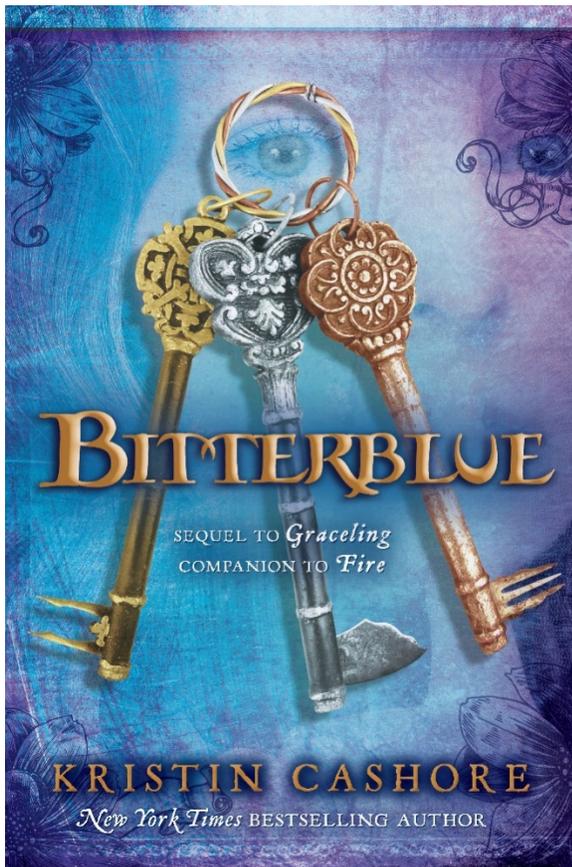


## Ableism and Magical 'Healing' in Fantasy

By Erin Hatcher



[Book cover of *Bitterblue* by Kristin Cashore]. Retrieved March 22, 2019, from <http://disabilityinkidlit.com/2016/03/23/review-graceling-and-bitterblue-by-kristin-cashore/>

Ableism, and the trope of magically 'Healing' a disabled or disfigured individual in fantasy fiction, is a trope that reinforces harmful ideas and is unfortunately still very prevalent in media. With the reinforcement of this trope in an area of media where representation of prominent and sympathetic characters with disabilities and disfigurements is still very sparse this community is further marginalized. Continually recreating this trope in a narrative reinforces the world view that people with disabilities and disfigurements should be thought of, and treated, as if they need to be fixed or changed in order to measure up to societal standards. This is

something that is particularly harmful in Young Adult (YA) media as it reinforces this worldview both on young and impressionable people with disabilities and non-disabled people. These impressions will likely affect the way that they perceive themselves and others and affect how they treat people in their lives.

These tropes play into the notion that an individual's disability or disfigurement is a marker of that character being deviant. This is based in a long held cultural belief, reinforced by Christian traditions, that believed disability to be a sign of immorality or disfavour (Bérubé, 2005). This cultural idea shows itself in characters being treated as pitiable, exotic, deviant, comical, asexual, powerless, othered, dependent, tragic, and altogether dehumanized (Bérubé, 2005). These ideas have been used to stigmatize, as well as to justify inequality for disabled and disfigured people (Anicca, 2017). Though this idea would often be refuted if stated in those terms today, the concept of it is still pervasive in our media. Ableism is less likely to be explicit within the text of a piece of media but rather in the subtext of how characters with disabilities and disfigurements are treated. These characters are often treated, or it is expressed within the narrative, that they are incomplete or othered by their disabilities. A prominent recent example of this characterization in adult fantasy would be the character of Eliza in the critically acclaimed paranormal romance film *The Shape of Water*, whose part contains the lines

When he looks at me, the way he looks at me, he does not know what I lack, or how I am incomplete. He sees me for what I am, as I am (Dale & del Toro, 2017).

