Chapter III

Shades of Stigma

“The world breaks everyone, and afterward, many are strong at the broken places.”

— Ernest Hemingway (*A Farewell to Arms*)

This chapter undertakes a rigorous examination of the selected literary texts authored by Beverley Brenna, with a specific focus on the intricate concept of stigma. The multifarious nature of stigma becomes apparent as individuals with disabilities bear the brunt of its effects at varying levels. Resultantly, these individuals endure a continuous cycle of trauma, feeling not only marginalised and insignificant, but also rendered invisible. The overarching objective of this chapter is to meticulously analyse the portrayal of characters with disabilities, thereby illuminating the profound impact of stigma upon their lives. By delving into the myriad shades of stigma that they encounter, this study endeavours to contribute to a deeper understanding of this pervasive phenomenon.

The lives of individuals with disabilities are fraught with immense hardships and challenges imposed by society. Despite the supposed progress resulting from disability activism and the development of assistive aids, the reality remains grim for disabled individuals, who continue to suffer under the weight of societal prejudice and oppression. In the words of Douglas C. Baynton in *The Disability Studies Reader*, “... Disabled people can be considered one of the minority groups historically assigned inferior status and subjected to discrimination, disability has functioned for all such groups as a sign of and justification for inferiority” (18). Disability serves as a stark symbol of inequality and discrimination directed towards individuals with disabilities, relegating them to an inferior position and systematically excluding them from mainstream society.

In the exploration of disability, which emerged in the previous century, significant theoretical frameworks such as ‘Stigma,’ ‘Invisibility,’ and ‘Trauma’ have come to the forefront. These concepts shed light on the unique experiences of disabled individuals who frequently face discrimination, oppression, and societal disdain. Society often views their disabilities as defining characteristics that inevitably lead to negative outcomes. As Tobin Siebers succinctly puts it in *Culture - Theory - Disability: Encounters between Disability Studies and Cultural Studies* by Anne Waldschmidt et al., “Pain and disability are not equivalent ... Disability is often misinterpreted as a personal misfortune, as inherently individual, and in a manner similar to pain ...” (113-14).

The deeply entrenched notion that individuals with disabilities are less than fully human and undeserving of the same rights as able-bodied individuals still permeates societies worldwide. In fact, this belief manifests itself in the abandonment or even abortion of disabled individuals, with the medical system offering mothers the option to terminate their pregnancies if the fetus is deemed disabled. Such actions are perceived as benevolent gestures, sparing the unborn child from potential challenges that they would face in society. Consequently, disabled persons are left isolated and subjected to inhumane treatment.

Disability, often derogatorily termed ‘cripple,’ emerged post-world wars to identify injured soldiers. Douglas C. McMurtrie’s article “The Meaning of the Term Crippled” explores its origins. In French, “mutilés” refers to individuals with severe limitations, while “estropié” is akin to ‘cripple’ (7). ‘Invalid’ in the medical model denotes injured or ill bodies.

In India, the term ‘Divyang’ is used instead of ‘Viklang’ to symbolise disabled individuals who are believed to possess divine powers. However, religious texts present conflicting viewpoints. In Judaism, the central character is attributed with responsibility for disability, portraying it in a negative light. In the *Yahweh* stories, disability is viewed as a degradation, a departure from the perfect body bestowed upon Adam in the creation narrative. As quoted by Brooke A, Blanks and David Smith in “Multiculturalism, Religion, and Disability: Implications for Special Education Practitioners,” Hentrich states, “People with disabilities are considered impure and they carry the danger of bringing pollution to their surroundings and other people” (4). Over time, the able-bodied perspective on disability has undergone changes, leading to a decrease in negative aspects. Smith concludes that one does not require a perfect body but should emphasise intellectualism. However, many individuals have structured their societies around religious beliefs, where disability is seen as impure. As a result, the able-bodied tend to underestimate persons with disabilities and overlook their abilities, leading to biased perspectives. Persons with disabilities are often subjected to prejudiced views.

Throughout history, religion has often stigmatised disability, suggesting it’s a sinful consequence or karma from past lives. Spiritual and religious beliefs deeply influence cultures and lives, historically leading to the disregard and labelling of people with disabilities as impure. Religious texts, like the Old Testament, have been interpreted to suggest that disabilities are punishments from God for sin. Theodore Arthur Pinnock in “Disability Studies: Black Cerebral Palsy Identity Crisis” noted, “It is seen as a curse and as a result of unbelief and ignorance.” The Hebrew Bible attributes disability to divine wrath for deviating from the traditional path, instilling fear to enforce obedience. This perception not only fears disability but also those who have it, perpetuating stigma and discrimination.

In ancient times, religion heavily influenced society's negative view of disability, leading to the isolation of disabled individuals. This exclusion caused significant trauma and affected not only the disabled person but also their family. Conditions like blindness, deafness, and leprosy were seen as diseases according to *The Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible*. Clinical trials emerged later, showing society's initial efforts to understand and accommodate disabilities. Priya Lalvani and Lauren Polvere, in "Historical Perspectives on Studying Families of Children with Disabilities," note the shift from 'supernatural to medical interpretations of disability' in the 19th century. Despite these trials, disabled individuals still face isolation and inadequate compensation, making integration into society a major challenge. This highlights the marginalisation they endure from the majority of able-bodied people.

Parents of disabled children often experience profound feelings of loss and burden, leading them to withdraw from social interactions due to stigma and trauma. Foley and Hochman, in "Mental Health in Early Intervention," emphasise that "... the birth of a child with a disability 'signals a potential threat to the spirit as well as to the daily and future life of the parents'" (227). This highlights the belief that disability brings misfortune to the family. Coming to terms with their child's disability presents another challenge, as noted by Singh and Verma in their article "Unplanned Journey of Parenting a Child with Special Needs," citing Lungile and Beresford, who state that "the birth of a child with disabilities or the discovery that a child has disability is an intense and traumatic event for parents ..." (2). This lack of acceptance not only isolates disabled children from society but also from their own families, creating a dual form of oppression and invisibility for them.

The pervasive stigma in society affects those seen as weak, powerless, or marginalised. In the "Toolkit on Disability for Africa: Culture, Beliefs, and

Disability," it's noted that families may hide their disabled children due to 'shame and stigma,' with caregivers restricting their participation in social activities (6). The dominant able-bodied group dictates who faces stigma, influenced by societal norms and cultural beliefs. Originally meaning 'prick' or 'to puncture' in Greek, stigma refers to negative beliefs about differences. This social rejection starts early, dividing disabled and able-bodied individuals. Dana S. Dunn, in "The Social Psychology of Disability," quoting Erving Goffman, categorise stigma into "tribal identities, body abominations, and character flaws" (40). These labels are imposed on the vulnerable, fostering a sense of superiority and control among the majority. This attitude is examined critically, showing how it varies across regions and situations, such as the stigmatisation faced by a black student at an American university versus in African regions.

Stigma marginalises individuals with disabilities, stripping them of power and subjecting them to bias and discrimination. Lerita M. Coleman-Brown emphasises in *The Disability Studies Reader* that stigma becomes their "defining attribute, overshadowing all other aspects of their identity" (150). Sara Earle further highlights in "Disability and Stigma: Unequal Life" how disabled individuals face significant inequality across various domains, perpetuating their "oppression" in society (7).

In "Personal Responses to Disability Stigma: From Self-Stigma to Empowerment" by Amy C. Watson and Jonathon E. Larson, two types of stigma are delineated: public stigma, representing societal perception, and personal stigma, involving self-doubt and reliance on others rather than self-belief. According to Priya Lalvani's "Historical Perspectives on Studying Families of Children with Disabilities: A Case for Critical Research," Harre and Gillet's positioning theory explains the construction of psychological and social phenomena through discourse and activity, shaping individual identity. Stigma persists through intergenerational transmission, normalising disability as feared and stigmatised in society.

The trilogy novels - *Wild Orchid, The White Bicycle,* and *Waiting for No One* - provide a profound portrayal of the life of Taylor Jane Simon, an eighteen-year-old protagonist diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome. Spanning from her primary education to her pursuit of economic and social independence, these three novels delve into Jane's journey. Throughout the trilogy, Jane strives to assert her independence, yet her divergence from the norm poses challenges that make her feel alienated, rendering her an anomaly in the eyes of others. Jane endures a lifetime of stigma, exacerbated by her overly protective mother. Penelope, being a single parent, takes charge of the situation after Jane's father, Simon, abandons them upon learning about Jane's disability.

In the trilogy, Jane connects with several individuals who recognise her true self without patronising her. Shauna, initially her caregiver, becomes a close friend, understanding Jane's worth beyond her disabilities. Paul from the Nature Centre empathises with her challenges, offering support in difficult times. Martin, drawing from personal experience with disability, sees Jane as a friend. Adelaide at Cassis helps refine Jane's artistic talents, appreciating her true potential despite societal biases.

In *Wild Orchid*, Jane's unwavering determination challenges societal stereotypes despite her autism, as noted by G. Lokandha Reddy in *Behaviour Disorders in Children*. Jane's struggle lies in connecting with others, a common trait in autism leading to isolation and behavioural challenges. Despite this, her Asperger's Syndrome grants her exceptional memory, enhancing academic performance and setting her apart from peers.

