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Becoming a Boy: Disability & Masculinity in Rodman Philbrick's *Freak the Mighty*

A Capstone Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements of the Renée Crown University Honors
Program at Syracuse University

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and Renée Crown University Honors

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Abstract

My Capstone thesis is a discussion of the various representations of disability in Rodman Philbrick's children's book and the film it was made into. In analyzing the characters, relationships between the characters and vernacular used within the text, I came to the conclusion that certain parts of the book, including the inclusion of not one, but two characters with impairments as main characters, serve to engage the book in a complex discourse with various concepts of disability and masculinity.

In order to place Philbrick's text within a larger discourse of disability studies, I analyze it with regard to theories of disability and its representation. I discuss the use of particular words and phrases to describe Max and Kevin. Although in some instances, the use of negative terms to describe people with disabilities such as "freak" or "cripple" can be empowering and intended to reclaim and redefine these words, the terms can also be misinterpreted and understood as the proper words to use when talking about people with disabilities. Specifically children, the target audience for the book may not realize that these terms are the incorrect ones to use.

In the next part of my paper, I explain the theory of the notion of disability as "incomplete," and how the combination of Max and Kevin into a singular entity "Freak the Mighty" complicates this idea. When Max and Kevin come together to form Freak the Mighty, they come to embody the image of the ideal, consisting of a sound mind and a sound body that nonetheless remain distinct, which perpetuates the Cartesian theory of duality. This unification of Max and Kevin into Freak the Mighty leads to their acceptance by their peers and adults in their lives, which emphasizes the idea that the boys are not worthy of acceptance and praise on their own and are seen only as a "whole" person when they are together, which calls attention to the social construction of the abled/disabled binary.

The next section of my paper focuses on the heavy representation of the supercrip stereotype in the book. The supercrip is a person with a disability who "overcomes" his or her impairment to achieve normality, which can be critically problematic because disability is not something that needs to be overcome. In the end of the book, Max succeeds in overcoming his learning disability and becomes a writer, while Kevin, who is incapable of overcoming his disability because of its physical manifestations, dies. The fate of both boys enforce the image of the supercrip and the importance placed on overcoming disability. In the penultimate section of my paper I discuss how stereotypes and constructions of masculinity are enforced through Max and Kevin's characters. In the same way that he is able to overcome his disability, Max grows into a more traditionally masculine character in the end, while Kevin, who cannot represent a stereotypical man physically, dies before he can grow into a man. The final section of my paper deals with the adaptation of *Freak the Mighty* into a film. I discuss what changes were made and what importance those changes have in terms of the representation of disability both within and outside the text.

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Introduction

Freak the Mighty is at its core a story about a young boy finding his voice. Like hundreds of thousands of novels that came before it, *Freak the Mighty* chronicles the journey of Max Kane as he grows up, finds his voice and the courage to use it, all through his experiences with his friend, Kevin. Max's story can be considered unique because both he and his friend Kevin are children with physical and mental impairments. Although at its surface the book is a simple one, an easy read, *Freak the Mighty* engages with multiple discourses of disability, masculinity, and what is considered normal in very complex ways. The friendship between Max and Kevin and the implications of bringing the two boys together have very complex effects on the messages of the novel. *The Mighty*, the film version of the book, also engages with these discourses with complicated consequences. Both the book and the film take on issues of disability, including theories of the abled/disabled binary, normative and ideal bodies, stereotypes, resignification, and masculinity. These complicated and sometimes problematic engagements with the discourses complicate the seemingly simple narrative. While it is laudable that the text takes on these dense discourses and makes them accessible to younger audiences, it can also create dangers by introducing and not fully explaining these complex theories.

History of Characters with Disabilities in Literature

People with impairments are a historically under-represented group in American children's literature.¹ According to Joan K. Blaska, "Perhaps no group has been as overlooked and inaccurately presented in children's books as individuals with disabilities...The limited presence of persons with disabilities points out the need for more stories that represent the diversity of society, which includes persons with varying abilities" (4). Not only are characters with disabilities historically under-represented, but when they are included in children's literature, they are often misrepresented. These characters are oversimplified and used not for their complexity as people but for their easily identifiable impairment which is exploited by writers for dramatic effect, for emotional appeal, or for blatant symbolism (Harnett 21). In 1977, Biklen and Bogdan identified ten typical disability models: pitiable and pathetic, an object of violence, sinister and evil, the person with disability as atmosphere, a super cripp with super qualities, laughable, his/her own worst-and-only enemy, a burden, non-sexual, and incapable of fully participating in everyday life (qtd. in Gervay 1). Characters with disabilities almost always fit into one or more of these discouraging, limiting categories. Traditionally they are rarely the main characters or the focus of the plot of the story. Most often, a character with a disability in a children's book serves as either "saintly" or "evil." He or she is typically one-dimensional, and his or her impairment frequently serves as an outward

¹ The term "children's literature" will be used throughout the paper to describe books intended for children aged six to twelve. These books are often used in classrooms by teachers and parents or guardians to educate children.

representation of inner traits or characteristics. Characters like these in children's literature encourage reductive stereotypes, are flat and static, and usually are either magically cured or die in the end of the story.

Recently, there has been an increasing number of children's books which include representations of characters with disabilities; however there is disagreement between scholars over whether these growing numbers of representations are progressive or not. According to Susanne Gervay, "Since 1975, books with disabled characters have increasingly begun to emphasize the reality of medical conditions as well as the influence of social attitudes on disabled persons" (1). However, John Quicke noted "a great deal of literature targeting disability, although well meaning has been in effect didactic and often poor, using bland language, weak story lines, predictable plots, with one dimensional characters" (2). The increased number of characters with impairments should not be considered movement in the right direction if the characters are represented in diminishing or limiting ways. Rodman Philbrick's *Freak the Mighty* is a fictional children's book which represents a progression away from one-dimensional, static characters with impairments; however, even though Philbrick's characters appear multi-faceted, the text's use of traditionally negative terms, the merging of Max and Kevin into one functional entity, and the portrayal of Max and Kevin as supercrips engage the book in a very complicated dialogue with concepts about people with impairments that is at various points progressive and at others reductive and restrictive.

Freak the Mighty is unique because it not only has a main character who is disabled, but it explores the relationship between and unification of two boys with impairments. In the story, Max and Kevin come together to create an imaginary superhero-like character they name Freak the Mighty. Through the representation of the character Freak the Mighty, Philbrick calls attention to traditional theories of wholeness and perfection; the two boys unite to form a whole person, sort of a super-human symbolic entity. Although they are unified as Freak the Mighty, the two boys do grow and change as individual characters. Their development serves at some points to work against traditional stereotypes of individuals with disabilities, but it also at some points enforces them. Through its inclusion of two main characters with impairments, *Freak the Mighty* is in conversation with many critical issues of disability including the theory of the abled/disabled binary, disability's relation to masculinity, and the concept of normative or ideal bodies.

Resignifying Epithets

The act of naming something, identifying something, carries with it a certain power. By using a certain word or phrase, you can take power, stature, or acceptance away from something. According to Simi Linton in her book *Claiming Disability: Knowledge and Identity*, since the rise of disability activism in the latter decades of the twentieth century, “the disability community has attempted to wrest control of the language from

the previous owners, and reassign meaning to the terminology used to describe disability and disabled people” (8-9). Because Max is the narrator of *Freak the Mighty*, the reader gets to hear him use multiple politically incorrect terms when describing himself and Kevin. Max’s terms contrast greatly with more acceptable, polite phrases like “people with impairments.” But do the words that Max uses take power from or give power to himself and Kevin? How does what he calls himself and Kevin affect his attitude and the reader’s attitude towards the boys? Are the boys reassigning meaning, or enforcing dominant meanings of these words?

Max frequently uses slang in his narration of the story. He calls himself a “butthead,” a “falling-down goon” and a “moron” all within the first few pages of the book and the narration of the first scenes of the film. Not only does he refer to himself by using traditionally negative language, he also refers to Kevin in the same manner. He calls Kevin a “freak,” a “crippled-up yellow-haired midget kid,” “strange,” “weird,” “the little freak” and the list goes on and on. Max never addresses Kevin as “Kevin,” only by the nickname “Freak.” But it isn’t only Max who uses phrases such as these. It is Kevin who allows himself to be addressed as “Freak,” and he who names their unified self “Freak the Mighty.” Although Kevin attempts to reclaim power through the use of his nickname, “Freak,” overall the terms used throughout *Freak the Mighty* have demeaning connotations and risk being received inappropriately by the intended audience of young readers.

