



**Reflecting an Autistic Character and Her Isolation in Society in Carol Cujec and Peyton
Goddard's *Real***

Carol Cujec ve Peyton Goddard'ın *Gerçek* İsimli Romanlarında Otistik Bir Karakterin ve
Onun Toplumdaki Yalnızlığının Yansıtılması

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Abstract

No matter how advanced a society gets, social perceptions on people with disabilities have predominantly kept going on. Considering technological advancements and scientific improvements, the fact remains that the disabled continue to be regarded as different and are still unable to have equal rights in contemporary societies. Being a minority in society means being a distinct subgroup characterized by certain features that distinguish them from the dominant majority group, and the word 'minority' often illustrates prejudices in many fields. Inspired by Goddard's life, *Real* was written by Carol Cujec and Peyton Goddard. The novel portrays the experiences of Peyton who has struggled to show her existence as a human being and proves to the world that she is 'intelligent' although she is unable to speak due to autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and despite the challenges she experiences while studying under unequal conditions. In the novel, Charity represents Peyton, and her narrative serves as an inspiration for the disabled. Through Charity, the novel delves into the value of overcoming challenges, working hard and not giving up for others who face similar challenges. Cujec narrates Peyton's life story for the purpose of making people aware that the disabled experience various troubles in their daily lives. It advocates the importance of empathy and acceptance in society, which makes the book essential in both youth and adult literature.

Keywords: *Real*, Carol Cujec, Peyton Goddard, autism, discrimination, youth literature

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Öz

Bir toplum ne kadar gelişirse gelişsin engellilere yönelik bakış açısı büyük ölçüde aynı kalmaya devam etmektedir. Teknolojik gelişmeler ve bilimsel ilerlemeler göz önüne alındığında, engellilerin günümüz toplumunda hâlâ farklı görülmeye devam ettiği ve eşit haklara sahip olamadıkları gerçeği aynı kalmaktadır. Toplumda azınlık olmak, kendilerini baskın çoğunluk grubundan ayıran belirli özelliklerle karakterize edilen farklı bir alt grup olmak anlamına gelir ve bu sözcük çoğu zaman birçok alandaki önyargıları ifade eder. Goddard'ın hayatından esinlenen *Real*, Carol Cujec ve Peyton Goddard tarafından yazılmıştır. Roman, otizm nedeniyle konuşamamasına rağmen insan olarak varlığını gösterme çabası içinde olan ve eşit şartlara sahip olmadan gittiği okullarda 'zeki' olduğunu dünyaya ispatlayan Peyton'ın deneyimlerini okuyucuya aktarmaktadır. Romanda Charity, Peyton'ı temsil eder ve Charity'nin hikayesi engelli bireyler için bir ilham kaynağı olmaktadır. Roman, Charity aracılığıyla benzer zorluklarla karşılaşan bireyler için zorlukların üstesinden gelmenin, sıkı çalışmanın ve vazgeçmemenin değerini gösterir. Cujec, Peyton'ın hayat hikayesini engellilerin günlük hayatlarında yaşadıkları zorlukların farkında olmayan insanları bilinçlendirmek amacıyla yazar. Eser, empatinin ve toplumda kabulün önemini savunur, bu da romanı hem gençlik hem de yetişkin edebiyatında önemli kılmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Gerçek*, Carol Cujec, Peyton Goddard, otizm, ayrımcılık, gençlik edebiyatı