Asperger’s Syndrome, a neuro-developmental disorder, involves social interaction challenges and repetitive behaviours. Core features include limited social understanding, trouble with reciprocal conversations, and intense interests. These traits can lead to social isolation, limiting academic, occupational, and independent achievements.

Individuals with Asperger’s Syndrome grapple with a lack of social understanding, constrained reciprocal conversation, and a profound focus on particular subjects. In essence, Asperger’s Syndrome pertains to individuals who possess distinct thought processes compared to those without the condition. This diagnosis was initially identified by Dr. Hans Asperger, a Viennese paediatrician, who in 1944 observed a recurring behavioural and personality pattern among a specific group of children. Tony Attwood, in his work *The Complete Guide to Asperger’s Syndrome*, quotes Dr. Hans Asperger, who suggested the term “Autistische Psychopathen im Kindesalter,” which, in contemporary English terminology, can be translated as “personality disorder” (12-13).

Individuals with Asperger’s Syndrome often face challenges in social interaction, experiencing delays in social maturity and atypical reasoning development. Attwood, in *The Complete Guide to Asperger’s Syndrome*, notes their “pedantic” language use and “unusual prosody” which affects tone, pitch, and rhythm (13). Despite advanced grammar and vocabulary, conversational difficulties persist, leaving observers with a sense of the conversation’s unusual nature.

The novel *Wild Orchid* opens with a conversation between Penelope and Jane, where Jane expresses disagreement with her mother’s planned trip to Waskesiu. Penelope’s overprotectiveness towards her daughter transforms into prejudice and stigma. Reddy, in *Behaviour Disorders in Children*, notes that parents often describe individuals with autism as “self-sufficient,” “withdrawn,” “happiest in solitude,” and “unaware of others’ presence” (268). Autistic individuals may feel vulnerable in the presence of prying eyes and tend to isolate themselves. Despite this, Penelope refuses to allow her daughter to be alone and forcefully takes her to Waskesiu. As a single parent, Penelope’s frustration occasionally leads her to utter words she doesn’t mean, such as portraying her daughter as selfish. This is a result of the challenges Penelope faces alone in a society that views her daughter as abnormal. Penelope plans to spend her summer with her new boyfriend, Danny, in Waskesiu, but she insists on bringing Jane along, despite Jane’s reluctance and annoyance. Penelope blurts out to Jane, saying, “‘Don’t you want me to have a life!’ ... ‘why can’t you just do this one thing? You’d like it there if you gave it a chance’” (Brenna, *WO* 8). Although Penelope is overwhelmed and yearns for a new life, she does not want to exclude her daughter from the picture. Her maternal instincts prevent her from letting go of her love for her daughter. Being a single parent deprives her of the opportunity to enjoy her own life, and both mother and daughter lack support from Simon, who has left them for his own benefit. Penelope not only struggles with societal stigma but also with her daughter’s actions, as she has no one else to vent her frustrations to. Consequently, Penelope’s stress reflects on Jane.

Penelope’s overprotective nature leads to prejudiced judgments about Jane, reflecting what Ato Quayson terms “aesthetic nervousness” in *Aesthetic Nervousness: Disability and the Crisis of Representation*. This concept highlights societal biases toward disability, often unexamined. Penelope’s control over Jane’s life perpetuates stigma, constraining Jane’s autonomy. Despite both being victims of societal stigma, Penelope’s able-bodied privilege enables her dominance over Jane, underestimating her daughter’s capabilities and diminishing her autonomy.

Parenting plays a significant role in shaping individuals, as children often emulate their parents' values and behaviours. Margaret K. Nelson highlights in *Parenting Out of Control: Anxious Parents in Uncertain Times* that "parents strive to instil their values and aspirations in their children" (164). Two contrasting parenting approaches exist: abandonment of labelled disabled children or providing unwavering support amidst adversity and stigma. Penelope exemplifies the latter, deviating from Simon's example by supporting Jane despite societal challenges. However, Penelope's concern for Jane's well-being transforms her into an overly apprehensive mother, leading to excessive control. Witnessing Jane's struggles and marginalisation, Penelope becomes convinced of her daughter's inability to navigate society independently, leading to her constant presence and imposition of strict rules, even during outings with prospective partners.

Penelope's maternal instincts, driven by fear, lead her to overprotectiveness, fearing her daughter may repeat her own struggles. Financial instability exacerbates Penelope's insecurities, influencing her relationship with Jane. When Penelope decides to return to their previous life after a breakup, she expects Jane to comply without question, revealing her economic concerns. In a conversation, Penelope's admission of underestimating Jane's understanding amplifies Jane's feelings of insignificance, as she perceives her inability to alleviate the situation. Penelope reveals, "[Penelope] … I have to start my other job on Thursday. If I'm not working here, I have to work somewhere ... We sat together quietly for a while. Then I said, 'I didn't know that part about the money.' 'I'm [Penelope] am sorry. I did underestimate you'" (Brenna, *WO* 143).

Penelope's awareness of societal attitudes towards individuals like Jane drives her to assume a dominant role in her daughter's life, aiming to shield her from potential traumas. However, Jane feels disempowered and increasingly disabled by Penelope’s actions. With her spouse absent, Penelope seeks solace in relationships but finds no support. Desperate to spare Jane from her own hardships, Penelope encourages her to flee adversity. Yet, her relationships yield no lasting benefits, leading Penelope to readily change partners and advise the same to Jane. These actions, while intended to be beneficial, also reveal Penelope’s silent plea for assistance. As they prepare to leave Waskesiu, Penelope manipulates Jane, failing to acknowledge her daughter’s efforts to adapt, especially considering the challenges posed by Jane’s Asperger’s Syndrome.

Penelope’s constant interference erodes Jane’s confidence. Before Jane’s diagnosis, Penelope and Simon are unaware of her condition, struggling with its challenges. When Jane has a meltdown at school, Penelope rushes to her aid, but Jane only identifies her through her handbag. As Vibha Krishnamurti in *Autism, Nature and Needs* notes, autistic children often show “limited interest in socializing,” making mothers notice their differences early on (55). Jane’s behaviour aligns with these traits; she struggles with emotions and avoids problems, retreating to the woods when faced with difficulty. Both mother and daughter suffer silently, unable to confide in each other. Penelope understands Jane’s emotional limitations, while Jane sees her mother as incapable of problem-solving, avoiding challenges. This silent struggle deepens Jane’s sense of inadequacy, as she becomes overly dependent on her mother’s care, hindering her independence.

Penelope is deeply attentive to Jane’s needs, accompanying her everywhere. However, Jane perceives this care as suffocating due to her autism. Despite their mutual dependence, they don’t acknowledge it. Jane’s reluctance to join Penelope in Waskesiu reflects her discomfort with new environments. In the *Handbook of*

Disability Studies by Albrecht et al., it's noted that people with disabilities often struggle to assert autonomy, leading to interdependence with caregivers. This dynamic is evident in Penelope and Jane's relationship, where Penelope is hesitant to let Jane experience independence. Ferguson, in the same handbook, highlights how interactions between families and professionals are shaped by societal attitudes towards disability, emphasising the importance of understanding the "sociohistorical context in interpreting family reactions to disability" (374-75).

Penelope struggles financially despite her daughter receiving government aid for medical expenses. The lack of comprehensive support for parents exacerbates financial strain for those caring for children with special needs. This combination of disability and poverty negatively impacts individuals with disabilities, as noted by Ferguson in the *Handbook of Disability Studies*. Ferguson highlights how impoverished parents caring for disabled children face societal condemnation due to societal expectations of "perfect" children (377). In the novel *The Moon Children*, single parent Chrysta Lee, working as a motel cleaner, faces the challenge of balancing caring for her son with special needs and earning a living, requiring immense effort to provide for both herself and her son.

The novel *The Moon Children* follows Billy, diagnosed with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD). While his mother, Chrysta Lee, cares for him lovingly, his father Zak abandons him, seeing Billy as a burden. Neighbour Mrs. Schmidt provides moral support, viewing Billy as a kind-hearted individual. Despite facing her own challenges, Natasha, who loses her ability to speak, connects with Billy. While Natasha's adoptive parents care for her, Zak's abandonment leaves Billy and Chrysta financially insecure.

Consequently, Chrysta Lee is unable to dedicate sufficient time to Billy. He experiences a profound sense of loneliness and struggles to develop interpersonal interactions and communication skills. This hinders his ability to engage socially and express his thoughts to others. Billy’s frustration erupts as he questions his mother, asking, “‘Do you ever feel like there’s a volcano inside you just waiting to erupt?’ ... ‘Or a cyclone, or a flood? Or maybe lightning and thunder?’” (Brenna, *MC* 16). These words reflect the tumultuous state of Billy’s mind. Unlike others, he cannot contain his thoughts and struggles to articulate them. However, Chrysta Lee, preoccupied with her work and the need to rebuild their lives, fails to truly listen to her son’s difficulties, hurriedly pushing him into the elevator and emphasising the importance of being punctual for her job. As a result, Billy is left alone, deprived of his mother’s attention and understanding.