Terms like the ones Kevin and Max use throughout *Freak the Mighty* promote negative concepts about people with impairments. These words and phrases enforce harmful ideas and stereotypes concerning disability. They put people with impairments at the bottom of a hierarchy, the powerless side of the abled/disabled binary. They associate disability with characteristics such as stupidity, uselessness and dependence on others. The fact that Max uses these terms to describe himself throughout the book highlights his low self esteem. Max consistently sees himself in degrading terms; he is too slow, too big, and too threatening to fit in. But Kevin, on the other hand, takes his soubriquet “Freak” and turns it into something enviable, something cool, something unique. He reclaims the word and turns it around from a negative connotation to a positive one.

Reclaiming or resignifying words and names is a common practice by marginalized groups. Michael Foucault called this practice the creation of a “reverse discourse” in which “homosexuality began to speak in its own behalf, to demand that its legitimacy or “naturalness” be acknowledged, often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which it was medically disqualified” (101). Just as Foucault discusses homosexuality reversing and reclaiming meaning of words meant to demean and limit, disability also has attempted to take back control and create a “reverse discourse” using the same words intended to degrade and debase people with impairments.

The first time Kevin uses the name “Freak the Mighty,” he is talking to the police about a bullying incident. The police ask for their names and Kevin replies, “We’re Freak the Mighty, that’s who we are. We’re nine feet tall in case you haven’t noticed” (40). He is proud of their status, their difference and uniqueness. He even encourages other people, including their peers at school, to call them Freak the Mighty. When asked about his summer vacation on his first day in eighth grade English, Kevin gets up onto Max’s shoulders and tells the class about their adventures as Freak the Mighty and he eventually gets all the kids in the class to cheer and chant “Freak the Mighty!” (78). The problem with the use of these terms, even by Kevin in order to highlight his own originality, is that children, the target audience for the book, may not realize that these terms are the incorrect ones to use and are impolite, politically incorrect and wrong. Furthermore, as a result of these terms, people with disabilities have been maltreated, oppressed, exploited and institutionalized because of the damaging and harmful meanings associated with them and use of these terms condones that treatment.

In contrast to Max and Kevin’s terms, in this paper I will be referring to people with disabilities according to the *Guidelines for Reporting and Writing about People with Disabilities* by the Research and Training Center on Independent Living at the University of

Kansas.² I will be using the terms “people with physical/mental disabilities” or “people with physical/mental impairments” to discuss both Max and Kevin. These terms highlight the people and put the disability second, as a descriptor or as one characteristic or attribute of a complex individual, rather than the single feature which defines the individual and overshadows his or her identity. I will be using “disability” and “impairment” interchangeably, even though “‘impairment’ refers to the specific physical or cognitive deficiency that leads to a reduced capacity to fully actualize all aspects of one’s life and ‘disability’ to the socially regulated parameters that exacerbate the effect of the impairment” (Quayson 3). I have chosen to use these terms interchangeably because the two are linked and inseparable; I believe that an impairment cannot come without disability in society. The novel itself also supports this through the disabling of Max and Kevin by society. For example, Max is disabled by his school; just because he doesn’t learn through conventional educational methods, he is considered “learning disabled” and banished to “L.D. only” classes. In referring to Max, I will be using the terms “learning disability” or “person with a learning disability.” According to the *Guidelines*, “nondisabled” is the correct term for people without disabilities. I will be using “nondisabled” but also the term “abled” when discussing the theoretical “abled/disabled” binary.

² The main goal of these guidelines is to help shape the public image of people with disabilities in a positive light, instead of a negative, stereotypical light. The *Guidelines* “explain preferred terminology and offer suggestions for appropriate ways to describe people with disabilities. The *Guidelines* reflect input from over 100 national disability organizations and has been reviewed and endorsed by media and disability experts throughout the country. Although opinions may differ on some terms, the *Guidelines* represent the current consensus among disability organizations” (1).

Freak the Mighty and the Theory of Disability as Incomplete

A basic tenet of disability theory is that “disability...is not a natural state of corporeal inferiority, inadequacy, excess, or a stroke of misfortune. Rather, disability is a culturally fabricated narrative of the body, similar to what we understand as the fictions of race and gender. The disability/ability system produces subjects by differentiating and marking bodies” (Garland-Thomson 2). The creation of the abled/disabled binary serves to produce the so-called “disabled” and gives the power and the status of normalcy to the “abled.” If “the disabled” can in some way become “abled,” they can achieve socially constructed normativity and power. When Max and Kevin come together to form *Freak the Mighty*, they are creating one “able-minded” and “able-bodied” person out of their “incomplete” individual selves. Because it is only through their fusion, and not on their own, that Max and Kevin are accepted by their peers in school and by others in society, the novel sets up and in some ways maintains the abled/disabled binary. Because it is challenged somewhat through Max’s development after Kevin’s death, the abled/disabled binary is both enforced and simultaneously critiqued through the representative unification of the two boys. Max and Kevin are figured as incomplete and lacking without each other, perpetuating the idea that people with impairments are incomplete. However, in addition to simply reinforcing the abled/disabled binary, through the use of dramatic irony, *Freak the Mighty* actually participates in a discourse focused on critiquing the conception of the binary itself.

When Max and Kevin become friends, Max, who is physically tough yet mentally “weak,” and Kevin, who is physically “weak” but mentally strong, come together to create “Freak the Mighty.” The boys are not only united in that their abilities complement each other’s, but also they are physically united when Max puts Kevin on his shoulders. It is important to note that Max realizes the act of placing Kevin on his shoulders may be offensive, evidenced by his remark that, “it’s okay, he’s not flipped out because I picked him up and put him on my shoulders like he was a little kid instead of possibly the smartest human being in the whole world” (32). This displays Max’s awareness of the idea that it may be impolite to assume Kevin needs his help. It shows that although Max may be “learning disabled,” he is clearly aware of his social surroundings and the dominant societal views that “the disabled” are in need of help. By describing Kevin as a “little kid,” Max is perpetuating the stereotype of a person with a disability as being childlike and dependent, unable to live on his or her own. Max clearly has infinite respect for Kevin and his intelligence, and doesn’t want to make Kevin feel diminished because of his small stature.

The fact that the boys are actually physically united emblemizes the theory of disability as incomplete. The assumption that a nondisabled person is normal and whole and that a person with a physical impairment is non-normative or somehow lacking comes into play when Freak the Mighty is created. Is Philbrick attempting to imply that by uniting the boys they have now created a “whole” “normative” person? The boys are like two

halves of a whole. Max can easily carry the physically weak Kevin to protect him and help him get around. Kevin serves as the brains of the operation, telling Max where to go and when, acting as the leader on their imaginary “quests.” Max is fully aware of the fact that he is the brawn and Kevin is the brains of *Freak the Mighty*. Max begins his narration by saying, “I never had a brain until Freak came along and let me borrow his for a while, and that’s the truth, the whole truth” (1). Kevin sometimes refers to Max as his “steed,” which could reflect the fact that he is only using Max for his physical might. This fusion of the two boys into one cohesive unit creates a more “human” whole entity, thereby enforcing the idea of the normative status of the physically and mentally complete person. However, through dramatic irony, this quote by Max specifically calls attention to and critiques the notion of a socially constructed binary. The audience of the story is aware that although Max does not believe he has a brain of his own, he does. It is through his relationship with Kevin that he discovers his own intelligence and the strength of his imagination. By depicting the way that society has forced Max to see himself as less than perfect, not normal, *Freak the Mighty* calls attention to the socially constructed ideas as just that, socially constructed. Max has been capable of all the things he does with Kevin’s help all along. The audience is aware of the fact that Max was always able to write a book like he does in the end of the story. His relationship with Kevin allowed him to discover strengths he did not know he had, and recreate to some extent his own self image.

When Max and Kevin come together to form Freak the Mighty, they come to embody the image of the ideal, consisting of a sound mind and a sound body that nonetheless remain distinct. This distinction perpetuates the Cartesian theory of duality. Cartesian duality is the concept that “the mental and the physical – or mind and body or mind and brain – are, in some sense, radically different” (“Dualism”). Descartes believed that the mind and the body are two distinct, separate entities, and that the mind holds influence and a certain control over the body. Descartes also theorized that one’s mind might exist without the body, but one’s body cannot exist without one’s mind (“Descartes’ Epistemology”). Max and Kevin create a symbolic perpetuation of the Cartesian mind-body duality when they form Freak the Mighty. Kevin, the brain or the mind, has a certain level of influence and control over Max, the body. Yet, Max and Kevin continue to live separately, acting as two distinct entities, learning and growing on their own, which enforces the idea of a mind-body duality.

