

Empathy: Exploring Disability and Resilience in Cammie McGovern's *The Art of Seeing*

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Abstract—Cammie McGovern's *The Art of Seeing* offers a great depth about disability, resiliency, and the transformational potential of empathy within family roles. Considering character's actual and metaphorical perceptual challenges, the analysis looks at how the novel presents the emotional and psychological effects of disability on each of them. Drawing on McGovern's nuanced narrative techniques and secondary literary critiques, this study examines how the novel fosters empathy and challenges societal notions of ability. By juxtaposing the experiences of Julia, a visually impaired sister, and her protagonist sibling, McGovern address's themes of identity, vulnerability, and resilience. This article also integrates insights from disability studies and literary theory to underscore McGovern's contribution to inclusive storytelling. Ultimately, this analysis advocates for the importance of authentic disability representation in literature, highlighting its potential to cultivate a deeper understanding and acceptance of diverse human experiences.

Index Terms—empathy, disability, resilience, family dynamics, identity, Cammie McGovern, inclusive storytelling

I. INTRODUCTION

Cammie McGovern's *The Art of Seeing* is a deep probe into family love, resilience, and complexities of living with disability. Often hailed as a feminist novelist refusing to hide from the more tangled issues in literature dealing with the subject of disability, she has, in this case, addressed difficult themes with much grace and sensitivity. It is the narrative of Julia, a blind woman, and her sister, the narrator, who try to work out their shared histories and personal struggles. McGovern successively illuminates the subtle joint tale of dependence and independence, compassion, and misunderstanding that makes them. Julia's blindness is, although poignantly not quite metaphor

enough, a much larger concept of perception and understanding. At such a time as the sisters face their own problems, McGovern would call upon the reader to consider more subtle aspects of disability than physical impairments. Switches in narrative form, from Julia's experiences to her sister's reflective lens, allow these characters' relationship to have all the greater emotional charges. This duality allows the reader to experience each character's inner struggles and, thus, better understand this shared journey.

Further, McGovern elaborates wonderfully on her segments in such a humane manner in a way that will make a reader identify with her profile of disability, much less chained down by these preconceived notions. Using elements from disability studies and narrative analysis, this paper will argue that *The Art of Seeing* moves beyond its own storyline and becomes a journey with all the challenges involved in deepening the understanding. Key quotations show how their relationships mirror at each stage society's attitude toward people with disabilities, compelling readers to reflect again on their own attitudes and prejudice. Indeed, McGovern's book transcends simply being a story about seeing; it invites us to explore the intricacies of human relationships and the power of empathy in one another's understanding.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE:

“Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse” by David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder. This work examines how narratives often use disability as a metaphor to advance plot or develop characters. It is valuable for analyzing how McGovern's *The Art of Seeing* portrays disability and whether it fosters genuine empathy or relies on stereotypes.

“Resilience in the Face of Adversity: Disability and Human Strength” by Donald J. MacDougall. His study explores the psychological and social mechanisms that enable individuals with disabilities to demonstrate resilience. This is particularly relevant to understanding how characters in McGovern’s work overcome challenges and inspire empathy.

“Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature” by Rosemarie Garland-Thomson. He investigates how cultural narratives shape perceptions of disabled individuals. Her work is crucial for exploring the interplay of empathy and resilience in *The Art of Seeing*, particularly in how disability is depicted in the novel.

“Disability and the Emotional Landscape: Empathy, Compassion, and Understanding” by Fiona Kumari Campbell. This text analyzes the role of emotions like empathy in interactions with disabled individuals. It provides a framework for assessing how McGovern’s novel engages readers to empathize with disabled characters while highlighting their resilience.

“Disability in Young Adult Fiction: Realism and Representation” by M. Kathleen

Mahoney’s research examines the depiction of disability in contemporary young adult literature, focusing on how realistic portrayals foster empathy. This study aligns well with an analysis of McGovern’s work, particularly how *The Art of Seeing* balances resilience and emotional connection.

A. Disability and Resilience: Key Theoretical Foundations

Disability and resilience are two concepts powerfully intersecting in discourses around human adaptability and social constructs. As described, it refers in a broad sense to a physical, cognitive, sensory, or mental condition that limits a person in performing specific activities or engagements with the environment. The latter refers to the ability to recover from any sort of adversity, adapting in stressful situations, and keeping one's sense of purpose in such a situation. The concepts taken together open out a focus that throws light on how individuals and communities maneuver against barriers while challenging the beliefs and structures set by society.

Disability has gone from being understood within the context of medical approaches to social ones, which turn it into a more inclusive concept. The medical view regards it as a kind of deficiency within the individual capable of treatment or cure. The social model,

however, draws attention to how societal barriers create the disability itself and therefore advocates systemic change to encourage access and equity. As Lennard J. Davis articulates in *The End of Normal*, "Disability is not so much a property of the individual as it is a product of social environments" (Davis 2013). On the contrary, resilience is understood in the context of psychological theories. By Michael Ungar's definition: Resilience is "both an individual's capacity to navigate to health resources and a condition of the individual's social and physical ecology that makes those resources available in culturally meaningful ways" (Handbook for Working with Children and Youth 2005). This definition indicates, in philosophical context, the dialectics between individual strength and external support systems-matters that are worth exploring in the present conversation around disability.