Similar to Billy, Jane faces challenges in fitting into society, encountering obstacles that hinder her assimilation. Her true identity remains hidden under societal stigma. Penelope’s pursuit of a partner stems from her desire to ease financial burdens, but Jane interprets it as pushing her into unfamiliar territory. Penelope insists they go to Waskesiu, but Jane refuses, feeling overwhelmed by the newness. Jane expresses, “It might be one thing for you, but it’s at least twenty things for me. Twenty new things. We’re talking twenty to one, Mom” (Brenna, *WO* 9).

Jane’s syndrome not only renders her vulnerable but also creates difficulties for Penelope in teaching her daughter to adapt to new situations, ultimately giving Penelope the upper hand in controlling her daughter’s life. Jane’s condition affects every aspect of her daily life, exerting a comprehensive influence over her body and mind. Consequently, she feels compelled to isolate herself, experiencing discomfort in the presence of strangers. This situation places a double burden on Penelope, who struggles to express her love for Jane. However, despite being an adult, Jane lacks autonomy due to societal norms that impede her understanding. Jane is perplexed by society's treatment of her, as her inability to comprehend emotions frightens Penelope, who cares for her adult daughter.

Heather Love argues that 'stigma' entails transforming impairment into disability, stating, "... defines stigma as break with expectations for 'normal' appearance ..." (Adams, *KFDS* 487). This perspective is clearly reflected in Jane's case, where her limited social interactions label her as disabled, leading to her exclusion from society. Her social isolation compounds her misery in life. Jane recollects:

> When I was in grade two, my teacher had a big cardboard box at the back of the classroom where kids could go and work if they felt like it. I spent a lot of time sitting in one corner of that box to escape the classroom setting …. when kids started called me 'The Freaker.' They did not understand why unpredictable things made me freak out …. I am still not happy when I remember those days. Being called by something other than your name is very unpleasant. (Brenna, *WFNO* 70)

From a young age, Jane has grappled with fitting in and feels uncomfortable around others, leading her to seek solace in solitude. Unfortunately, her teacher fails to identify the true bullies and instead blames Jane for her reactions, unaware of her syndrome. This misunderstanding results in Jane being labelled a freak, diminishing her sense of bravery.

Once an individual is subjected to stigma, it becomes an all-encompassing force that permeates every aspect of their life. Throughout her schooling years, Jane is stigmatised, deprived of any friendships on which she could rely. Even during her meltdowns, instead of extending a helping hand, everyone criticises her sporadic behaviour. It is profoundly uncomfortable for Jane when she is referred to by names other than her own, but she is unable to defend herself against her classmates who seize every opportunity to bully her.

Similarly, the character Billy from the novel *The Moon Children* encounters a parallel dilemma. His Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) profoundly affects his central nervous system, leading to a deficiency in social skills and making him an outcast among his classmates. Unable to recognise letters due to his FASD, he becomes the subject of ridicule among his peers. Relentlessly bullied by his classmate Eddie, who seizes every opportunity to demean him.

Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) causes brain damage and growth issues, leading to socio-behavioural challenges like deficient social skills and difficulties with adaptability and task-switching. According to Adubato and Cohen in *Prenatal Alcohol Use and Fetal Alcoholic Spectrum Disorders*, Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS) results from maternal alcohol consumption during pregnancy, characterised by growth deficiencies, facial anomalies, and central nervous system abnormalities. Such alterations are often observed among mothers who have consumed alcohol during pregnancy. Billy’s FASD exacerbates his feelings of being different and disabled. Simple tasks become complex for him, while they remain effortless for children his age. As Elizabeth Barnes argues in “Disability, Minority, and Differences,” the question arises as to whether having a “disability merely signifies a different way of being or, more significantly, a form of difference that renders one worse off precisely due to that difference” (339). In today’s world, individuals fear difference because it threatens their sense of stature and competence relative to others.

Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder is a condition resulting from prenatal exposure to alcohol. FASD leads to irreversible brain damage, growth issues, and a range of developmental deficits. In *Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders: Concepts, Mechanisms, and Cure: Neurology – Laboratory and Clinical Research Developments*, Sushil Sharma cites Chudley, who describes “FASD victims as displaying abnormal craniofacial features, stunted growth, short stature, low body weight, microcephaly, poor coordination, reduced intelligence, neurobehavioral impairments, as well as visual and auditory abnormalities” (78). Individuals with FASD encounter challenges in growth and development due to structural and functional damage to their central nervous system.

In earlier times, women were advised against alcohol consumption during pregnancy and breastfeeding, as seen in the *King James Version of the Bible’s* warning, “Now therefore beware, I pray thee, and drink not wine nor strong drink, and eat not any unclean things.” British physicians in 1725 petitioned against alcohol consumption during pregnancy, citing its detrimental effects on children’s health and future. The risks of Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) depend on the frequency and quantity of alcohol consumed during specific stages of pregnancy.

Disabled individuals are dehumanised as their needs and expectations are disregarded by able-bodied individuals. The able-bodied population neglects to educate their children about disability from a young age, instead imposing their biased perspectives on disability onto their offspring. Due to the prevailing dominance of temporarily abled individuals in society, the unique abilities of disabled individuals are devalued, leading to their exclusion from social circles. Society, along with their peers, fails to recognise the worth and potential of disabled individuals, thereby depriving them of sufficient opportunities. In *The Moon Children*, Billy is grossly underestimated by his classmates and becomes a target of bullying by individuals like Eddie and his peers, "'Looser!' Eddie Mundy would whisper on his way past Billy's desk …. 'Does Baby Billy wear a diaper, too?' Sometimes, the other kids, would write notes about him. Billy knew this because he'd find them sometimes, small scraps of paper with his name on them …. He just knew they sound bad things" (20-21).

Children with FASD exhibit distinct facial expressions that set them apart from their neurotypical peers. Their emotions experience disruptions, and they may require more time to comprehend tasks that come easily to children their age. Such hindrances make them easy targets for able-bodied individuals, who exacerbate the challenges they face. In Billy's case, Eddie seizes the opportunity to take advantage of the situation, treating Billy as if he were a kindergartner and subjecting him to derogatory names like 'baby' and 'loser.' Regrettably, Billy finds himself helpless and unable to defend against these bullies.

In Billy's situation, no one comes forward to offer assistance; instead, they join forces to taunt him. As a young boy, he endures bullying without anyone to rely on for support. Eddie and his classmates mock Billy for his inability to perform simple tasks. They dehumanise him, viewing him as an abnormal classmate. This constant humiliation and taunting not only shatter Billy's confidence but also isolate him from social interactions. This is a prime example of how Billy becomes stigmatised by his peers.

Dan Goodley, in *Disability Studies: An Interdisciplinary Introduction*, cites Connor to illustrate the historical dehumanization of black and disabled individuals.

They were often exhibited in freak shows of the nineteenth century as “exotic” and “repulsive” attractions (36-37). Individuals like Billy, with unique traits, face stigma and ridicule, particularly from classmates like Eddie Mundy, who enjoys targeting Billy. This treatment ostracises Billy socially, diminishing his sense of humanity and support. Natasha emerges as his sole confidante, offering understanding and support amid his isolation.

The presence of social interaction is crucial within society, yet individuals labelled as disabled often encounter significant barriers to accessing such opportunities. They endure social alienation, as they are frequently stigmatised by able-bodied individuals, rendering them invisible to others. Jane experiences the distress of lacking friends at school, constantly accompanied by her teacher assistant, Shauna, who serves as her guide and instructor in navigating social situations. Additionally, Jane laments her lack of a boyfriend, feeling that others view her solely through the lens of her special needs, rather than recognising her as a teenager.

Shauna acts as both protector and mentor to Jane, guiding her social integration and encouraging interaction with peers. However, Jane increasingly relies on Shauna, feeling understood and supported by her. Despite this, Shauna inadvertently hinders Jane’s ability to form friendships, leading to isolation and frustration. Jane feels her disability overshadows her social life, with no one finding her interesting or forming meaningful connections:

> All of the boys I know are from my high school, and none of them wear golf shirt. Some of them talk to me, but none of them are boyfriend material because they think of as someone who has special needs. When I’m eating lunch, sometimes boys sit at my table, but

> only if there are other girls there. Not once has a boy ever come to eat lunch just with me. (Brenna, *WO* 27)

Jane faces neglect from boys her age who perceive her as someone in need of special attention, resulting in her exclusion from the social circle. Her peers view her as inferior due to her disability, leaving Jane without a friend to share meals with and causing her to regret her lack of a boyfriend. These experiences leave her feeling insignificant and diminish her sense of self-worth. The personal stigma she carries convinces her that she is incapable of forming friendships or leading a normal life like her peers.