Introduction

The term “autism” originates from the Greek word “autos”, which is related to being “alone”, and it was first used by the Swiss psychiatrist Eugen Bleuler in 1911 (Perkowski & Oksztulski, 2018, p. 43). According to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (5th ed.)*, there are three main deficits ranging from social-emotional reciprocity to nonverbal communicative behaviours and adjusting to social contexts (American Psychiatric Association & Association, 2013, p. 50). Autistic children may encounter specific challenges in many places making their lives hard. They can have problems with their peers and teachers because of their limited verbal skills, resulting in isolation from neurotypicals (Perkowski & Oksztulski, 2018, p. 48). These also affect their social interaction, causing their being “other” in society. Furthermore, they can have difficulty in taking roles in daily life because they feel safe only in their familiar environment; however, when their routines or safe environment change or when they encounter unexpected and unfamiliar situations, this leads them to have high stress and discomfort, which may result in tantrums. Families may prefer constraining their autistic children to specific areas, leading them to feel isolated and otherized in society because “despite the creation today of such an enormous capacity, which could help overcome disability, the way this capacity is misdirected means that many physically impaired people are still unnecessarily barred from full participation in society” (Baldwinson, 2019, p. 1). This oppression gradually changes the language employed in disability studies. There are new terms that are used such as “ableism” and “neurodiversity” (Manalili, 2021, p. 22).

Individuals with disabilities face discrimination in preference to those without physical impairments because of their social exclusion, and this leads to the common phenomenon known as “ableism”. According to Beth Haller, the word “ableism” refers to “dominant beliefs that ignore or stereotype disabled individuals negatively” (2010, p. 67). The ongoing existence of stereotypes for the disabled causes the construction of a dichotomous worldview that segregates individuals with impairments from those without, consequently fostering ableist ideologies (Dickey, 2023, p. 3). According to Lennard J. Davis, the concept of ableism “seeks to remove the blame of those most responsible for creating a disabling society” (1999, p. 37), and aside from the fact that ableism exists in a way that discriminates people with disabilities, it also attempts to place the credit for this discrimination on those with disabilities. We should acknowledge that people with disabilities are disabled because of the environment created. Devlin and Pothier state that disability is not a concern for health sciences, instead, it is a matter of power and politics, and it needs some empathy and understanding (2006, p. 2). These

arguments clearly present that disability rather than being limited to medical studies is a phenomenon socially constructed and maintained by those without any visible physical disabilities. Glennon, for instance, highlights that disabled people in the past faced severe discrimination and treated as less than humans: “[P]eople identified as disabled inherit a history of discrimination and negative connotations along with this label. In the past, they were excluded from schools, placed in institutions or hidden at home, and often viewed as subhumans who threatened society” (1995, p. 24). It is known that the practise of segregating children with impairments was widespread before the beginning of the 20th century, leading them to be institutionalized to pursue their education in asylums, nursing homes, and private institutions. In other words, people without any disability have authority over the disabled, so power structures are fundamentally responsible for the establishment of power distribution and the identification of those who exercise authority over others (Manalili, 2021, p. 28). As a result, it is commonly observed that individuals in positions of authority cause ableist phenomenon prevalent in the mainstream culture. This distinction in roles highlights differences in society and makes normalization difficult, as well as the marginalization of the disabled in comparison to non-disabled ones. To Campbell, the problem regarding segregation is that it creates a sense of separation among the disabled, and then, it causes the disabled to behave according to this discriminative behaviour (2008, p. 152). In order to make the lives of the disabled comfortable and easier, they must be under the same conditions as non-disabled people as their separation makes it difficult for them to adapt to social life. Their segregation from society causes them to be otherized, which leads their lives to be limited and confined.

Real written by Carol Cujec and co-author Peyton Goddard is inspired by the real-life story of Peyton Goddard¹(2020)². The novel includes the rich world of ASD, and shows the reader how autistic people are treated unfairly in society and presents valuable insight into how stereotypes can be removed for the sake of equity and how ASD can be perceived as an identity rather than a deficiency. The story is about Charity who cannot speak and is on the autism spectrum disorder (ASD), hence she has difficulty in controlling her body effectively. She is highly sensitive to her surroundings such as bright lights, noises, and crowded areas. Her communicative skills are limited, which is a typical symptom of ASD. In various studies, characters with are highly hypersensitivity issues to external factors such as noises and lights are dealt with (Loftis, 2015; Schulz & Stevenson, 2018; Tulgar, 2022a, p. 1354). This