The privileging of the mind over the body as theorized by Descartes is also enforced by the creation of Freak the Mighty. Descartes claims that, “[I]t is the soul which sees, and not the eye; and it does not see directly, but only by means of the brain” (“Descartes’ Epistemology”). Rational consciousness is not dependent on the body; the body is purely a machine to be controlled by the mind. This theory has greatly influenced western thought, encouraging a privileging of the mind in our society. In *Freak the Mighty*, it is Kevin who holds the sway and the power over Max. Kevin

embodies all of the characteristics which our society values. He is tolerant, brave, intelligent, eloquent, and imaginative – everything that is viewed to be positive and acceptable. Max, on the other hand, exemplifies qualities which society deems fearful or negative. He is large, imposing, inarticulate, unintelligent – an embodiment of everything society scorns. In this way, Philbrick is clearly enforcing the concept of the Cartesian duality and the privileging of the mind.

However, Kevin's death and Max's further development challenge the Cartesian tradition of mind-body duality. In order for Max's character to fully develop by the end of the book, Kevin must be removed from the picture. If Kevin were to live, Max and Kevin would remain *Freak the Mighty*; if this had happened Max would not have fully "overcome" his impairment and become a "complete" person. When Kevin dies, Max takes over for him, embodying both the mind and the body. Max thinks for himself, encourages himself, and controls himself because Kevin is no longer there to do it. There is a transference when Kevin dies; Max ceases to be one part of the mind-body duality. He now embodies both parts, becoming a singular functional entity. *Freak the Mighty* engages in a critique of the theory of the privileging of the mind over the body and also the concept of an abled/disabled binary at this point. Max was always capable of writing a book, using his imagination, and passing the seventh grade. What it took to convince him of this was for Kevin to encourage him, instead of relegate him to the powerless side of the binary. Max was never

really powerless at all; he just had to realize it himself, which is what Kevin helped him to do. It was society that disabled Max by imposing the abled/disabled binary on him and forcing him to the powerless, disabled, side because of his supposed difficulties in school. Max's overcoming his learning disability in the end of the story could bring into question whether or not he actually had an impairment at all. Max may not have been disabled at all; he was disabled by society.

Kevin's death is also significant for considering the representation of characters with physical impairments versus characters with mental impairments. Kevin, the character with physical impairments, had to die which enforces the theory of the normative body. In recent years, certain theories of the body have emerged from the works of scholars in both the humanities and social sciences. The concept of the normative body relates closely to Kevin's death in *Freak the Mighty*. The way people look aesthetically has become more and more important and has come to relate directly to defining personal self-identity. It follows that, "if the fleshy body represents oneself, then it is imperative to ensure that the appearance of the body is as attractive and conforming to accepted norms as possible" (Lupton 41). Based upon this idea, the physically disabled body is extremely threatening to the normative body. Disabled bodies do not appear as accepted cultural normative bodies do; they are different, 'other', and as a result, do not have an acceptable place in this society. Kevin's body in *Freak the Mighty* is a source of anxiety for people without disabilities. His

body does not appear “normal” or function “normally.” Kevin has a small stature for his age, and he also utilizes leg braces and crutches to move around. He clearly does not fit into what society would label “acceptable” or “desirable.” Kevin’s physical condition is irreparable. He cannot be “fixed” in order to appear more aesthetically “normal.” The deviations of his body call attention to the fact that able-bodiedness may be a fleeting, impermanent state. Any so-called able body can at any time become disabled. Although Max is large for his age and imposing, unlike Kevin he appears physically “whole” and fits more readily into what is deemed “normal.” Max’s impairment is not immediately visible to the outside world. His impairment does not create an immediate anxiety for those able-bodied people around him, like Kevin’s does. Max can “pass” as non-disabled. The fact that Kevin, and not Max, is the character who dies engages *Freak the Mighty* in a discussion of the theory of “normative” bodies, and explores the need for society to excise that which deviates from the normative, which fuels this anxiety.

Kevin’s imaginary idea of his robot body represents the concept of the ideal body. Kevin tells Max very early on in their friendship that he will be going into the “medical research” ward at the hospital in order to be turned into “the first bionically improved human” (51). Ever since he was a small child, Kevin was fixated on robots. He imagined that his metal leg braces and crutches were part of his robot body armor. Max says, “No question, Freak was hooked on robots even back then, this little guy two

feet tall, and already he knew what he wanted” (3). Kevin encourages Max to believe this scenario as well. When Kevin needs to make frequent trips to the hospital, he tells Max that it is because the doctors need to run tests and take measurements in order to correctly configure his bionic robot body. Even as Kevin is about to die, he maintains this imaginary robot idea. He tells Max that he will be having his surgery in the Bionics Unit at the hospital, and that the next time Max sees him, he’ll have his new body. Kevin’s fascination with robots represents an obsession with perfection or completeness. Robots are meant to be fully functional, indestructible bodies; they represent everything that Kevin lacks – strength, power and physical might. Kevin’s obsession with robots symbolizes society’s pursuit of perfection and its ostracizing of those who do not fit this ideal, or strive towards fitting it.

The inclusion of the concept of the robot body also calls attention to the fact that no human body is perfect. Perfection is unattainable by human beings, which calls into question society’s need to strive towards it. The fact that Kevin imagines himself as a robot instead of a perfect human displays this idea. This is just one more way that *Freak the Mighty* calls attention to social constructs and their influence on society.

Kevin and Max are better accepted by other people as Freak the Mighty than as separate individuals, which reflects society’s fears of people with impairments. Historically the treatment of people with disabilities reflects the nondisabled’s cultural fears. According to Ato Quayson,

“Several disability scholars have already noted the degree to which the disabled body sharply recalls to the nondisabled the provisional and temporary nature of able-bodiedness and indeed of the social frameworks that undergird the suppositions of bodily normality” (14). The rejection of Max and Kevin by their peers and their status as outcasts until they unite and merge into a single, normative person represents this societal fear of people with impairments. Before they become united, neither Max nor Kevin is accepted by his peers at school. They are harassed, teased, ignored, and have no friends. Max recounts how he is called different names, including “Mad Max,” “Max Factor,” and “Maxi Pad” by other children at his school. As they walk down the hallway, Max and Kevin are subjected to comments like, “‘Hey, who’s the midget?’ And, ‘there goes Mad Max’; and, ‘excuse me while I barf’; and, ‘look what escaped from the freak show’; and, ‘oh, my *gawd* that’s *disgusting*’” (76). However, after Max and Kevin tell their English class about their adventures as Freak the Mighty, the other children encourage them. Max writes:

Freak is riding me like he’s the jockey and I’m the horse, he’s steering me around the class room, showing off. He’s raising his fist and punching it in the air and going, ‘Freak the Mighty! Freak the Mighty!’ and pretty soon he’s got all the other kids chanting, ‘Freak the Mighty! Freak the Mighty! Freak the Mighty!’ even though they don’t know what he’s talking about, or what it means...I’m standing up straight, as tall as I can, and I’m marching

exactly like he wants me to...and all those kids chanting our name...I can't explain why, but it was really pretty cool. (78)

The children's encouragement of the two boys as Freak the Mighty but not as individual people reinforces the idea that neither boy is worthy of friendship and support on his own, but when they form a whole, with a complete functioning brain and a complete functioning body, they then, and only then, deserve encouragement and positive feedback. This treatment of people with impairments is relatively common. People are uncomfortable and seek to either separate or assimilate those with impairments in society. The people with impairments reflect a difference and an otherness from people who are nondisabled, portrayed by Kevin and Max's treatment by their peers.

Through Max and Kevin's fusion into Freak the Mighty, Rodman Philbrick is calling attention to the concept of "disabled" as non-normative and incomplete. Both Max and Kevin are lacking separately and form a symbolically whole person as Freak the Mighty. This concept of the boys being "incomplete" on their own is challenged at the end of the novel both through Kevin's death and Max's continued development. Whether or not it enforces the concept of the abled/disabled binary, it certainly encourages readers to consider it, and forces the audience to question the ways in which society has constructed this notion of the two-sided binary.