Disabled individuals face social injustice, relegated to the bottom of society's hierarchy due to binary cultural perspectives that categorise them as normal or disabled, autonomous or dependent, competent or incompetent citizens. This oppression leads to social divisions and labour inequalities, evident in Jane's struggle to find meaningful employment due to her Asperger's Syndrome. Despite her efforts, she settles for an undervalued role organising books, highlighting the exclusion of disabled individuals from the labour market and limited access to education. Eli Clare's *Brilliant Imperfection: Grappling with Cure* further explores this issue:

> Some of us are granted personhood as our birthright [sic], but others are required to prove and defend it every day. And when we fail this perverse test, we're in trouble …. Over and over again neurologists, journalists, judges made decisions about … body-mind based on the beliefs that language and self-awareness make us worthy, that death is better than disability, that withdrawing the basic human rights of food and water can be acts of compassion. (28-29)

The pervasive nature of stigma compels differently-abled individuals to navigate the spectrum of disability throughout their lives, while striving to break free from its constraints. The co-construction of ability and disability positions ability as superior to disability, privileging certain individuals over others. Brenna, through her work, highlights the interplay between ability and disability in a socially constructed society, shedding light on the realities experienced by able-bodied individuals. In the narrative of *The White Bicycle*, Jane recounts her encounters with stigma in the way others treat her. When she was four years old and undiagnosed, Jane was viewed as a problematic child, prompting her class teacher to frequently call Jane's mother for assistance during Jane's uncontrollable meltdowns at school.

Having Asperger's Syndrome bestows individuals with unique qualities, but it also impairs their social interactions. Dr. Vibha Krishnamurti, in *Autism, Nature and Needs*, explains that these children and adults were often perceived as eccentric or emotionally disturbed rather than recognising their neurological impairments. Autistic individuals are emotionally vulnerable, lacking the skills to navigate unexpected crises. In Jane's kindergarten, she attempts to organise the toys neatly in a box, but her efforts are repeatedly thwarted by a classmate who deliberately creates chaos. This eventually triggers a meltdown, leading Jane's tutor to remove her from the room as she becomes inconsolable.

The prejudiced mindset towards Jane's behaviour clouds the judgment of her tutor, who fails to recognise her silent cry for help. Jane's desperate pleas become a regular occurrence for her tutor, yet no one makes an effort to understand the underlying reasons behind her indifference. Jane's atypical behaviour serves as an invisible barrier, preventing others from discovering the root cause of her distress, rendering her plea unheard.

Another incident in *The White Bicycle* illustrates Jane's growing difficulty in expressing her emotions. When faced with a crisis, she finds herself unable to articulate her thoughts and instead resorts to yelling, which often escalates into a meltdown. For instance, in her kindergarten class, a boy named Elton attempts to forcefully remove her from her chair, prompting Jane to respond by striking him with a mouse:

> A boy comes over. His mouth is moving and sounds are coming out but I don't hear any words. Then he tries to push me out of my chair. I grab the mouse and pull it out of the computer; then I hit him on the side of the head with it. He runs away crying and I sit back down, plug in the mouse, and continue to type random letters. I am surprised when the teacher comes over and turns off the computer …. 'It's going to stay off until you apologize to Elton,' says the teacher very slowly. (Brenna 52-53)

Elton, a source of intimidation for Jane, instils fear in her through his forceful actions of forcefully taking away the computer by pushing Jane. This act of violence not only poses a direct threat to Jane but also exacerbates her sense of vulnerability. In response, Jane resorts to her own use of force to regain control over the computer, symbolising her pursuit of power in the face of dominance by the able-bodied. The computer becomes a symbolic representation of the power struggle between the children, highlighting the underlying dynamics of domination between the able-bodied and differently-abled individuals.

However, the teacher fails to comprehend the underlying issue and instead blames Jane for her perceived act of violence. This failure stems from the teacher's lack of awareness regarding Jane's disability, as she remains oblivious to Jane's condition at that particular moment. Furthermore, no one in Jane’s life has taken the initiative to diagnose her problem, further contributing to the lack of understanding and support for Jane.

Discrimination and social prejudice against disabled individuals are widespread, leading able-bodied individuals to harbour negative attitudes towards those who are differently-abled. In the short story collection *Something to Hang on To*, one of the stories titled “Finding Your Voice” portrays the struggles faced by Janine, a kindergarten student who experiences difficulties in communicating with her classmates, often choosing to distance herself from the crowd. Janine’s realisation that words cannot alter her situation stems from the fact that her able-bodied classmates perceive her as an outsider. Despite Mrs. Desjarlais’ numerous attempts to foster a friendly environment, the stigmatising perspective held by Janine’s classmates hinders any understanding or effort to include her.

Another significant character in the short story collection is Samantha, who, like Janine, has been diagnosed with muscular dystrophy. Together, they form a friendship that serves as an example to those who look down upon Samantha. However, due to Samantha’s inability to communicate verbally, the two friends develop a unique method of communication through eye movements. Janine learns about Samantha’s likes and dislikes by observing her eye movements.

As Janine and Samantha nurture their friendship, their spirits are shattered by Janine’s mother, who criticises Samantha and uses the derogatory term “retard” to describe her (Brenna, *STHOT* 65). This biased perspective and cruel comment deeply affect Janine, leaving her shocked to hear such words from her own family. Despite having a disabled child of her own, Janine’s mother maintains an insensitive attitude towards disability while attempting to project an appearance of normalcy. Disabled individuals are subjected to both intentional and unintentional abuse by able-bodied individuals. The mother's behaviour in this instance is highly irresponsible, as the use of the word "retard" represents a thoughtless and outright slur (Brenna, *STHOT* 65).

The able-bodied individuals engage in stigmatisation of differently-abled individuals, subjecting them to stereotypical judgments and treating them as deviant and different. These stigmatising attitudes devalue and distance individuals based on their specific characteristics. The emotional impact of such stigma results in discrimination and the erosion of self-esteem among the differently-abled. In the novel *Wild Orchid*, Paul's wife, June, is afflicted with multiple sclerosis, making her a prime target for able-bodied individuals. This is evident in June's reluctance to engage with the outside world and her fear of daylight, driven by her personal stigma.

In contemporary society, the concepts of 'fit' and 'misfit' are employed to accurately capture the challenges faced by individuals with disabilities. The notion of being 'fit' has become deeply ingrained in our culture, where it signifies an individual's conformity to societal norms and others' perceptions. Consequently, this creates an illusion that individuals must strive to fit into every aspect of life, and those who do not conform are labelled as 'misfits' and marginalised from mainstream society. As Brenda Major, and Laurie O'Brien state in "The Social Psychology of Stigma," stigma toward individuals with disabilities can manifest in various ways, such as "discomfort" or "anxiety" experienced in social interactions with this group (8). The constant judgment and scrutiny from able-bodied individuals can create an uncomfortable environment for those with disabilities.

Jane encounters June in Waskesiu through Paul's introduction. Upon starting her part-time work at the Nature Centre, Jane becomes acquainted with June, who has been diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. As is often the case, stigma plays a significant role in turning June's life into a nightmarish existence. June harbours a deep aversion to venturing out during daylight hours, as she is unable to cope with the criticism and scrutiny imposed by able-bodied individuals. She seeks to remain invisible, escaping the gazes of others. As Paul explains, "June was a wheelchair and felt too sorry for herself to come out unless it was dark and people couldn't see her" (Brenna, *WO* 64). The morning light becomes a fixed gaze upon June, compelling her to avoid daytime excursions. Instead, she becomes a 'night owl,' seeking solace and freedom under the cover of darkness. This serves as a protective shield for individuals like June, who are not only physically disabled but also mentally burdened by the constant gaze and stigma imposed by able-bodied individuals.

The gaze directed at June serves as another significant reason for her avoidance of social contact. June experiences a sense of sadness and diminished self-worth as she becomes the object of stigmatisation. Transitioning from an able-bodied to a disabled individual, June's thoughts are weighed down, leading to a loss of hope. When Jane attempts to engage in conversation with June, she responds curtly and pushes Jane away. June feels uncomfortable interacting with Jane, as she perceives herself to be seen as a burden rather than as a person. Despite Jane's intentions to provide support to June, June does not reciprocate the same. Jane reflects on this in *The White Bicycle*, stating, "... I said, to try and say something positive ... I don't blame June for not liking the light. I can understand that. Some people find darkness softer on their skin" (Brenna 92). Despite Jane's greater understanding and effort to uplift June's spirits, she fails to do so due to the stigma and gaze that June experienced both before and after becoming disabled. The gaze can transform into a harmful practice, placing the individual subjected to it in an uncomfortable state. It acts as an agent of stigmatisation, creating discomfort for the disabled individuals.

Consequently, June avoids contact with the outside world due to the persistent gaze fixed upon her.

In *Keywords for Disability Studies*, Georgina Kleege quote Rosemarie Garland, who defines the act of staring as a distinct form of social interaction that sets apart the disabled body, differentiating it from a mere look, “glance,” or “gaze” (512). The gaze serves as a means of marking and subjecting individuals to scrutiny based on their otherness. It becomes a mode of judgment in interactions with disabled individuals. Following Foucault’s perspective, the act of gazing takes on a paranoid quality, delving into the realm of surveillance and providing able-bodied individuals with a medium to assert dominance over the differently-abled. This gaze compels June to withdraw from contact with the outside world, instead creating her own space to navigate life. It is also a reason why she avoids exposure to broad daylight. Kruger’s interpretation of the gaze concept reveals its function as an instrument of control, particularly affecting women who are expected to exhibit resistance. They conceal their identities, allowing the world to impose its own version upon them rather than expressing their individuality.