² From now on, only page numbers will be given for the novel *Real* by Cujec & Goddard, 2020

hypersensitivity can be observed in the way Charity behaves as well, which is a typical syndrome of ASD. Charity, due to this hypersensitivity, has not found a way to communicate with people, and no one knows what she wants, or how she feels in a brutal environment with full of restrictions for the disabled since her childhood. Although she is a very clever girl, no one is aware of her sense of humour, and her enthusiasm to struggle with bad treatments and bad people on her own way every day. It is clear that seeing the world from a so-called disabled girl helps readers to understand the emotional pain that she experiences when she is ignored, rejected and looked down on due to her identity. No matter how difficult the life is for Charity, she does her best to find a way to communicate and announce the reality that she is an intelligent girl. The fact that her intelligence is overlooked by neurotypicals is criticized by the author through Charity's deliberate actions to prove that she is intelligent. Whenever people see her, they reconstruct more stereotypes about her identity because of her body's repetitive movements such as clapping, jumping or screaming stemming from unknown reasons to neurotypicals. Even though she wants to go to a public school, no school accepts her because of her diagnosis since neurotypical families do not want their children to have education with the disabled. In spite of the fact that Charity confronts bullying and bad treatments, she adapts to the new conditions and proves that she is more intelligent than her peers without disabilities in the classroom. Charity's life story helps people to foster empathy along with encouraging the disabled not to give up trying to get equity. Based on a true story, *Real* reminds that no one should be excluded from society due to neurodiversity, and it makes the reader to conclude that everyone deserves to be treated equally.

Disabled people's struggle to be seen and heard in a society which disables them

The number of disabled people may change according to countries; however, the disabled constitute a numerical minority compared to people without disabilities, hence the numerical disparity serves as a distinguishing feature which causes discriminations and problems. Ableism, as defined by Thomas is, "a form of social oppression involving the social imposition of restrictions of activity on people with impairments and the socially engendered undermining of their psycho-emotional well-being" (2007, p. 73). People with disabilities experience constant obstacles and feel social disadvantages such as bias, stereotyping, discrimination, mocking, or exclusion. They also often encounter social stigma, which distinguishes them as "other" in comparison to people without disabilities. When they experience othering, they undergo a process of dehumanization or devaluation based on a common characteristic they possess in conjunction with a marginalized or minority group (McCarrick, 2024, p. 16). They

also experience pressure due to their being minority in a socially marginalized group, and this feeling can cause some stress in their daily lives. Individuals with disabilities often face the challenge of being minority in places where people without disabilities feel comfortable. Charity would like to demonstrate the disparity between the personal experiences of autistic individuals and the manner in which they are viewed and classified by experts and society:

My whole life, I have lived with this brain/body disconnect. The thinkers- the people with fancy initials after their names-have examined, poked, analysed me a million times. After all the tests, I am labeled, like a strange species of toad they have discovered. Most people see me only as that label, not as a real person. (p. 8)

These labels make them susceptible to prejudice, and exploitation as triggering the ideas that they are inferior or insignificant. In the above quote, Charity is perceived as she has a lack of control mechanisms and ability to make decisions for herself. She tries hard to prove that she feels everything, and she presents the importance of approaching them as genuine individuals with unique experiences, emotions, and viewpoints. People hardly demonstrate empathy when she reacts differently in unexpected situations, but she has nothing to do as her body sometimes acts out of control:

If my brain moves like lightning, my body sometimes moves like it's been invaded by aliens. For no apparent reason, I might jump, flap my arms, clap my hands, shrug my shoulders, squish my lips out like a duck face. Sometimes I am in control of my body, sometimes I am not. Even I do not understand how my body works. And no one can imagine how scary that feels. (pp. 10-11)

