- .. But he also recognizes that people are different:
 - ⊗ "*One person's like this, another's like that. . . . That was as near as he dared come to thinking about it*" (1969: 222, emphasis in original / [1957] 2005: 205).

Vesaas: *Fuglane* (*The Birds*)

- .. Vesaas approaches an understanding of what Mattis experiences, but *doesn't assume* more than he would have access to through his personal experience.
- .. In this sense, he is not a ventriloquist, but has tried to *closely observe* Mattis and to understand his experience.

3. Some Observations on Narrative Voice

What types of “voices” are represented in these works?

Varieties of Narrative Voice

- .. Literally verbalized (as with the cinematic version of Forrest Gump or, when he speaks, Lennie)
- .. In “written” form (as is the case with Charlie, or in the novelistic version of Gump)
- .. A sort of “inner speech” (Palmer 2004: 94) that represents the thoughts or consciousness of a character as though they were transcribed – even if that transcription is a highly stylized representation of those thoughts, as in the case of Benjy in *The Sound and the Fury*

Varieties of Narrative Voice

- As **represented speech** embedded in a prose narrative (as occurs in all of these cases, except with Benjy)
- Articulated **descriptively** by a narrator who **attributes particular thoughts and feelings to a character** (Lennie, or Spiros Antonopolos, in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*).

Listening to voices of people with intellectual disabilities

- Looking at these examples, we realize the importance of listening to the *actual* voices of people with intellectual disabilities.
- In another seminal work from the social sciences, Langness and Levine's *Culture and Retardation: Life Histories of Mildly Mentally Retarded Persons in American Society* (Dordrecht, The Netherlands: D. Reidel, 1986), they suggest:
 - “It is only through their voices, and the careful examination of what they say and do in everyday life that we can fully interpret their behavior independently of the label of retardation” (191).

And this should caution us against the risk of “mindreading”

• Zunshine warns of this possibility, when she suggests that the “mindreading” by which Theory of Mind frequently is understood “might as well [be]...called...mind misreading,” in that, “more often than not it actually *limits* our perception and interpretation and lures us into insidious cognitive traps. For instance, it is vulnerable to essentialist thinking (e.g., just consider how easy it is for us to slide into believing that the capacity for complex mental states is what makes us “essentially” human), and as such can be used as an effective ‘trope of dehumanization’ [citing Vermeule 2002: 87]” (21).

✧ In Savarese and Zunshine (2014)

A respectful approach to the stories of others

- .. Author Hari Kunzru:
- .. “Good writers transgress without transgressing, in part because they are humble about what they do not know. They treat their own experience of the world as provisional. They do not presume. They respect people, not by leaving them alone in the inviolability of their cultural authenticity, but by becoming involved with them. They research.”

See also my article on this:

- “Reading Other Minds: Ethical Considerations on the Representation of Intellectual Disability in Fiction.” In Tom Shakespeare, ed. *Disability Research Today: International Perspectives*. London: Routledge, 2015.

Thanks!



.. howard.sklar@helsinki.fi