Max and Kevin as Supercrips

One of the most heavily represented stereotypes of people with impairments in *Freak the Mighty* is that of the supercrip. Supercrips are people with impairments who are “portrayed as remarkable achievers who, against all odds, triumph over the tragedy of their condition...the supercrip stereotype depicts a disabled person who, through astounding personal endeavor overcomes their disability – a cripple who learns to walk” (Harnett 22). The concept of the supercrip fits directly into the construction of the abled/disabled binary, encouraging those who are non-normative or “other” (“the disabled”) to change or adapt in order to fit into what is considered the normative (“the abled”). The portrayal of the supercrip promotes the idea that disability is something to be overcome or fixed. According to Tanya Titchkosky, author of *Reading and Writing Disability Differently*, “All of us are subject to and deploy the sensibility that disability ought to be *overcome*. Turning to this common and familiar way of positing a solution to the problem of disability is simultaneously a turning of attention to how we will spend our lives noticing disability...this form of recognition is not an individual act but is a participant in the normative order” (178-179). The supercrip construction is very problematic for disability studies critics and scholars. Disability critics and scholars discourage images like this; they see it as “crucial that a disabled person learn to accept their disability, rather than constantly struggling to rise ‘above’ it to ‘normality’”. It should not be assumed that it is the ultimate goal

of a disabled person to be cured. The underlying message, or ideology, of this logic is that disabled people can never be happy as they are and must change to be accepted and valued” (Harnett 22). The supercrip representation creates the standard for people with impairments, basically enforcing the idea of “ableism.” Ableism is similar to racism and sexism in that it is the oppression of a group of people (people with disabilities) through the privileging of “normative,” or socially acceptable, bodies (Smart 20).

Freak the Mighty deals directly with the concept of the supercrip. Both Max and Kevin and their unity as Freak the Mighty play into the notion of the supercrip who overcomes his impairment to achieve normality. Because Max is the main character and narrator of the book, the audience is given a firsthand look into his psyche. The readers hear directly from him what he thinks about himself and others. Perhaps because Max is the main character of the story, he is the one who develops the most from beginning to end. Max’s development echoes that of a supercrip, and although Kevin does not fully complete a supercrip’s development, he nonetheless fits into this stereotype at many moments of the novel.

Max’s character when analyzed by itself is relatively well-developed and multi-faceted. In the beginning of the book, Max is an outcast. He does not have any friends, he is picked on at school, and he is in all of the “L.D.” or “learning disabled” classes. Max has very little confidence in himself or in his abilities. Because Max is the narrator, the reader gets the opportunity

to hear firsthand what Max thinks of himself and of others. It is clear from the beginning that Max has very low self esteem. He has been hearing people talk about him in limiting ways since he was a very small child and as a result has created a discouraging picture of himself. He refers to himself as a “butthead” and “a falling-down goon” and believes that his “brain is vacant” (4-6). His own description of himself is: “I’m just this critter hiding out in the basement, drooling in my comic books or whatever. All right, I never actually *drool*, but you get the picture” (6). Max sees himself in negative terms. He calls himself a “critter” – something less than human, more like an animal or a bug. He imagines himself drooling, an action which is considered uncivilized and inappropriate. This destructive self image is clearly created as a result of the way his teachers, guardians, peers and others treat him. This relates directly to the concept of ableism and the oppression of those with disabilities. Max has internalized the idea of the normative standard and sees himself with respect to it.

Max is extremely self conscious and has very little contact with the world. He keeps himself locked away in his basement bedroom, which he calls “the down under” (5). Max’s voluntary pulling out of the society in which he lives is a direct result of the treatment he receives from other people. Max is self policing by separating himself from others. He understands that his appearance is frightening and that he scares people often, and so he spends most of his time apart from other people, alone. As a result of this action, Max is himself reinforcing the “abled/disabled”

binary and the idea that the “disabled” must be hidden away and separated from those who are “abled.”

Not only is Max physically very large and imposing, he also bears a striking resemblance to his father, a convicted murderer who at the beginning of the story is serving time in prison. Because of his intimidating size and his resemblance to his father, the people in his town are afraid of him. Children, Max’s peers, adults, and even his guardians (his grandparents Gram and Grim) all fear him and are alarmed at Max’s threatening size and appearance. There is a collective fear that Max will eventually turn out, like his father, to be violent and dangerous. In the beginning, Max’s grandfather Grim says to Max’s grandmother, “It’s more than just the way Maxwell resembles him...the boy is *like* him, we’d better watch out, you never know what he might do while we’re sleeping” (4). Although Max does strike out when he is a young child and terrorizes other children in his daycare class, he soon grows out of this phase. In reality, Max is a sensitive person with a full range of emotions. Even though he attempts to hide his emotions and his pain of rejection by the people in his town by using a cynical, jaded tone, there are certain points at which his vulnerability becomes clear. For example, when Kevin befriends Max, after Max goes home from Kevin’s house he says, “Everything seems really great, just like Gwen says, except when I lie down on my bed it hits me, boom, and I’m crying like a baby. And the really weird thing is, I’m happy” (27). This is evidence very early on in the book of Max’s portrayal as a

rounded character with changing emotions, one of the positive aspects of the representation of either boy in the book.

Max has a very complex psyche and convoluted emotions, possibly as a result of having witnessed his father murder his mother when he was a small child. After this incident, Max became emotionally unavailable, unable to show affection or tolerate affection given to him. Towards the end of the book, Max is kidnapped by his paroled father who he eventually confronts about his mother's death. The reader is able to see Max's complex emotions and relationship with his family directly from Max's point of view and it is clear that there are many layers of emotion within him. This engrossing development of Max's character, a character with a distinctive past and confusing and conflicting emotions, functions to present Max as a genuine, multi-faceted person, instead of a character defined by his impairment.

Over the course of the story, Max slowly overcomes his learning disability and becomes a better student in school. At first, Max's development is wholly related to his personal relationship with Kevin. Max is promoted from the seventh grade to the eighth grade, and is permitted to attend the "smart classes" in order for Kevin to have a companion to "help him get around." Max is extremely uncomfortable with everything relating to school, from speaking in front of a group, to reading comprehension to writing. But after Kevin begins to teach Max, acting as his tutor, Max begins to improve as a student. Max says at one point after being asked a

question in school, “As a matter of fact, I do know the answer...and I know about that because Freak has been teaching me to read a whole book and for some reason it all makes sense, where before it was just a bunch of words I didn’t care about” (81). Max has been underestimated by his teachers and his grandparents his whole life. No one expects very much from him or is very encouraging of him. After he begins to associate with Kevin, Kevin starts to encourage him to read and to expand his vocabulary. When Kevin uses a word Max doesn’t recognize, Max looks it up in Kevin’s dictionary. Often, Max is hard on himself, believing that he could never be as smart as Kevin or even understand the subjects that Kevin goes on and on about, but under Kevin’s tutelage Max continues to advance academically throughout the book.

This sense that Max has “overcome” his learning disability feeds directly into the idea of the supercrip who triumphs over his “tragic condition.” All of the adults in the story treat Max in a similar way. In the beginning, they are discouraged by his lack of intelligence and academic drive. No adult, including his guardians Grim and Gram and his parolee father, has any confidence in his abilities. Kevin must get his mother Gwen to convince the school administrators to let Max accompany Kevin to the “smart classes,” as Max calls them. However, after Max begins to do better in school, he gains admiration from all of the adults who doubted him. The principal tells Max, “First, let me say we’re all very pleased with your progress. It’s nothing short of miraculous, and it almost convinces me you

knew how to read at your level all along and were for some reason keeping it a secret” (84). This is clearly an example of the supercrip stereotype. As Max develops intellectually, he astounds the people around him. They are all so impressed that Max is “overcoming” his learning disability that they begin to support him to do better. It is only after Max begins to develop in the way that his teachers and guardians think he should that he is rewarded and encouraged. As Max begins to assimilate into what society deems acceptable (intellectual development), he is encouraged by those around him.

The fact that Max develops with regards to school and intellectual growth is in itself very positive. Every human must grow and develop, as must every interesting and successful character in literature. Self betterment in and of itself is a positive idea; however, placing self improvement within a frame of overcoming or rising above an impairment makes it problematic. The idea that in order to be classified as successful, or acceptable, or more human, Max must achieve a certain level of intellectual development is an idea imposed on him by the society he lives in, his guardians and his teachers. Max should not be forced to overcome his disability in order to be embraced by society.

Kevin does inspire Max to read and encourages him in school; however, Max still continues to develop even after Kevin has passed away. Max, the boy who at the beginning of the story did not read or write at his academic school level, not only achieves in school but writes an entire

book. He says in the end of the story, “By the time we got here, which I guess should be the end, I’m feeling okay about remembering things. And now that I’ve written a book who knows, I might even read a few. No big deal” (160). Max is unimpressed with himself even at the end of the book after all of his accomplishments. He is just as cynical and negative as he was at the beginning, but he has overcome his learning disability and achieved more than anyone thought possible which plays directly into the concept of the supercrip.

Kevin’s character by itself in *Freak the Mighty* is very problematic with respect to stereotyping characters with physical impairments. Kevin’s adventurousness and activeness go against traditional ideas of people with physical impairments, but his bravery, optimism and patience are all qualities which are very traditional in depictions of characters with impairments as supercrips.