This extract presents a profound and powerful description of people who possess neurological or sensory processing impairments due to autism spectrum condition. This metaphorical depiction implies a divergence between cognitive processes and bodily actions. Charity's gestures exhibit involuntary or seemingly disconnected actions, thereby creating an impression of diminished control. People feel when they touch, hear or smell, but other than seven senses, people know what happens when they are hungry, or when they feel full after meal (DuBois et al., 2016, p. 105). This sense is called 'interoception', and it helps people to interpret different reactions inside body; however, autistic people lack in. Charity gives a description of how she feels when she does not know what to do for this unknown bodily reactions, and she explains this "each dawning day, I live in terror of my unpredictable body that no one understands" (p. 7), and she also provides important knowledge for sensory or neurological variations. This illustrates the intricate challenges that they encounter in regulating themselves to the new environment. She tries to show that her body and her conscious are different, so it is not proper to judge them according to their physical behaviours. Simi Linton states that "a person's abilities or characteristics are determined by disability or that people with disabilities as a group

are inferior to non-disabled people” (1998, p. 9). Disabled people do not want to be seen different, but they only want to be treated equally. In the novel, Charity states that “some call me *special*. Is that supposed to make me feel good?” (2020, p. 8). This shows that children who have physical, developmental or other problems face bullying compared to their non-disabled ones, but not only children but also adults treat the disabled in a bad way and they do not respect them. Workplace studies have examined how particular groups of employees are ‘othered’ based on their appearance, behaviour, or other visible or social differences from the majority (Mik-Meyer, 2016, p. 1357). In other words, adults can be more brutal than children when they encounter a disabled person:

Adults are even worse than kids. They just shake their heads and whisper that disgusting R-word. They think that because I cannot talk, I do not understand what they say. They think I cannot see the such-a-tragedy look on their faces. (p. 11)

Charity feels desperate when someone calls her “retarded”, and the R-word stands for intellectual disability, so it has not been used as it is offensive and a form of hate speech for a long time. This kind of criticism damages their sense of confidence and decreases their motivation for education or prevents them from making friends in daily life. Many disabled children are considered that they do not have any brain control, so they can do whatever they want. In the novel, Charity experience many kinds of mistreatment due to her physical appearance and her inability to talk, and she states that “some people think if I do not show emotion that means I do not feel any” (p. 7). Bullying can take many forms such as making fun orally, touching or physical threats, hence they can cause loneliness, depression and helplessness as a result of the power imbalance among them. Charity in a public school is bullied by someone whose nickname is Sassygirl72, and in an Instagram post, she says, “No retards playing basketball” (p. 186), hence it is necessary to educate school children about disabled ones. These harassments create uncomfortable atmosphere and unsafe place for people with disabilities:

Sassygirl72 had posted pictures of me on the field trip-one with me drooling on the bus and one of me standing next to a photograph at the museum-the lunch-counter photograph- my lips pressed into a duck face. The captions read, “First-class embarrassment!!!” and “Is this the way we want Lincoln represented???” (pp. 196-197)

Sassygirl72 shares images captured on a school daytrip, and makes this without permission and posts it online. If someone posts some unwanted photographs of anyone without consent, this is categorized as cyberbullying or harassment. Many steps must be taken against cyberbullying as it can cause a lot of damage, especially for people with disabilities. In public schools, that kind of bullying can happen; however, disabled people who study in specialized or segregated schools experience more problems compared to disabled or non-disabled students who study in