Able-bodied individuals have constructed an illusionary framework, assigning various derogatory labels such as ‘retard,’ ‘broken,’ ‘cripple,’ and conflating intellectual disability with mental illness. In contrast, Jane sheds light on the understanding of autism, stating, “‘It used to be considered a mental illness’ ... ‘Kanner, who first published articles on autism in 1943, classified it as a subset of childhood schizophrenia’” (Brenna, *WO* 144). Ability consistently governs and haunts disabled individuals, emphasising what they lack and positioning them as lesser in comparison to eligible able-bodied individuals.

Society contributes to the alienation of differently-abled individuals, reinforced by the special attention they receive from their families, which can have both positive and negative effects. Family members may establish boundaries and expectations for disabled individuals, further compounded by the presence of the gaze as a third layer of scrutiny. This combination leads to personal stigma, causing individuals to judge themselves and believe they must conform to the square-shaped mould imposed by society or their families. Consequently, impairments and disabilities can lead affected individuals to avoid contact with the majority in society.

In *The White Bicycle*, the character Martin has cerebral palsy and is excessively doted upon by his family. Despite being surrounded by able-bodied individuals, Martin becomes trapped in their sympathetic gaze, resulting in his own self-perception as a perpetual baby, regardless of his age. This stigmatic perspective imposed by his family prevents Martin from assuming a mature role and perpetuates his dependence on them for tasks he could accomplish independently with proper training.

Jane, having experienced the effects of such a gaze and stigmatic view herself, empathises with Martin and endeavours to create a comfortable environment for him. Carol Padden, in *Keywords for Disability Studies,* cites Akhtar and Gernsbacher, stating that “autistic children are often perceived as lacking shared intentionality due to their failure to track the eye movements of others. However, recent research has demonstrated that their sociality and interest in others can be achieved through alternative means, such as physical proximity and verbal engagement” (136). Jane discovers that interacting with individuals who share similar experiences, like Martin, is easier for her. She perceives Martin for who he truly is, as does Luke, his understanding younger brother who has been by his side since the beginning. Through this realisation, Martin sheds the label of being a baby and is recognised as a “cool kid” (Brenna, *WFNO* 113) within their household—a significant triumph for Martin, who has been confined to a wheelchair.

In *The Moon Children*, Natasha’s selective mutism remains a puzzle to her adoptive parents, who possess some understanding of her condition. However, this understanding becomes a source of discomfort for Natasha as her parents take it upon themselves to assume control over her life as a mission. In response, Natasha adopts silence as her shield, protecting herself from prying eyes. Both June and Natasha employ different strategies to shield themselves from the gaze of others. Jane, on the other hand, opts for self-empowerment and independence, while Natasha finds solace and expression through her moon journal.

Jane, the trilogy’s protagonist, faces persistent discrimination, shaping her into a resilient and independent individual. Her father’s abandonment and societal scrutiny contribute to her strength and adeptness in navigating stereotypes. Supported by her single mother, who confronts stigma for both Jane’s birth and her unwavering support, Jane learns to thrive. Despite teenage betrayal from her boyfriend and clashes with Penelope in Waskesiu, Jane seeks solace in colleague Paul, though with disappointing results. Across the trilogy, she steadfastly asserts her ability to manage life independently, rejecting stereotypical constraints on her journey.

In the novel *Wild Orchid*, June’s withdrawal from societal engagement stems from her struggle to adhere to the norms dictated by able-bodied individuals. Initially able-bodied, her diagnosis of cerebral palsy precipitates a profound descent into despair. Recognising the tendency of society to overlook those with disabilities, June grapples with the realisation that her presence may easily fade into obscurity.

Consequently, she endeavours to carve out her own sanctuary, seeking solace within its confines.

In the novel *The Moon Children*, Billy seeks refuge in Mrs. Schmidt's apartment, yearning for invisibility from the rest of society. He finds solace in the unassuming care provided by Mrs. Schmidt, who perceives him not as a burden, but as a young boy deserving of attention and support. Acting as a protective shield, the elderly couple offers Billy a haven as he struggles to integrate into mainstream society. Amidst societal stigma, the couple's compassionate demeanour stands out. Their home serves as a sanctuary for both Billy and Chrysta, a single parent grappling with his care. Facing financial strains exacerbated by her spouse's absence and insufficient government aid, Chrysta confronts the added challenge of a second pregnancy while working as a motel cleaner to sustain her family.

Discrimination plays a pivotal role in Billy's life, leading to internal stigmatisation and a questioning of his self-esteem. He wrestles with self-doubt, asking himself, "Why am I so stupid?" (Brenna, *MC* 19). The constant discrimination based on his identity shatters Billy's heart and affects his sense of self in society. Bullies around him belittle him, portraying him as incapable and a burden to society, rendering him useless.

Adding to Billy's distress, Brenna vividly depicts his struggles in *The Moon Children*. His actions during class hours and his self-isolation from the crowd reflect his awareness of their cruel attitudes towards his disability. His difficulty in recognising letters makes him a target, yet his teacher fails to provide the necessary support. He can only grasp a few words such as "Days of the week. Months of the year. The. And. Because. Then." (Brenna 20). When his classmates engage in reading novels, he is unable to keep up and becomes lost in the sea of readers, "When his class read from their novel, he tried to turn the pages and keep up, but sometimes he got off track and realized that everybody else was way ahead of him. He hated that feeling, that breathless, panicky feeling, as if he was at the bottom of the pool, counting to fifty" (Brenna 20).

The experience of trauma renders Billy in a vulnerable position, causing him to lose hope in his ability to learn. He pretends to keep up with the class, but it is evident that Billy has become lost in a predatory world, where the weaker spirits are crushed instead of being supported. This constant exposure to traumatic experiences triggers panic attacks, leaving Billy feeling overwhelmed by his own thoughts due to the stereotypical treatment he receives.

Billy's struggle to recognise letters, coupled with constant insults from his classmates, intensify his anxiety and contribute to his panic attacks. Borwin Bandelow, et al. in their work on *Panic Disorder and Agoraphobia,* discuss how bodily panics are accompanied by fear and discomfort in one's surroundings, which can lead to panic attacks. Panic attacks and depression are closely intertwined, as they arise from anxiety and restrictions in lifestyle, often stemming from the judgment of able-bodied individuals towards those with disabilities, without understanding the underlying source of suffering.

Despite his ongoing struggles, Billy frequently becomes the target of bullying by his classmate Eddie. With no friends to support him at school, he is unable to defend himself. His FASD (Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder) poses a barrier to letter recognition and makes him the object of ridicule in front of his peers. Billy's FASD not only complicates his life but also renders him vulnerable to the mockery of his classmates, who make fun of his difficulties in reading and communicating. To prove them wrong, Billy endeavours to participate in a yoyo competition, aiming to demonstrate his value in other areas. However, his struggles with communication and reading hinder his ability to fulfil this dream, making it appear unattainable.

On the other hand, Samantha, from the short story “Finding Your Voice,” is forced to rely on others throughout her life even for the simplest tasks. When Janine encounters Samantha at school, they establish a connection that leads to their friendship. Even young children with disabilities are not spared from the able-bodied individuals who assign them labels. This act of labelling is normalised by the able-bodied population in order to bolster their own sense of superiority over those who are impaired. Janine’s mother witnesses her daughter’s unwavering attachment to Samantha when she comes to pick her up from school. In response, Janine’s mother hurls hurtful words like “retard,” crushing the young spirit within Samantha (Brenna, *STHOT* 65).

This insensitive behaviour from a mother towards her disabled child is deeply concerning, as it highlights the extent of the stigma ingrained in society. Janine herself acknowledges this at the beginning of the story, reflecting on her mother’s indifference both at home and in public. While parental care is crucial in a child’s life, Janine’s mother fails to exhibit the qualities expected of a caregiver. She is solely concerned with aligning herself with the able-bodied category, viewing anyone who falls short of those standards as less than fully human.

The short story “One of the Guys” revolves around the protagonist Rodney, who has been diagnosed with Down syndrome. Brenna skilfully portrays Rodney’s character, showcasing his ability to find positivity in every situation. Despite facing derogatory comments and being subjected to indifference, Rodney remains unfazed. He even displays kindness towards strangers, such as paying for a fellow passenger on the bus, despite being warned by his teacher about the possibility of deception.

Rodney possesses a compassionate nature, but unfortunately, his disability acts as a barrier that obscures his inherent kindness. His classmates label him as “hot rod” (Brenna, *STHOT* 66), yet Rodney takes it lightly, oblivious to the fact that they are mocking him.

Rodney remains unperturbed by the derogatory comments directed at him in his workplace, exhibiting the strong-willed nature commonly associated with individuals with Down syndrome. According to Mark Selikowitz’s research in *Down Syndrome*, “Children with Down syndrome may exhibit a range of temperaments, from easy going to strong-willed. Some have a fondness for music, while others may experience varying degrees of intellectual disability, which can range from mild to severe” (25). Individuals with Down syndrome are unique due to abnormal fetal development. While they are often characterised as strong-willed, some may also have intellectual disabilities. However, in the short story, Rodney is depicted as intellectually capable, as he demonstrates an understanding of nautical flags and their significance.