Kevin has been diagnosed with Morquio Syndrome, which is a rare form of dwarfism. It causes slower skeletal development, compression of the spinal cord and an enlarged heart, among other effects. This diagnosis is not stated within the text of the narrative; it is included in the “After Words Bonus Features” interview with Rodman Philbrick in the 1998 paperback edition of *Freak the Mighty*. Throughout the book Kevin has attacks in which he has trouble breathing and sometimes collapses. All of these symptoms are consistent with a diagnosis of Morquio Syndrome. The

accurate representation of Kevin's disorder is progressive in and of itself, as historically, impairments have not been accurately portrayed in literature.

As soon as Kevin and Max become friends, it is clear that Kevin has seemingly infinite patience for his friend. Although Kevin does seem to put people down and be rude at times, calling people "cretin" or "doofus," and even calling Max "hopeless" and "moron" at times, he also takes time to explain things to Max and help him understand what he is talking about. Kevin acts as a tolerant tutor for Max. He is always extremely encouraging, telling Max to look words up in the dictionary when he doesn't understand them. He never tries to simplify what he is discussing for Max's benefit, but instead attempts to help Max to understand and learn by using different methods of teaching. This intense patience that Kevin possesses echoes the traditional representation of children with impairments as "saintly." It is evolved somewhat because of the dismissive and irritated tone Kevin takes with Max and with others, but in the end he is always patient and understanding, enforcing an old stereotype.

Kevin is not only patient, but is also constantly optimistic. He has a very positive outlook on life. He is always looking on the bright side of things, encouraging Max to do the same. Kevin has a very active imagination and uses it in order to make his life more interesting and fun. Kevin's constant optimism and bravery in dealing with his disease also enforces a traditional image of children with impairments being brave and heroic in dealing with their diseases or impairments. These stereotypes are

problematic because they create and enforce the image of a person with impairments as acting in only one way. These images of people with impairments as being brave and patient people create a belief that all people with impairments should feel and behave this way. It enforces an unfair standard for all people with impairments to be expected to live up to.

Kevin's imagination fuels his and Max's adventures. Kevin imagines Freak the Mighty as a knight and his valiant steed, going on quests, slaying dragons and rescuing fair maidens. He tells Max about the Knights of the Round Table, King Arthur, Sir Gawain and the Fair Guinevere. When Max and Kevin go on their own quests, it is Kevin's imagination that fuels them, coming up with beautiful scenery, castles, and trails making their suburban neighborhood into a scene out of the Middle Ages. Kevin's imaginary scenarios can be seen as both positive and negative. When his imagination encourages himself and Max to complete a "quest" or go on an adventure, it is positively enforcing the boys. Kevin's extreme energy and activity are not what is traditionally viewed as the image of a young boy with physical impairments. But instead of ignoring his impairments, or not living his life because of them, Kevin incorporates his impairments into his imaginary life as well as his real life. This concept of learning to live life with impairment, instead of "overcoming" or "fixing" it, is extremely encouraging. Because Kevin does not seek to overcome his disability but instead lives with it, he can be seen as a positive character in the representation of people with impairments.

Because Kevin cannot overcome his physical impairments, and does not triumph over them on his way to success, he is the one who must die. Although he maintains the right stereotypical attitude for a supercrip, Kevin doesn't fulfill the end result of one: triumphing over his impairment. He is literally and figuratively defeated by his impairments when he dies because of his disease.

Issues of Masculinity in *The Mighty*

In any book whose characters are of preadolescent age, there are going to be issues of gender construction. As children grow into adolescence, they begin to transform from little boys and girls into men and women. In our society, being men and women come along with a whole host of characteristics and acceptable actions. These actions, Judith Butler claims, are performed or acted out and are not part of people's natural functioning, but are constructed by society. Butler claims in her essay "Performance Acts and Gender Constitution,"

"Significantly, if gender is instituted through acts which are internally discontinuous, then the appearance of substance is precisely that, a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief. If the ground of gender identity is the stylized repetition of acts through time, and not a seemingly seamless identity, then the

possibilities of gender transformation are to be found in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a different sort of repeating, in the breaking or subversive repetition of that style.”

(520)

This idea of gender as a creation of repetition of performative acts is based not only on the way a person behaves, but also how a person appears.

Gender is based on the physical body and how it looks, moves and acts.

Gender is “instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self” (Butler 519). This conception of gender relies heavily upon the notion of the “complete” physical body. The way gender is constructed, according to Butler, female bodies are “incomplete” and thus undervalued. However, disability scholars have begun to associate Butler’s concepts of gender and the body with the disabled body. Because the conception of gender, and specifically the acceptance of the male body, is so heavily based on the physical, disabled bodies are incapable of fulfilling societal constructions of masculinity. Disabled bodies are associated with the feminine, the incomplete and the unacceptable. In *Freak the Mighty*, this concept is evident through Max’s and Kevin’s development into adolescence. Max, the stronger, more masculine of the two boys, is the one to overcome his disability and go on to lead a productive life in society. Because Kevin is unable to execute the performance acts of the male body, he does not grow

into adolescence or adulthood. He is unable to become a man because of the fact that he is unable to perform masculinity the way society has constructed it. Kevin cannot create the “bodily gestures, movements, and enactments” which constitute the illusion of gender.

Various masculine performative acts are evident throughout *Freak the Mighty*, and are even accentuated in the film version *The Mighty*. The boys’ success in integrating into the community of their peers at school is represented through a basketball game. Kevin and Max aspire to be like King Arthur and his knights of the round table, historical symbols of stereotypical masculine traits. They successfully defend themselves against school bullies and Max’s father, moving from being passive, a traditionally female trait, at the beginning of the book, to active and aggressive, traditionally associated with males. Though the construction of masculinity in *The Mighty* does align itself with traditional performances of maleness, through Max and Kevin’s development, the book values honorable and respectful male behavior and devalues dishonorable male behavior. Through his experiences with Kevin, Max learns to grow into an honorable man, but a man nonetheless.

Instead of illustrating Max and Kevin’s acceptance by their peers in a classroom setting as in the text of the book, *The Mighty* moves the setting out of the academic arena and into one of physical dominance, the gymnasium. Max and Kevin are depicted as being accepted by their peers and adults as well in gym class. In the beginning of the film, Kevin is not

allowed to participate in physical education because if anything should happen to him, it is an insurance risk for the school. The school bullies make fun of Kevin because he cannot participate. One of the boys rolls a basketball into Kevin and knocks him over and all of the children laugh. Max, too timid to stand up for himself, is accused of throwing the ball and takes the blame. Once Max and Kevin become Freak the Mighty, they are much bolder and more confident, more traditionally masculine. Kevin convinces the principal of the school to allow the boys to take part in physical education as Freak the Mighty, with Kevin on top of Max's shoulders. She reluctantly agrees, and together the boys play in a basketball game. Because they tower over the rest of the children, Kevin and Max instantly become the stars of the game. They run faster, jump higher, and score more than all of the other players. The other students in the class begin to encourage the boys, shouting "Freak the Mighty!" and yelling and cheering when they score a basket or win possession of the ball. Through their completion of this stereotypical masculine action, competing in and winning a basketball game, Max and Kevin win the acceptance of their classmates. Also, the physical education teacher who originally saw Kevin as a waste of space because of his inability to participate in sports has a newfound appreciation of him. This sequence of the film fulfills both the concept of the supercrip overcoming the odds to complete a challenge, and also the boy completing a male task and moving closer towards becoming a man.

Both Max and Kevin's progress towards manhood is hindered somewhat because of the fact that neither boy has an acceptable male role model in his life. Kevin's father abandoned him and his mother Gwen when he found out that Kevin would be born with a birth defect. Max's father was sent to prison for murdering Max's mother in front of him. The only male role model the boys have is Max's grandfather, Grim. Although technically he is a male role model, he is older and less involved in Max's life than a father figure traditionally would be. Because of the absence of acceptable male role models in their lives, Max and Kevin adopt King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table as the men whom they strive to emulate.

King Arthur and his knights are hyper-masculine role models for Max and Kevin. They stand for bravery, physical strength, mercy and respect. They also ascribe to the notions of chivalry, that men should protect and defend women's honor. The influence of King Arthur is amplified in the film. In the book, Kevin tells Max about the history of King Arthur, who his knights are, and what they stand for. However, in the film, the knights become a recurring symbol of *Freak the Mighty*. When Kevin first names the boys *Freak the Mighty*, they are standing in a museum with suits of armor all around them. Kevin takes the sword from one of the models of a knight and "knights" them *Freak the Mighty*. When Max carries Kevin on top of his shoulders in certain scenes in the film, they are flanked by knights on horseback. The influence of the knights encourages Max and Kevin to be less timid and to stand up for themselves. In the beginning of the film, even

though he is larger than every other child in his class, Max is extremely hesitant to fight anyone, even to defend himself. He allows the bullies to pick on him, call him names, and let him take the fall for crimes that they commit. However, after Kevin knights the boys Freak the Mighty and they start to develop their self-confidence, Max stands up for himself much more readily. Although he never attempts to cause actual physical harm, he does his best to defend himself and Kevin and to protect them from harm.