public schools (Rose et al., 2012, p. 2). Insulting, ridiculing, or stigmatising language addressed at disabled people not only causes them discomfort but also deteriorates their self-confidence. Uneducated people tend to call the disabled with a language that discriminates or hurts, but it is important to avoid ableist language against the disabled. In another instance, Charity feels sorry: “in second grade, a boy screamed when he saw me reaching for his throat. I only wanted to feel the silver, shiny buttons on his coat. ‘Fishface tried to strangle me’! That was his nickname for me-Fishface” (2020, p. 11). In order to help the disabled, fulfil their developmental stage, it is crucial for the environment to adapt and accommodate their needs, rather than stigmatizing them as ‘different’ due to their disability. Most people, especially the disabled experience stigmatization “at least in some connections and in some phases of life” (Goffman, 1963, p. 138). Being stigmatized results in the disabled person’s certain positive attributions overlooked. This outcome is the direct result of constructed stereotypes and biases which are present in an ableist society which favours able-bodied perspectives (Tulgar, 2022b, p. 196). This especially affects disabled individuals and makes it difficult for them to adapt to society where they hardly ever feel equality. In the novel, Charity defines equality and says, “Define *equal*: Equal does not mean that everyone gets the same. It means each person gets what they need” (p. 79). In other words, society neglects to take the necessary measures to create an environment that everybody can benefit from. In the novel, coach George in the basketball team does not think Charity as a player and avoids considering her own talent due to her disability:

“Hey, Charity did a great job today. She’ll make a terrific team mascot.” “Mascot?” Dad took a step back. “Well, sure, Steve. I thought she could put on the hornet suit and do some funny moves on the court, make some silly faces like she’s doing now. It’ll crack everyone up.”
Translation: I am a joke. (p. 94)

The presence of environmental obstacles, such as restricted opportunities for unrestricted social interaction, has a significant impact on the perceived quality of life. Physical disabilities confine the interaction socially, and in the novel, Charity expresses her desire to participate in a school excursion. However, Jergen, the school administrator, initially exhibits reluctance in granting her permission to participate in the trip. Charity’s behaviour is perceived as fluctuating, so it creates some concern regarding the possible hazards posed to both herself and others: “Celia and Ms. Beckett had to convince Jergen to let me go. Her unpredictable behaviour puts her and others at risk. What will happen if she acts out or runs away like she has done at school?” (p. 193). Jergen has worries over the potential occurrence of outbursts or escape during the forthcoming excursion. This particular situation illustrates an often-encountered obstacle

experienced by individuals who are diagnosed with autism. These people can encounter challenges in social interactions or in unfamiliar places, but collaboration between schools, educators, students, and parents is crucial in arranging effective solutions and adjustments that help the disabled adapt themselves to these occasions. In the novel, Charity has education in a specialized school where she experiences violence and bullying as she does not interact orally:

By third grade, I was considered too special for public school. That's when the Thinkers pressured my parents to see me to a private institution. Define institution: a place where people are separated from the world instead of included. Separate can never be equal. Borden Academy was not a real school. Schools are places for learning. Borden was a prison camp for disabled kids, complete with an escape-proof, eight-foot-high chain-link fence. (p. 33)

This segregated education does not have any benefit on children in Borden Academy as the instructors are unwillingly helpful and friendly as well as they use violence when they do not obey rules. Since they lack the power to inform people about continuing physical and psychological violence, they find no way to escape. Charity is also afraid of having a tantrum inside a closet where she spends time waiting for her teacher's mercy:

Forever. I have been locked in here forever. How many minutes until I would be released from this prison? Would it matter? My mind would never escape the prison of my broken body. It was a life sentence. (p. 41)

The children in Borden Academy have different disabilities and their parents are unaware of the violence happening there. Charity experiences many forms of harassment and violence and states that "kids who cannot talk are easy targets for bullies. At Borden, I learnt teachers can be bullies too" (p. 31). Not only does the instructor use violence against children, but she also steals money from the children whose families give them as pocket money: "She reached into my pocket, pulled out the three dollars, and stuffed them into her own pocket. I saw her do this to other kids too, and I knew I would not be eating sloppy joes today" (p. 31). Charity remembers her days at school where she experiences bad treatments and harsh punishments:

Miss Marcia patrolled the room like a prison guard, snapping at kids to "Knock it off!" or "Put a lid on it!" and threatening to banish them to the dreaded time-out closet. I lived in fear of it every moment. Each lockup chipped away at my already broken heart. (p. 37)