Rodney’s learning abilities are not as advanced as those of his peers in his current school. As he laments, “... everything I do is so slow, and maybe they taught me wrong because other people at Hazel’s know how to do a lot more things” (Brenna, *STHOT* 67). Rodney’s work pace is notably slower than others, and the constant stigmatisation he endures leads him to doubt his own abilities. Everyone operates at their own pace, yet able-bodied individuals criticise and portray disabled individuals in a negative light. Rodney’s comparison of his academic progress to that of his classmates perpetuates his self-stigmatisation. Despite his inherent kindness and naivety, his disability becomes his defining characteristic, rendering him vulnerable to societal judgment.

Rodney falls victim to self-stigmatisation as he continuously compares his academic achievements with those of his peers. Even within the confines of the special school, Rodney harbours a sense of inadequacy, primarily stemming from the scrutinising gazes directed towards him. As he articulates, "… at school … most of the other kids couldn't talk. It was a special school and I had to go there. I learned to read some and to write a little. Like my name and stuff, but everything I do is slow and maybe they taught me wrong because other people at hazel's know how to do a lot more things" (Brenna, *STHOT* 67).

Despite attending a special school, Rodney compares himself with others due to the societal norms that weigh heavily on disabled individuals. Notwithstanding his diagnosis of Down Syndrome, he remains resolute in his pursuit of independence, securing employment at a warehouse and obtaining his own room at Hazel. Despite these notable achievements, Rodney grapples with self-stigmatisation, a consequence of the derogatory treatment he receives at the warehouse, where he is addressed with uncomfortable names. Compounded by his low academic standing, Rodney feels powerless to address this mistreatment. Despite his evident kindness and thoughtfulness, Rodney's efforts often go unrecognised, highlighting the unreasonably high expectations society places on individuals with disabilities.

Rodney's observation of his classmates mistreating jellyfish, instead of aiding their return to the sea, serves as a metaphor for the mistreatment and stigmatisation experienced by disabled individuals in society. Just as the jellyfish are subjected to harmful actions, disabled individuals often face similar mistreatment and disregard for their well-being. By drawing this comparison, the author sheds light on the impact of stigma and societal judgment on disabled individuals. The intention is not to diminish the value or dignity of disabled individuals but to emphasise the need for empathy, respect, and inclusion in order to foster a more compassionate and accepting society.

Lerita M. Coleman-Brown in the *Disability Studies Reader*, states, "… consequences of bearing stigma is that stigmatized people may develop the same perceptual problems that nonstigmatized [sic] people have. They begin to see themselves and their lives through the stigma ..." (153). Rodney, despite facing differential treatment from his classmates, extends his arms to help a jellyfish return to the sea, unless his classmates have other plans. He empathises with the jellyfish as he cannot stand witnessing the harm inflicted upon them by his fellow classmates. This act symbolises how everyone falls prey to the stigma and the changes it can bring about in individuals. Rodney explains, "... I was a kid I took swimming lessons in the Swan River .... These jellyfish don't sting, but when we had to jump into the water ... kids would gather the jellyfish that had washed up on the shore and throw them at each other, but I didn't do that. I just tried to throw them back into the water" (Brenna, *STHOT* 69).

Rodney compares himself with the jellyfish because he can see how the fishes are traumatised by his classmates, and he genuinely empathises with the creatures and helps them get back to the sea. Trauma serves as the common link between Rodney and the jellyfish, as he is a victim of bullying. Due to the trauma he has experienced, he does everything he can to assist the sea creatures.

In "Friday Essay: On Telling the Stories of Characters with Down Syndrome" by Sarah Kanake and Charlie, the authors delve into the culture of low expectations towards individuals with Down syndrome. They question why these expectations persist and shape our understanding of what people with Down syndrome can achieve, despite many individuals having contrary lived experiences. This theme resonates with Rodney’s narrative about Tamiko, his classmate who lost her ability to speak after an accident. As Tamiko becomes Rodney’s girlfriend, he gains deeper insight into her life. The car accident shatters Tamiko’s life, leading to her loss of voice and placement in a specialized school. Despite their disabilities, Rodney and Tamiko find solace and connection during a visit to the beach, where they momentarily forget their challenges and see each other as individuals. Rodney, narrating the story, doesn’t explicitly detail Tamiko’s health issues, yet his silent role as her protector underscores the struggles faced by individuals with disabilities, subtly challenging societal expectations.

Brenna’s portrayal of characters with disabilities emphasises their ability to form deep connections, often with individuals labelled differently abled. These characters, including the protagonist, frequently interact with friends requiring special attention or experienced caregivers. They share profound understanding and empathy, challenging societal marginalisation and limited opportunities. Disability understanding disability is exemplified, with an emphasis on unique abilities over differences. In Disability Studies, mutual support replaces prejudice, portraying differently abled individuals as fully human, free from stigmatisation.

Towards the conclusion of the story, Rodney experiences the realisation that he remains invisible to able-bodied individuals. Despite his efforts, they fail to acknowledge his existence as an equal human being, instead perceiving him as less than them. Rodney yearns to be recognised as a person, pleading, “I’m out here in the water, paddling my way to the sweet spot where the guys are. Tamiko says they look like gulls riding the crumbling crests of the waves, but I don’t know. When I look at them, I simply see men. That’s how I wish people would see me when they look out here—not as a gull or someone with Down syndrome” (Brenna, *STHOT* 72).

In *The Moon Children*, Natasha, a Romanian immigrant, grapples with selective mutism and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), using her moon journal for communication due to her inability to vocalise her condition or express her native country's realities. This shared experience of hiding pain due to impairments fosters a strong bond between Natasha and Billy. They find understanding in each other's struggles, as individuals with impairments can often empathise more deeply than those who are able-bodied, who may struggle to fully comprehend their experiences.

> Shared pain fosters profound connections, providing support in times of need. Mrs. Schmidt's empathy, rooted in her own experience with cancer, allows her to understand and assist her neighbours Chrysta and Billy. She extends solace to Natasha as well, refraining from judgment and recognising the underlying goodness in them all. Mrs. Schmidt sheds light on Natasha's loss of voice, attributing it to the trauma experienced by children from orphanages, stating, "There must have been a big sadness .... A big sadness came and wrapped itself around her voice, like a blanket. Her voice is still there, but it's just muffled up" (Brenna, *MC* 86-105).

Natasha's involuntary immigration to Canada unfolds as a poignant tale of displacement and adversity. In Romania, she confronts a disheartening reality where children are abandoned by their parents, left in shelters amid desperate circumstances. Witnessing this cruelty at a young age, Natasha's voice takes on symbolic weight, representing her willpower and personal freedom, echoing the struggles of the oppressed. Her silence reflects the silenced narratives of marginalised communities, yearning to be acknowledged. The psychological toll of her trauma leads Natasha to choose muteness, believing it futile to speak out. Her voice becomes a sacrifice to despair, embodying the collective silence imposed on marginalised individuals denied the right to be heard.

Amid Natasha's narrative, Billy emerges as a discerning witness to her plight. He deeply understands the trauma she has endured and its profound effect on her ability to communicate. In a moment of insight, he reflects, "I guess Natasha must have left her voice over there" (Brenna, *MC* 87). Billy's observation encapsulates Natasha's silenced existence, where her voice, metaphorically abandoned amid the turbulence of her past, becomes a haunting absence. His empathetic recognition distinguishes him from those oblivious to her untold stories and unspoken struggles.

Natasha's immigration experience transcends individual history to assume a broader significance. It becomes an exploration of the human condition, unravelling the complex interplay between voice, trauma, and the transformative power of genuine understanding. Through the prism of Natasha's voicelessness, the novel invites readers to reflect upon the profound implications of oppression, the yearning for connection, and the potential for redemption through compassionate engagement. It serves as a poignant reminder that amidst the silence, there lies a yearning for empathy and a hope for the reclamation of voices long suppressed.

Equally noteworthy is Janine's assertion in the narrative "Finding Your Voice" that her mother's conduct has inflicted lasting trauma upon her, leaving her without any support and greatly impacting her ability to communicate effectively. Janine's placement into foster care stems from her mother's inability to provide for her and her mother's perplexing behaviour, wherein she portrays a loving facade in front of others while displaying a contrasting demeanour at home. The overpowering memories of her mother's actions prompt Janine to attempt to vocalise her distress, only to find herself uttering mere air: "Janine opens her mouth to yell, but all she hears is the wind" (Brenna, *STHOT* 58). This traumatic experience renders her emotions invisible, depriving her of both a voice and the necessary attention she requires. Her defence of her friend Samantha when her mother derogatorily labels her as a "retard" (Brenna, *STHOT* 65) exemplifies Janine's journey towards self-advocacy.

In a similar vein, Natasha's encounter with trauma and the ensuing societal stigmatisation as an immigrant lead her to mourn in silence. Hindered by the prevailing stigma, Natasha cannot openly display her vulnerabilities, as she is perceived as a victim of brutality. Consequently, she resorts to communicating solely through her moon journal, where she expresses herself through drawings that only she and Billy can comprehend. By sharing a common thread of stigma, they establish a means of communication that defies the understanding of others. The fixed gaze and stigmatisation directed at victims can exacerbate their trauma, as every action is scrutinised by the able-bodied population.