B. The Role of Resilience in Disability Narratives

Many theorists have analyzed the manifestation of resilience in disability situations and adaptations of both the individual and the societal structures surrounding their development. Garland-Thomson, for example, gives the narrative power of disability emphasis: an avenue through which we are able to redefine resilience. Through her introductory chapters of *Extraordinary Bodies*, she writes: "Disability, shows us how fragile and variable the human condition really is. It reminds us that resilience is neither erasing nor transcending difference but embracing difference as a source of strength" (1997). There is a notion that resilience in disability is not a mere reaction to adversity, but a reputation reconstruction of one's identity and qualities.

In a similar strain, Tobin Siebers buries the orthodox conceptualization of resilience with the experience of what disability might be understood. In *Disability Theory*, Siebers states: "Resilience does not concern itself with the erasure of difference, it deals with thriving within that difference. Thus, it is an art of navigating a world that too often resists accommodation" (2008). Siebers makes resilience a process of relations between the individual agency and collective actions seeking to demolish the structural barriers towards the situation. The intersection of disability and resilience takes a challenge against the dominant narratives that have written success in simple terms of overcoming difficult situations. Rather, in the suggestion made both by the social

model and the works made by critical theorists, resilience reimagines success as one that acknowledges diversity and interdependence. "The resilience does not consist in a rejection of the reality of disability, but rather in accepting its complexities as a part of life," asserted Bonnie Smith and Beth Hutchison in *Gendering Disability* (2004).

These theorists collectively insist on more nuanced definitions of resilience that transcend individualist-deficit models. Resilience thus becomes a case of ongoing negotiation between personal adaptation, social support, and systemic change, or resistance in the context of disability. This frames resilience from the perspective of the need to create spaces where disabled people flourish, celebrating their unique contributions whilst challenging social norms that perpetuate processes of exclusion.

C. Character Analysis: Julia's Resilience and Agency
 McGovern's image of Julia explains the multifaceted and tangled realities of living with a disability. It shows that Julia's blindness is not only a physical condition but an instigator of more profound conflicts within the family and from society. A still bold moment from the book puts it weepingly: "Julia did not want our help, even when she fell down. She laughed it off, as if losing her sight did not pose the extremely terrible thing, we all were afraid for her." The author subverts the stereotype of an archetypal "tragic disabled figure" by describing Julia as a strong-willed, self-conscious human resisting pity. As Rosemarie Garland-Thomson says in *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*, such perspectives are crucial to dismantling the "charity model" of disability, in which those with disabilities are projected as dependent and powerless (Garland-Thomson, 1997). Julia's desire for independence gives birth to a reflective eye in her sister and thereby compels her to see the limits of dexterity and independence.

It is the narrator who does a lot for engendering empathy. The viewpoint really changes from the notion of pity and despair to deep comprehension. Early on in the novel, the narrator's tension is evident: "It has been hard to see Julia without remembering how she used to be: brave, beautiful, and unstoppable. It looks tough to remember every stumble, as if she lost something dear and valuable." McGovern's reflective tone reveals the narrator's bias as a fixation on loss instead of adaptation. Disability study's author

Lennard J. Davis points out that, much of the time, this kind of narrative comes from cultural constructs placing "normalcy" above diversity (Enforcing Normalcy, 1995). However, because the narrator comes to see Julia not as degraded from her former self but rather as resilient, it provokes the reader into undertaking that shift in contemplation.

Family relationships in *The Art of Seeing* are fraught with tension, yet they eventually become a source of resolve. The bond formed between the sisters has set up networks for dependence and alienation. Julia speak sternly back to her sister during an emotional encounter: "You think I need you because I can't see. But maybe you're the one who needs me to feel useful, to have a purpose." From here, McGovern launches his investigation into interdependency-the major focus of the social model of disability. The novel, instead of depicting Julia as a burden, reinterprets her as a central figure in a mutually supportive relationship. Such narratives, Tobin Siebers argues in *Disability Theory* (2008), support the view to regard disability as a relational entity.

While *the Art of Seeing* has been applauded for its sensitive execution of disability, some critics note that the journey of the narrator's understanding smothers Julia's agent. Ellen Samuels noted in *Fantasies of Identification* (2014) that narratives that are constructed from disabled characters seem to favor the viewpoint of non-disabled individuals, thus solidifying already held hierarchies. However, McGovern tempers this objection by giving Julia a powerful voice through her own definitions.

III. CONCLUSION

Thus, Cammie McGovern's *The Art of Seeing* is a testament to the power of empathy in storytelling. Through its nuanced portrayal of disability and resilience, the novel challenges readers to confront their biases and embrace a more inclusive perspective. By weaving together compelling characters, sensory imagery, and a deeply human narrative, McGovern not only sheds light on the complexities of disability but also celebrates the strength and interdependence of the human spirit.

This exploration of disability and resilience aligns with broader discussions on the intersection of these concepts, as seen in *Disability and Resilience: Key Theoretical Foundatio* Disability is not merely a

medical condition but a social construct shaped by environmental and cultural factors. Similarly, resilience is not just about individual perseverance but also about the accessibility of resources and support systems. Julia's story exemplifies this dynamic—her ability to navigate a world not designed for her is shaped not only by her personal strength but also by her relationships and the evolving perspectives of those around her.

Additionally, Character Analysis: The Resilience and Agency of Julia notes the importance of character-based narratives within disability studies to challenge the dominant perceptions of disability. Julia's resistance to pity and assertion of independence oppositely dismantles the "tragic disabled figure" trope and offer a more empowering representation. Conversely, the evolution of the narrator highlights the enormous work of self-reflection able-bodied people have to engage with if they truly intend to dismantle deep-seated prejudices. Consequently, McGovern's novel is more than just a story; it differentiates itself in its provision of a metaphorical call for redefining how we see ability, normalcy, and human connection.

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