The ableism in this line is the thought that, with this disability, Eliza is not complete as a person and she does not see herself as complete. Through her disability Eliza is othered, and though the film does contain positive elements in giving her sexual agency, power, and having her drive the narrative, these elements of othering and being treated as inherently flawed are still there

(Sjunneson-Henry, 2018). There are scenes where the character tries to teach her fantastical lover sign language, but they are sparse and underdeveloped, and the character later has an out of body musical number where the non-disabled actress sings about how she will never be able to express to her lover how much she loves him (Sjunneson-Henry, 2018). Once again this is a devaluing of this character, saying that not only is she lesser, but the language that she uses to communicate is lesser.

Something that reinforces that idea of someone being incomplete due to their disability or disfigurement is the magical healing trope. For the purposes of this article I have dubbed this particular trope as the *Magical Healing* trope, but it has also been referred to as *Throwing off the Disability*, or the *Magical or Miraculous Cure* (tvtropes, 2019; Tiede, 2013). This trope is something that remains unfortunately common in media, particularly in the genres of Fantasy and Science Fiction. The trope involves a disabled character being magically or miraculously healed of their disability or being given a magical power that negates their disability, thus making them ‘whole’ from the perspective of the narrative (Stemp, 2004). In fantasy works one very prominent example is the use of blindness as both tragic disability that is either overcome or negated by magic. This is a trope that is prolific in media for children and young adults, with a recent and prominent example being the book *Graceling* by Kristin Cashore (Pryal, 2016). In this book Po, a prominent character is in the *Graceling Realm* series who loses his sight. However, within the first book of the series his magical ability becomes so great that he is able to override his blindness and perceive the world through magic (Cashore, 2012). This has become a prominent example because the author herself acknowledged the mistake, saying

Thanks to Rebecca Rabinowitz and Deborah Kaplan, who, after reading a late draft of *Bitterblue*, counseled me on the matter of Po, disability politics, and whether there was any

way to counter the consequences of my making Po's Grace grow so big that it compensated for his blindness at the end of *Graceling*. (I was not thinking about disability politics back then. It didn't occur to me, until it was too late, that I had disabled Po, then given him a magical cure for his disability—thus implying that he couldn't be a whole person and also be disabled. I now understand that the magical cure trope is all too common in F/SF writing and is disrespectful to people with disabilities. My failings here are all my own. (Cashore, 2012))

This robs the character of the significance of having a disability. The character is not simply allowed to exist with a disability and for that to be a part of their experience within the narrative, in this case the character is not simply allowed to be blind (Pryal, 2016; Sjunneson-Henry, 2016). Some works of fantasy have been able to apply this trope with more consideration for representing a character with a disability. The character of Toph from the acclaimed cartoon series *Avatar* is a popular example. Toph is a character who was born blind but possesses the magical power of earth bending, the ability to move and control earth (Avatar Wiki, n.d.). Through this ability Toph is able to navigate, sense movement, and fight. However, there are still ways in which her blindness affects her experience (Avatar Wiki, n.d.). Toph is still unable to see in the traditional sense and this affects her character in various ways: she cannot perceive objects that are not connected to the ground, she is also unable to perceive physical beauty in the way that other characters do, something that has an effect on her perspective, she has difficulty navigating in water or on sand because it affects her abilities as vibrations travel differently through them (Sjunneson-Henry, 2016). This is still a problem as she is not allowed to exist within the world simply as a person with a disability, but it at least grants her relatable experiences for an audience, which is an important thing for young adults to see (Stemp, 2004).

The Magical Healing trope is based on ableist ideas that a disabled person cannot be whole unless that disability is negated by some narrative device. With its use in works targeted at young adults it is reinforcing those ideas to non-disabled readers and robbing disabled readers of much needed representation. Even in its more nuanced portrayals this is a problematic representation of characters with disabilities, particularly as it comprises the bulk of the representation of these characters in fantasy. People with disabilities should be able to find narratives that better reflect their experiences instead of treating them like someone who needs to be fixed.

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