Abandonment intertwines with internal stigma, a recurring motif in scholarly discourse and a profoundly distressing ordeal, especially poignant when endured by unsuspecting children. The act of being forsaken immerses these fragile souls in profound despair, isolating them from the fabric of society and intensifying their anguish. Remarkably, even within the sanctuary of family, the sacred covenant meant to offer comfort and solidarity can be ruptured. This poignant reality is vividly depicted by Beverley Brenna, who illuminates the profound and heartrending aftermath of abandonment.

In *The Moon Children*, the protagonist Billy finds himself ensnared in the web of his father's callous abandonment. Zak, his own flesh and blood, ruthlessly turns his back on his son, relinquishing his paternal obligations and leaving the weight of responsibility solely on the shoulders of Billy’s mother. Such abandonment sends shockwaves through the tender psyche of the young boy, prompting him to question his self-worth: “‘Did he leave because he hates me?’... ‘Because I'm so stupid?’” (Brenna, *MC* 69). Billy’s struggle to grapple with the abandonment of a disabled child exposes the profound existential questions that plague his tender mind, for he begins to perceive how the materialistic world can strip away one’s innate humanity.

In Natasha’s case, abandonment takes a nuanced and deeply moving turn. Her mother’s painful choice to leave her behind for her own survival throws Natasha into a surreal world where her voice is silenced in Romania. Early trauma, marked by unimaginable cruelty, robs Natasha of the childhood joys she should have known. Bereft of maternal care, she becomes a casualty of circumstance, facing unmet emotional needs while others enjoy parental love. Finding solace in her moon journal, shared only with Billy, Natasha’s adoptive parents miss her silent pleas for help amidst her artwork. Driven by a desperate need for connection, Natasha turns to painting, transcending words to express her inner turmoil and longing for love.

Likewise, Jane’s narrative emerges as a powerful testament to the psychological ramifications of abandonment. Overwhelmed by the profound inability of her father to comprehend her uniqueness, Jane spirals into a vortex of self-blame. Her existence becomes ensnared within the confines of a perpetual seven-year-old’s perspective, where idyllic visions of a loving and nurturing family haunt her consciousness. In Jane’s world, her father, Simon, unveils a different facet of his character upon realising that his daughter deviates from societal norms. This awakening plunges him into a state of profound despair, which manifests in his treatment of Jane, exacerbating her trauma. Bereft of understanding and acceptance, Jane becomes an outsider within her own social circles, a “freaker” among her peers.

Faced with such ostracisation, Jane retreats into the confines of a wooden card box, a sanctuary where she is liberated from the relentless need to prove herself to an unforgiving world (Brenna, *WFNO* 46).

Abandonment's profound impact on the disabled is evident in Billy's story. Initially hopeful for his father's return, he plunges into despair when he realises his disability drove the abandonment. Ata Quayson highlights the challenges in disabled-nondisabled interactions, where "misconceptions" hinder "social connections" (203). Additionally, haunting words resonate within Billy, "Don't worry, this baby won't turn out like Billy" (Brenna, *MC* 63). This discomfort often leads to distancing, as seen in Zak's embarrassment over Billy's disability, ultimately leading to abandonment.

In the wake of his father's rejection, Billy's world is irrevocably altered, magnifying the complexities of his trauma. Nature assumes a significant role as a conduit for expressing his innermost thoughts and emotions, as has been the case with renowned writers who have employed nature as a symbolic language of the soul. To Billy, the moon becomes a potent symbol, representing the weight of his grief and loneliness. He perceives the celestial orb tilting ominously in the sky, mirroring the heaviness he feels within, the weight of his secret burdens. "Did he leave because he hates me?" he muses, his heart heavy with sorrow. "Because I'm so stupid?" (Brenna, *MC* 65-69). Billy's anguish intensifies as he not only grapples with society's judgmental gaze but also contends with his father joining the ranks of those who stigmatise him. Seeking solace in nature, he transcends the limitations imposed upon him by trauma. Indeed, trauma can hasten one's maturation, forcing individuals like Billy to relinquish the carefree pursuits of childhood, consumed instead by the longing to reclaim a sense of belonging and acceptance.

The shaping of one's personality often occurs through the gaze of parental figures. In Billy's case, he witnesses his father fleeing, evading responsibility and escaping from the problems he lacks the courage to confront. Regrettably, this abandonment engenders a paralysing fear within Billy, rendering him unable to stand up for himself in the face of bullying by his peers. Frustration engulfs him, and he screams, "I am stupid! Do you know what it's like? There's stuff everywhere that people are reading, and I can't figure it out" (Brenna, *MC* 69).

Drawing parallels with Billy's father, Jane's father similarly abandons her during a time when her need for support and understanding is most acute. However, before his departure, he further complicates Jane's already challenging existence by subjecting her to humiliation and ostracism in the presence of her classmates. Jane, who grapples with Asperger's Syndrome and the accompanying aversion to crowded spaces, finds herself coerced by her father into hosting a birthday party, a situation that triggers immense distress. In a heartbreaking display of parental failure, Jane's father not only neglects his role as a source of solace and guidance but also exacerbates her struggles by orchestrating a spectacle that strips her of her dignity in front of her peers:

> When I was a kid, I didn't like birthday parties either. Birthday parties would have been great if there were no other people there I was always afraid …. It was my eighth birthday, and I was hiding under the bed and my dad wanted me to come out and be polite to my friends and my mom said, 'Just leave her there; she's not feeling well,' but Dad grabbed me by the shoes and pulled me out and the other girls said, 'Here comes the Freaker!' and I heard it. (Brenna, *WO* 93-94)

Jane seeks solace and refuge under her bed, a sanctuary from the harsh realities of her father's actions. Instead of approaching her with empathy and understanding, her father intrudes upon her safe space by forcefully pulling her legs from beneath the bed—an act that can only be described as abusive. By subjecting Jane to such treatment and singling her out as an oddity in the presence of her classmates, her father exacerbates her anxiety and distress.

Rather than embodying the nurturing figure a parent should be, Jane's father assumes the role of a bully, cloaking his actions as fostering social interaction. These behaviours morph Jane's life into a sequence of nightmares, with her eighth birthday eternally etched in her memory as a traumatic milestone, marking her last positive recollection of her father. Trapped in an unending emotional stasis at the tender age of seven, Jane's subsequent compulsions—repeating tasks seven times when overwhelmed or feeling a loss of control—become poignant manifestations of her profound trauma.

Reflecting on her experience, Jane recounts, "For a long time after my eighth birthday, I wished I were still seven." In her sessions with a psychiatrist, she delves into her fixation on the number seven. The psychiatrist, in their dialogue, offers insight, "Perhaps by seeking out sevens, you are truly yearning for a return to that happier time before you turned eight, when your parents were still together" (Brenna *WB*, 76).

Her experience at the ill-fated birthday party leaves Jane feeling uncomfortable and unseen, even when physically present among her guests. The pain and anguish she endures remain invisible to her classmates and her own father, who remain oblivious to her distress throughout the event. This sense of invisibility extends beyond the confines of the party, permeating her school life during lunch breaks, where she is ignored by her peers, devoid of friends, and lacking romantic connections. The able-bodied individuals around her choose to act as if Jane does not exist, absolving themselves of the responsibility to acknowledge her presence.

Jane's encounter with her father is deeply unsettling, trapping her in a dynamic where she feels trapped and misunderstood. Her father's failure to comprehend her unique needs and his insistence on forcing her to conform to societal norms create a profound disconnect between them. In her own reflection, she draws parallels between her life and the characters in Samuel Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot*, perceiving her existence as devoid of meaning, perpetually awaiting a resolution to her personal crisis. This places her in a state of "Emotional Labour," wherein disabled individuals are expected to cater to the expectations and demands of able-bodied individuals, as aptly stated by Dan Goodley quoting Hochschild in his work *Disability Studies: An Interdisciplinary Introduction:*

> … concept of emotional labour refers to those times when the self has to act in ways that fit the expectations of others. Disabled people learn to respond to the expectations of non-disabled culture – the demanding public – in ways that range from acting as the passive disabled bystander, the grateful recipient of others' support, the non-problematic receiver of others' disabling attitudes. (107)

The burden of expectations weighs heavily on parents who never anticipated having a child with a disability. Their lack of understanding leads to difficulties in comprehending and accepting their children, ultimately subjecting them to increased pressure to meet unrealistic standards.

Jane exemplifies the detrimental effects of parental pressure and trauma. Her father becomes the primary source of this pressure, forcing her into uncomfortable situations that go against her nature. Jane experiences a triple oppression in society, facing discrimination for being a girl, a disabled child, and being subjected to her father's expectations. Unlike Jane, June chooses to isolate herself from society. Similarly, Martin Phoenix's disability confines him within his father's-imposed rules, robbing him of his childhood memories. Billy endures abandonment by his father and constant stigmatisation and mistreatment due to his disability. Additionally, Natasha faces immense hardships in Romania, leading to a loss of voice and identity.

In the short story collection *Something to Hang on To*, various disabled characters like Janine and Samantha face adversity. Janine suffers mistreatment from her indifferent mother, resulting in a loss of self and vulnerability to societal judgments. Samantha, a wheelchair user, is dependent on others throughout her life and becomes the target of mockery by Janine's mother. This interaction triggers a powerful emotional outburst from Janine, "'She's not a retard,' …. 'Her name is Samantha and she is my best friend'" (Brenna, *STHOT* 65).