This dynamic is evident in a scene in the film in which Kevin and Max are retrieving a wallet stolen by the school bullies in order to return it to its owner. Before they successfully retrieve the wallet, they are discovered by the gang of bullies. The bullies threaten them with knives and fists, but Max, in a superhero-like feat of strength, lifts a storm drain cover over his head and launches it towards the boys, scaring them away. This shot of Max throwing the storm drain cover is inter-cut with frames of a knight unsheathing his sword. In the film, this becoming more physical and brave is an integral part of Max's development. He must move from being timid and passive to employing characteristics of the truly male knights in order to progress and succeed.

In a book which relies so heavily on romantic themes, such as knights and chivalry, it is important to note that nowhere in the text is there a female love interest or even a friend for either boy. The focus of the story is the boys' bond with each other and their growth as a result. The women who are included in the text are all maternal figures: Kevin's mother, Max's

grandmother, and Loretta Lee. Although Gwen is figured as the Queen of the story, compared to King Arthur's Queen Guinevere multiple times, she remains a maternal figure for both boys, never a romantic interest, even for Max. And although Loretta Lee is presented originally as a figure to be feared, an alcoholic in league with Max's father and other criminals, in the end of the story she gives Max advice which he truly takes to heart, marking her as yet another caring maternal figure in the book.

The quests that Max and Kevin go on may have originated in the King Arthur tales as searches for fair maidens, but their purposes are clearly centered around male bonding alone, based on the lack of romantic female characters within the text. This lack of romantic feminine contact calls to the forefront the conception of people with disabilities as asexual or undesirable. Neither Max nor Kevin has any substantial contact with a female character of their own age at any point in the novel. They hardly interact with other children at all, excluding the bullies they are forced to deal with. There is an intense focus around Max and Kevin's bond, to the exclusion of all other characters in the text. Max and Kevin's quests include only the two boys themselves. During their quests, they have the opportunity to learn more about each other and become even better friends. It is on a quest one day that the boys exchange the stories of how they lost contact with their fathers. It is telling that even when the quest the boys go on has the express goal of rescuing a damsel in distress, the woman is

around the same age as their mothers, and in no way a romantic figure for them.

Although Max is able to successfully develop into a man, Kevin, as a result of his disability, will never be. Max's disability was invisible to begin with. Kevin's, on the other hand, is readily visible and creates an anxiety, specifically because his is a male body. "Performing one's gender wrong initiates a set of punishments both obvious and indirect, and performing it well provides the reassurance that there is an essentialism of gender identity after all. That this reassurance is so easily displaced by anxiety, that culture so readily punishes or marginalizes those who fail to perform the illusion of gender essentialism should be sign enough that on some level there is social knowledge that the truth or falsity of gender is only socially compelled and in no sense ontologically necessitated" (Butler 528). Since Kevin will never physically be able to perform his gender correctly, he must die in the end of the book. Because his body cannot achieve the normative masculine performative acts, his body is therefore a source of anxiety which challenges social constructions of gender. The book reinforces the concept of a "right" way and a "wrong" way to be a man by having Kevin, the character with the physical impairments, and not Max, die in the end.

The journey of Max from a non-normative outsider because of his disability, to a larger-than-life, superhero-like figure as Freak the Mighty, finally to a "normal" boy learning how to be a man and accomplish his

goals takes him from outside the normative dominant masculine hierarchy and moves him into it. In her book *Boys in Children's Literature and Popular Culture*, Annette Wannamaker states that, "Gay boys, poor boys, and minority boys are often invisible in popular texts or, worse, are presented as the Other against which a protagonist's subjectivity is defined. This doesn't mean, however, that white, middle-class, heterosexual boys are the only ones reading, viewing, and consuming these texts or being affected by them" (8). In *Freak the Mighty*, the protagonists are not defined against the other; instead they are defined as other and must over the course of the novel find their way back into the dominant classes, male and able-bodied. Although both Max and Kevin are at the outset presented as other, in this case, disabled, by the end of the story, Max has been replaced within the masculine hierarchy around which society is constructed. He is not only physically strong like he was before, he has also found his intelligence and confidence. Kevin is truly the other, the disabled, and remains this way once he dies. Through this replacement of Max into the normative societal standards, and the dismissal of Kevin through his death, *Freak the Mighty* support the notions of masculine, able-bodied dominant standards.

Adapting *Freak the Mighty* for the Silver Screen

In 1993, *Freak the Mighty* was made into a film by Miramax called *The Mighty*. Because *The Mighty* was marketed toward a more family-oriented, broader audience than *Freak the Mighty*'s academic-oriented

intended reader, there were important changes made to the text which deserve to be explored further.

When films are adapted to the screen, many changes must be taken into account. According to Lester Asheim, author of “From Book to Film,” a study of the adaptation of novels to films, there are six categories of changes made to books when they are adapted. These include: impositions of the technology of film production, considerations of the artistic use of the medium, recognition of the limitations and interests of the audience, requirements of the star system, deference to pressures outside the industry and the medium, and attempts to remain faithful to the novel. *The Mighty* includes changes that fall into all of these categories.

The very nature of film is innately different to that of the literary novel. The translation must be made from the verbal form of the novel to the visual form of the film. In this translation, the words and literary style of the original book must be changed into a simultaneously optically and aurally illustrative style. This obvious and natural transformation brings about many other changes in the narrative, focus, characterizations and style of storytelling of the book. Although some of Max’s narration and many of the chapter titles are retained from the book, much of his explanation and description of people, places and events are cut. This is because instead of them being verbally explained, they are visually performed for the audience to see. In this modification, the viewer loses much of Max’s personal feelings as evidenced through his narration. The reader can discern how

Max feels about a certain person or event through the words, phrases and tone he uses to describe it which is lost in the film version.

There are quite a few textual differences between *Freak the Mighty* and *The Mighty*. *Freak the Mighty* takes place in a suburb in Maine and *The Mighty* is located in Cincinnati, Ohio. This is important because of the assumed socioeconomic differences between living in a suburb and a more urban, poorer area. In the book, the lifestyles of Max and his grandparents and Kevin and his mother make it clear that while they are not wealthy, they live comfortably. The film relocates the families to more of a rundown area, perhaps to make a cerebral connection between poverty and disability, or maybe to increase the feelings of “overcoming” the odds of success in the film.

There is much more of an emphasis placed on Kevin’s different body in *The Mighty* than in the book version. When the film introduces Kevin, it takes pains to establish the otherness of his body from Max’s. When Max sees Kevin for the first time, the camera slowly pans over his entire body, accentuating his physical impairments. The film is careful to show Kevin’s twisted spine, hunched back, and small, underdeveloped legs. It calls attention to his braces and his crutches. In the book, on the other hand, Kevin’s physical differences from Max are mentioned in Max’s nonchalant, casual way. Because of this emphasis placed on Kevin’s physical differences from other people, and the way it is filmed in slow camera movements with gentle music behind it, the audience is encouraged

to sympathize with Kevin and to pity him because of his disability. This is the wrong way to approach characters with impairments. Increasing the focus on their differences reduces these characters, and people with disabilities, to symbols. Attempting to influence the audience to feel pity for Kevin only enforces the stereotype of people with impairments as being strange, unknown and objects of pity, all reductive images. Instead of accentuating Kevin's physical differences, his character should be treated as a whole, well-rounded character whose impairments are only one small part of who he is as a person.

Artistically, consideration must be made concerning what events to include in and which to excise from the script. Originally, Rodman Philbrick wrote the screenplay for *The Mighty*, but the producers of the film decided that his version was too much like *Freak the Mighty*. The producers then selected Charles Leavitt to adapt Philbrick's novel to a screenplay. According to Asheim, "The more active sequences from the novel are the ones most frequently used for the film version, [and] nonactive passages, in the majority of cases, are presented on the screen only when necessary to the plot action, and then in a more active manner than in the book" (260). The sequences in which Max is kidnapped by his parolee father, when Max and Kevin escape the school bullies by crossing the pond at the Riverfest and when Kevin has a coughing fit at school and is rushed to the hospital are all kept true to the original text of the novel. These are the scenes in

which there is the most action in the book, and thus they are transferred to the screen relatively unchanged.