Such bad attitudes and behaviours reduce the self-confidence of the disabled towards outside world, and these difficulties may cause the disabled to avoid social interactions, which will make adjusting to new social environment more difficult. First of all, it is critical to use a language that is free of prejudice and limitations against the disabled if the aim is to increase their emotional motivation, and make easier their adaptation process easier. When children go to the same school with children without disabilities, they are forced to adapt themselves to the conditions which are designed for people without disabilities. Charity has a heavy emotional burden of feelings of frustration stemming from the treatment of people who approach her pity

or hatred as a consequence of their condition. She expresses a desire for equitable recognition and treatment, underscoring her capacity to comprehend and engage with the world equal for any human:

Acceptance. Complete acceptance from the first minute. So different from how most new people react to me. They get stiff. They back away-like maybe I am contagious-and usually talk about me as if I am not there. Or they talk to me as if I am three years old. (p. 84)

As stated in the above quotation, the worst barrier that prevents them from society is the immediate environment such as family, school or neighbourhood, which discourages the disabled from social life. All people are considered to have equal rights, but some families think that “having special-needs students in regular classrooms lowers standards and distracts other students” (p. 76). Charity’s family struggles to find a school which accepts her; however, many schools reject her since they have parental concerns regarding the integration of such children may have negative effects on children without disabilities. When they finally find a school, the school’s head called Jergen forces her to take an exam to prove that she is able to study. Having such an opportunity gives her strength, hence Charity finds the power to take the exam saying “I have a mission. I need to prove to Jergen that I can be included in real classes. That all kids can be included” (p. 131). She is about to dismantle the educational system and demonstrate that, with the right support and training, children of all backgrounds can participate in regular classroom settings. This is consistent with the tenets of inclusive education, which aim to create diverse and equitable learning environments. Charity takes 96 out of 100 and proves that she is “*INTELLIGENT*” (p. 117), and this is the word that she types on the keyboard. From now on, she wants to “prove that kids like me could contribute and did not have to sit on the side-lines and watch other kids have a real life” (p. 137). She gets upset by always hearing that she has no brain: “pity poisons bubbled up inside me. I wanted to cry, but instead my body jumped and clapped. I begged for words. *My ears work. My brain understands. Can't you see I am a REAL PERSON?*” (pp. 60-61). Charity and other disabled people only want to be seen as normal since they are fed up with being judged by their disabilities. Different or special treatments also hurt them. Charity explains this as “just because there is an error in someone’s genes does not mean that person is an error. Does it?” (p. 143). Having equal rights, receiving the same education and not being excluded from social life will help the disabled to challenge themselves to study and work outside home. They will not be seen “different”, and this will help them increase self-confidence and motivation.

Conclusion

Real written by Carol Cujec is based on a true-life story of the novel's co-author Peyton Goddard, and the narrative is about a girl called Charity with autism. Even though Charity would like to adapt herself to society, she confronts various challenges due to her condition. As her body sometimes is out of control, she has unpredictable physical movements. Although she lacks the ability to speak, she possesses exceptional memory and understanding of mathematics. Her parents want her to be accepted to a state school, but many parents reject the idea that children with disabilities should have the same education with children without disabilities. The head of the school where Charity takes an exam says if Charity successfully passes the acceptance exam, she will get admission to the school. Remarkably, she takes the highest score. It is clear that disabled people are forced to prove themselves to get an education in a state school as they are deprived of common rights. On the other hand, no matter what they do, disabled people are always ignored by society, and they do not have necessary improvements to make their life better. Thus, when they face challenges in their daily lives, they may experience increased level of tension and discomfort. Under these conditions, they do not want to believe in themselves, hence they prefer not to communicate with people, which triggers their isolation. Nevertheless, this isolation leads to biases and discriminatory attitudes in many different fields, thus to raise awareness to avoid these attitudes everyone should be educated on different types of discriminatory behaviours. The goal of the normalisation is to protect individuals from devaluation by improving their social standing and talents.

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