Jane's experiences of emotional labour thrust her into a dark place where she questions the meaning of everything, grappling with an existential crisis. She envies the characters in Beckett's works, as they at least have each other for support, while she waits alone, yearning for acceptance. As she expresses, "As I lie here in the dark ... while I have no one. I am waiting alone" (Brenna, *WFNO* 64-65) This sense of trauma and invisibility surrounds her, exacerbating her feelings of loneliness, as no one truly comprehends her situation or her internal struggles.

Upon Jane's diagnosis with Asperger's Syndrome, she is subjected to repeating academic years while her peers advance to the next grade. During this period, she becomes a test subject for medications that are still new to the market and untested on humans. Consequently, Jane suffers from a range of side effects, further exacerbating her challenges:

> I think the pills they put me on when I was eight might have been tranquilizers. I can't remember the name of the bottle. They made me feel as though I wanted to sit down all the time, but when I sat down, I immediately wanted to get up. I can remember feeling relaxed on the outside, but jumpy on the inside. Then for a while I wished I was dead …. (Brenna, *WO* 59)

Jane's journey into trauma commences with her diagnosis of Asperger's Syndrome, thrusting her into a society riddled with challenges and deep-seated biases. She is subjected to repeating kindergarten twice, solely for the purpose of teaching her social skills. Most of the time, Jane finds solace in sitting alone inside a cardboard box, which has become her designated space within the classroom. Within the confines of this box, she experiences a sense of security and freedom from the burdensome expectations placed upon her.

Jane's instinctual desire to escape stems from the world that has been shaped by able-bodied individuals, a world where she struggles to find her place. In the school environment, the cardboard box serves as her refuge, offering respite whenever she feels overwhelmed by her surroundings. As a consequence of her Asperger's Syndrome, Jane grapples with difficulties in making eye contact and engaging in communication. The gazes of others intimidate her, and she becomes unsettled in the presence of multiple voices simultaneously resounding in the classroom. Her ability to concentrate is impaired when confronted with a chorus of voices, whereas she thrives when she can focus on a single voice. Nestled within the box, she finds comfort in the liberation from the need to conform to societal norms. This respite aids in quelling her meltdowns and providing a sense of stability amidst an environment that otherwise leaves her feeling unhinged.

Tobin Siebers, in *Disability Theory*, elaborates on the complexities of disability, shedding light on the profound impact it has on individuals like Jane, "… the emerging field of disability studies defines disability not as an individual defect but as the product of social injustice, one that requires not the cure or elimination of the defective person but significant changes in the social and built environment" (3). Disability studies illuminates the systemic injustices and societal marginalisation faced by disabled individuals, who are excluded and marginalised within a construct devised by able-bodied individuals, exemplified in characters like Jane who navigate hostile environments with biased treatment, driving her to seek solace in isolation and create her own realm to escape stereotypical views.

The presence of Asperger's Syndrome intensifies Jane's unease, as she struggles to concentrate amidst a cacophony of multiple voices. She experiences frustration, witnessing how other children effortlessly navigate messy environments without being bothered. However, her classmates, driven by prejudice, harshly judge Jane's own disarray solely because she is a disabled individual. She endures constant scrutiny due to her disability, with her mistakes meticulously highlighted while her peers remain unscathed.

The response of society towards hidden disabilities can be ruthlessly unforgiving. Parents of autistic children often share the immense challenge they face in managing their children's meltdowns. Regrettably, rather than extending support, able-bodied individuals tend to resort to commenting and staring at the child, exacerbating the situation. They even reprimand the parents, failing to comprehend the complexity of caring for a child with special needs. As aptly quoted by Dr. Vibha Krishnamurti in *Autism, Nature and Needs*:

> Behaviours that appear anti-social or maladaptive may well carry important messages, and before trying to suppress such activities one should look at them from the viewpoint of the autistic person. Almost all adult accounts of what it is like to be an autistic child mention an overwhelming sense of confusion, a difficulty in making any sense of ones own experience, in a world in which constant change reinforces ones inability to exercise control over anything. (41).

Able-bodied individuals often exhibit comfort in familiar situations, but when faced with disability, they often react with unease and may subject disabled individuals to scrutiny and questioning of their existence, as depicted in “Finding Voices” from the short story collection *Something To Hang on To,* where a mother perceives disabled individuals as burdens, and similarly in the trilogy novel, Jane’s mother adopts an authoritative stance to conceal her inability to assist Jane, ultimately avoiding the uncomfortable reality.

Hidden disabilities can cause significant physical or psychic pain that may not be apparent to others. In the *New York Times* article “What Happens When You’re Disabled but Nobody Can Tell,” Andrew Solomon quotes ethicist N. Ann Davis, stating, “There is no reason to believe that the invisibility of a disability itself necessarily lessens its impact or makes the disability less serious” (4). Davis emphasises that disability is not solely a matter of objective fact but is continuously defined and redefined in relation to evolving social structures and norms. The able-bodied maintain their dominant position by altering the scales or norms used to define disability, often portraying impairment as equivalent to disability, even though disability is socially constructed rather than inherent.

Trauma and invisibility profoundly impact individuals with disabilities, as seen in *The Moon Children*, where disabled children face stigma, trauma, and bullying, often subjected to charity and pity. Lennard Davis, in *The Disability Studies Reader*, argues that stigma neutralises positive qualities, hindering recognition of hidden talents in disabled individuals, who are often labelled and overprotected, limiting their freedom and excluding them from sports despite their abilities.

Stigmatisation allows the able-bodied to take advantage of the differently abled, as they have already marginalised and oppressed them. For instance, in *Wild Orchid*, Kody exploits Jane by pretending to be her boyfriend, while in *The Moon Children*, Eddie takes advantage of Billy by tricking him into believing he must pay for a contest. As Eddie callously states, “Just like taking candy from a baby” (133). Being able-bodied grants Eddie the privilege to bully Billy, who belongs to a more vulnerable community.

In the realm of literature, characters such as Taylor Jane from the trilogy, Billy from *The Moon Children*, and others featured in the short story collection *Something to Hang on To,* serve as poignant examples of individuals with disabilities who are consistently underestimated and marginalised by society. These individuals often find themselves either cast aside or subjected to mistreatment within the system, resulting in the development of low self-esteem. The detrimental impact of personal stigma surpasses that of public stigma, as is evident in the case of Jane, who has endured a lifetime of stigmatisation. Despite possessing a remarkable photographic memory, her own perceived limitations become an impenetrable barrier, eroding her confidence from the very outset.

The usage of labels such as ‘mentally disabled,’ ‘retard,’ ‘crazy,’ and others profoundly affects the decision-making processes of individuals, shackling them to the public stigma surrounding these terms. Despite their innate ability to navigate various challenges, the labels forced upon them restrict their growth and prevent them from fully emerging from their self-imposed constraints. The novel *The Moon Children* provides a striking illustration of this phenomenon through the character of Natasha. She is unable to break free from her metaphorical shell as society views her solely as a special child in need of help, disregarding her individuality and reducing her to a mute or a person afflicted by selective mutism. The labelling process obscures her true identity and perpetuates the perception of her primarily as a disabled child incapable of speech. In many instances, the lives of disabled individuals are marred by the unjust labels bestowed upon them by able-bodied individuals, often leading to additional barriers hindering their progress.

The concept of disability, much like the development of other social constructs such as gender and ethnicity, has evolved over time. However, disability remains largely unacknowledged and seldom regarded as a broader societal issue. Language possesses a formidable power capable of yielding either positive or negative impacts on individuals and communities alike. Negative language fosters harmful actions, abuse, discrimination, and the perpetuation of negative stereotypes. Terms like ‘retard,’ ‘fool,’ ‘freak,’ ‘deaf,’ ‘blind,’ and ‘crazy’ serve to dehumanise specific communities, instilling the belief in many that individuals with disabilities are incapable of achieving the same goals as their able-bodied counterparts. Additionally, terms such as ‘bound,’ ‘confined,’ and ‘victim’ evoke a sense of tragedy, exemplified by the character June in the novel *Wild Orchid*, who is depicted as someone confined to a wheelchair by both her husband and society. Instead of recognising her as an individual who utilises a wheelchair, her identity is overshadowed by her perceived confinement, with her disability taking precedence over her personality. This profound impact causes June to withdraw from society, only daring to emerge under the cover of darkness where her disability remains undefined—an existence forced upon her, rendering her effectively invisible within society.

In conclusion, the exploration of stigma within the literary realm, as exemplified in Beverley Brenna’s works, underscores the profound and pervasive impact it inflicts upon individuals with disabilities. Through the intricate narratives and nuanced character portrayals, the relentless cycle of marginalisation, trauma, and invisibility experienced by these individuals is vividly depicted. Despite advancements in disability rights and advocacy, the shadow of stigma continues to loom large, perpetuating inequality and exclusion. This chapter serves to deepen understanding of the multifaceted nature of stigma and to redouble efforts in fostering inclusivity, empathy, and dignity for all individuals, regardless of their abilities.