Asheim also states that, “New action without precedent in the book is added to the film version to exploit the camera’s advantages...the film frequently exaggerates characterization, setting, and action beyond the norm presented in the novel, for purposes of more dramatic and sensational presentation” (261, 265). This is clearly evident in *The Mighty*. The sequence in which Max and Kevin participate in the basketball game, when Kevin steals his mother’s car and goes on a wild sled ride through Cincinnati on his way to rescue Max, and when Max scares away the boys who are bullying them, and when Max runs barefoot in the snow to what he thinks is the bionics lab where Kevin will get his new robot body are added into the film. They do not appear in the text of the novel at all. All of these scenes include a lot of physicality and movement over much space, emotionally heightened music, and much intricate editing. These characteristics of the scenes “serve to provide the sensationalism which appeals to mass audiences, to capitalize upon the advantages the camera makes possible, and to achieve, in its more concentrated compass, effects which the novel gains through more leisurely and lengthy treatment” (Asheim 265). These scenes are incorporated in order to capture and keep the audience’s attention, heighten the emotional stakes of the film and also to utilize the basic elements of film to tell the story of *Freak the Mighty* in a more theatrical manner.

Keeping the film to an acceptable length proves to be a challenge. Sequences which could explain parts of the story more in-depth but don't serve to move the plot along are often deleted from the final version of the film. *The Mighty* had many such deletions. The opening sequence originally stayed very true to the novel. It included the previous contact that Kevin and Max shared in preschool and in elementary school. The scene in which Kevin moves into the neighborhood and the scene in the book where Max meets Gwen for the first time and she is startled by his resemblance of his father were also cut from the final film.

Scenes that were created originally for the film also had to be deleted because of brevity and clarity demands. A scene in which Max and Kevin are playing in Kevin's room and Max discovers Kevin's collection of medications was cut from the final film. Another scene in which Max gives Kevin a computer as a Christmas gift was also cut. A scene which could have added much to the substance of the film and added depth to the character development of both Max and Kevin was also deleted in the end. This scene involved a fight between Kevin and Max. It would have taken place right after Kevin has returned from his short hospitalization about midway through the film. Kevin begins to resent having to be carried around by Max and taken care of because of his disease. As a result, Kevin becomes frustrated and upset, and he and Max fight. This scene could have added depth to Kevin's character by illustrating the fact that he isn't always positive, cheerful and optimistic. It could have also created more conflict

and intensity in Max and Kevin's relationship by depicting more adult, complex discussion between them, and more honesty, like a real relationship would be. But unfortunately, this scene was omitted from the final version of the film.

The tendency of film adaptations to heighten the importance of the characters played by stars is present in *The Mighty*. The actresses who have top billing in *The Mighty*, Sharon Stone and Gillian Anderson, play what are very small, supporting roles in the book. Stone plays Gwen Dillon, Kevin's mother, and Anderson plays Loretta Lee, an old friend of Max's father. Both of these roles are expanded from the book to the film. They have many more lines and much more screen time than the original story calls for. The two boys who portray Kevin and Max, Kieran Culkin and Elden Henson respectively, aren't even listed on the cover of the film's DVD. They are billed last, after all of the adult actors in the film, which is odd because the children are the lead actors. They display incredible maturity and a lot of on-screen talent, and yet it is the adult actors who are advertised in conjunction with the film.

Most startlingly, the title *Freak the Mighty* was changed to the less provocative and less eye-catching *The Mighty*. According to author Rodman Philbrick, "The folks at Miramax decided to change the title because they thought my title might be offensive. Obviously they were wrong, but they meant well, and should get credit for trying to bring such an offbeat story to a larger audience" (rodmanphilbrick.com). As discussed earlier, the use of

negative epithets even when meant in a positive way as in *Freak the Mighty* perpetuates harmful attitudes towards people with disabilities. However, in this case, changing the name of the film created distance between the original book and the film which could have helped attract audiences who were fans of the book. Also, keeping the name *Freak the Mighty*, along with certain scenes in the film that were eventually cut, could have served to spark a healthy dialogue about appropriate treatment and naming of people with impairments or on a larger scale, people who are different from viewers of the film.

These textual differences between the filmic text and the text of the book are important to analyze, but also equally as important is the question of fidelity not only to the text, but to the quality of the medium. According to Francois Truffaut, there is a marked distinction between adaptations willing to reinvent their sources and adaptations “condemned to servile imitation” (Leitch 152). A successful adaptation takes the heart of the story and remakes it, translates it from words to moving images. The medium of film, and specifically this adaptation, did not lend itself to representing the elements that were the core of the book. *Freak the Mighty* is not an action-packed book. The changes that were made to the text of *The Mighty* had a lot to do with focusing on the action and adding more active sequences. *Freak the Mighty* is a difficult book to translate to the screen because the core of the story is the internal development of Max and Kevin. It focuses a lot on the growth of the relationship between the two boys and their own

maturing. There is a certain complexity and nuance in the interactions between the two boys that is lost when the book is transferred to the screen. At certain key points in the novel, Max's narration is what gives the story its emotional depth and creates a visceral connection to the reader. When the book is translated to the screen, much of Max's narration, and his strong voice and emotional connection to the reader are lost. The film version did not have as strong an emotional impact as the book did.

Freak the Mighty becomes *The Mighty*: The Problem of Casting

According to Rodman Philbrick's website, Scholastic Productions acquired the option to *Freak the Mighty* in 1993, right before the book was published. Miramax Films took on the project in 1996, and shooting for the film commenced in February of 1997. In order to frame the release of the film to try to assure the largest audience possible, Miramax delayed opening *The Mighty* multiple times. *The Mighty* was finally opened in limited release in the fall of 1998. The delayed release of *The Mighty* could have attributed to its low box office returns and ticket sales, as it ended up premiering directly after another film about the friendship of two adolescent boys, one of whom had a disability – *Simon Birch*. Rodman Philbrick postulates in an interview that “they opened [the film] in forty cities and got a lot of nice reviews but the audience just never showed up -- apparently they'd already seen enough 'freaks' in "Simon Birch", which was released earlier. That meant the movie pretty much died in a few weeks”

(rodmanphilbrick.com). This brings into focus the idea that “freaks” are token characters, not to be spotlighted and if too many films that focus on people with disabilities are made and promoted, audiences will tire of this overused trope.

Simon Birch, was released on September 11, 1998 and starred Ashley Judd, Jim Carrey, Oliver Platt and Ian Michael Smith. Like *The Mighty*, *Simon Birch* was based on a book entitled *A Prayer for Owen Meany*. It is a story about the friendship between Simon, a young boy with a disability, and Joe, the illegitimate child of a single mother. Like Kevin and Max, Joe and Simon bond over their shared outsider status. While *Simon Birch* grossed \$18,253,415 domestically, *The Mighty* grossed a meager \$2,652,246.

Ironically, the boy who played the title role in *Simon Birch*, Ian Michael Smith, originally auditioned to play the role of Kevin in *The Mighty*. Ian Michael Smith actually has Morquio Syndrome in real life, the same disease Kevin has in *The Mighty*. Unfortunately, Smith was considered “too young” for the role according to one of the websites for the film. This conflict between casting an actor who has the same impairments as a character calls into question the idea of actors “cripping up” in a similar fashion to “blacking up” as they have in the past.

Specifically, the issue of creating a screenplay out of a novel calls into question the problem of having to find actual people to portray what once were imaginary characters. Many issues of representation arise here,

surrounding the problem of finding a suitable performer to bring to life the character effectively on screen. One of the most common questions which arises when casting parts for characters with disabilities is whether or not an actor who is disabled can do the hard work of representing the character in the film. There is a clear hierarchy of people with disabilities which becomes clear in the representation of disability by the media. People who are a part of the Deaf community and people who use wheelchairs, canes, or crutches, for example, are more readily visible than people with other impairments or diseases.

According to the Screen Actors Guild 2005 study “The Employment of Performers with Disabilities in the Entertainment Industry,” only 1,237 performers self-identified as being a person with a disability out of the over 120,000 actors the SAG represents. In a country whose population of people with disabilities is around 54 million people, or roughly 20 percent, this is a startling statistic. Even worse, only “one-third of Screen Actors Guild members with disabilities reported working in a theatrical or television production in 2003.”

In the past two decades, legislation has been passed and agencies and organizations have been created in order to try to improve hiring practices and increase employment of people with disabilities. The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (42 U.S.C. Sec 12101) prohibits employers from discriminating against qualified people with disabilities and necessitates providing accessibility and reasonable accommodations for

them. The Producers and Screen Actors Guilds have their own Policy of Non-Discrimination and Diversity, instituted in 2001. This policy “reaffirms a commitment to a policy of non-discrimination and fair employment regarding the treatment of performers on the basis of sex, race, color, creed, national origin, marital status, disability or sexual orientation.” In addition to this statement, producers must “agree to make every effort to cast performers with disabilities that are suitable for roles, eliminate stereotyping in casting, and portray the American Scene realistically.” Also, producers are encouraged to be specific in their advertisements for roles which call for people with disabilities in order to enhance opportunities for actors with similar disabilities to audition.

In addition to these laws and policies, numerous organizations exist and continue to be created in order to foster the growth of the careers of performers with disabilities. The Non-Traditional Casting Project, which was established in 1986, is a “not-for-profit advocacy organization whose purpose is to address and seek solutions to the problems of racism and exclusion in theatre, film and television” (nea.gov/resources/accessability/ntcp.html). I AM PWD, or Inclusion in the Arts & Media of People with Disabilities, is a major disability rights campaign launched by the Screen Actors Guild, the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists, and Actors’ Equity Association in 2008. I AM PWD seeks to educate employers about actors with disabilities, improve the careers of its members through professional experience and training and to

further develop the ethical standards and practices of the entertainment industry (iampwd.org). Even with the passage of legislation and creation of organizations such as these, the fight for inclusion of actors with disabilities continues.

The production team for *The Mighty* did audition actors both with and without impairments for the roles of Max and Kevin, which is commendable. However, the fact that no actor with any sort of disability was cast, and that the young, talented actors who did portray the roles of Max and Kevin were not advertised and publicized as the stars is unfortunate.

Conclusion and Further Study

The implications of this study have to do with how representations of characters with impairments in children's literature and film are not only written about, but how they are perceived by their audiences. The general public, and specifically young children, are easily influenced by the portrayals they read about people with impairments. It is imperative that the images presented be positive and realistic, and that they not perpetuate stereotypical, inappropriate conceptions about people with both physical and mental impairments.

Rodman Philbrick's book *Freak the Mighty* is a step in the right direction with regards to representations of characters with impairments. Its presentation of multiple characters with impairments and the development

of Max as a complex and dynamic character are two examples of how *Freak the Mighty* makes progress. In contrast to this advancement, Philbrick simultaneously enforces numerous degrading stereotypes of people with disabilities, including the representation of Max and Kevin as supercrips and the concept of impairments signifying incompleteness. It is crucial that readers identify and celebrate the positive aspects of Philbrick's book, but also pay attention to the reductive stereotypes and ideas which are being enforced, and be aware of how they can be changed.

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Capstone Summary

My Capstone project is an analysis of the book *Freak the Mighty* by Rodman Philbrick. My analysis focuses on the ways in which disability and masculinity are represented in the text of the book. I discuss the ways impairments are named, what specific words are used to describe them, and the ways characters with impairments are talked about and treated by other characters in the story. I consider the ways in which masculinity is signified and how it corresponds to the representation of disability. In addition to analyzing *Freak the Mighty*, I also examine the movie version that was based on the book, Miramax's 1993 film *The Mighty*.

Freak the Mighty is a story which centers on the friendship between two main characters, Max and Kevin. Maxwell "Max" Kane also serves as the book's narrator. The boys have different impairments and they unite to form a larger-than-life imaginary character called Freak the Mighty. Max has unspecified cognitive impairments (he is identified as "learning disabled"). Kevin "Freak" Avery has physical impairments signified by his metal leg braces and crutches. According to Philbrick, Kevin has Morquio Syndrome, a rare form of dwarfism, although this is never specified in the book. In the story, Max chronicles how he and Kevin became friends, created the imaginary persona Freak the Mighty, and went on numerous quests as Freak the Mighty. The boys deal with issues including problems with peers, trouble with schoolwork, and Max's relationship with his incarcerated father. Finally, Max is left on his own to deal with Kevin's

death. Max writes the book as if it were a memoir; the reader finds out in the end that he has written down his recollection of the past year's events.

In order to deconstruct the text of *Freak the Mighty*, I completed research on past representations of disability in children's literature and film. I also researched material on disability theory, a relatively young field of study. In addition to disability, I also completed background research on masculinity in literature, gender construction and the adaptation of literature to film.

In researching disability theory, I focused on a few different areas within the field. I researched literature which was specifically intended for an adolescent audience. Historically, people with impairments have been underrepresented in children's literature, and when they are included, they are oftentimes misrepresented. Based on this, *Freak the Mighty* is a significant step forward by including not one, but two main characters with impairments. However, simply including characters with impairments is not enough. They must be well-rounded, real characters who develop over the course of the novel, instead of one-dimensional, static characters that are used because of their impairments to represent an inner characteristic such as sin or corruption. By supporting stereotypes like presenting characters with impairments as supercrips and concepts of disability like the idea of disability as being deficient, *Freak the Mighty* enforces negative ideas of disability.

Throughout the book, characters use disparaging language to identify characters with impairments. Max, as the narrator, calls Kevin names such as “midget” and “cripple.” He also identifies himself using such terms as “moron,” “butthead” and “goon.” Other children in their school call Max and Kevin inappropriate names as well. Kevin calls himself “Freak” and allows Max to do the same. It is also Kevin who comes up with the moniker “Freak the Mighty” for Kevin and Max’s imaginary persona. Although Kevin attempts to reclaim power through the use of the nickname “Freak,” overall the terms used throughout *Freak the Mighty* are negative and risk being received negatively by the intended audience of young readers. The problem with the use of these terms, even by Kevin in order to highlight his own originality, is that children, the target audience for the book, may not realize that these terms are the incorrect ones to use and are impolite, politically incorrect and wrong. Furthermore, as a result of these terms, people with disabilities have been maltreated, oppressed, exploited and institutionalized because of the negative feelings surrounding them and use of these terms condones that treatment.

When Max and Kevin come together to form Freak the Mighty, they are creating one “able-minded” and “able-bodied” person out of their “incomplete” individual selves. Max, because of his large size, acts as the “body,” and Kevin, because of his intelligence, acts as the “mind” of Freak the Mighty. The boys are unified not only because their strengths complement each other, but because Max carries Kevin on his shoulders.

Because it is only through their fusion, and not on their own, that Max and Kevin are accepted by their peers in school and by others in society, the novel sets up and maintains the abled/disabled binary and supports the concept of disability as incomplete.

In addition to enforcing the idea of people with disabilities as being incomplete, another heavily represented stereotype in *Freak the Mighty* is that of the supercrip. A supercrip is a character who triumphs over his or her impairment to achieve an amazing goal. This concept of “overcoming” an impairment is troublesome because it encourages people with disabilities to change or adapt to fit into what is considered normal. Disability should not be conceptualized as something that needs to be overcome or fixed. Both Max and Kevin satisfy the supercrip stereotype at different points in the text. Max overcomes his learning disability to read at his grade level, and even succeeds in writing a book. Although Kevin is unable to overcome his disability, he still maintains the attitude of a supercrip. He is always patient, optimistic and brave. But because he cannot overcome his disability because Morquio Syndrome is irreversible, Kevin is the one who must die in the end of the story.

Theories of masculinity are represented in *Freak the Mighty* through Kevin and Max’s development. Because the conception of gender, and specifically the acceptance of the male body, is so heavily based on the physical, disabled bodies are incapable of fulfilling societal constructions of masculinity. Disabled bodies are associated with the feminine, the

incomplete and the unacceptable. In *Freak the Mighty*, this concept is evident through Max's and Kevin's development into adolescence. Max, the stronger, more masculine of the two boys, is the one to overcome his disability and go on to lead a productive life in society. Because Kevin is unable to execute the performance acts of the male body, he does not grow into adolescence or adulthood. He is unable to become a man.

Finally, in addition to exploring how disability is represented in the book, I also examined the film that was based on the book, Miramax's *The Mighty*. Many important changes were made from the text of the book to the screenplay. For example, action sequences were highlighted and some were added in order to increase the excitement of the film. This served to increase the fantastical nature of the book when it moved to the screen. In addition to the changes in the text, when characters in a book are moved onto the screen, actors must be employed to perform the roles. This translation from imagination to reality is very difficult, especially when characters have impairments. It calls into question the casting of actors with impairments to play characters with impairments. Although *The Mighty* auditioned characters with physical impairments to play Kevin, they ended up casting an able bodied actor. Many groups that support the inclusion of diverse actors in Hollywood have expressed concern that having able bodied actors portray characters with disabilities is untruthful and harms the community of actors with disabilities.

The implications of this study have to do with how *Freak the Mighty* and other books and films with representations of characters with impairments in children's literature are not only written about, but how they are perceived by their audiences. The general public, and specifically young children, are easily influenced by the portrayals they read about people with impairments. It is imperative that the images presented be positive and realistic, and that they not perpetuate stereotypical, inappropriate conceptions about people with both physical and mental impairments.