

Highlighting Disability Experiences and Voices

by Casey Kayser, Guest Feature Editor

It is an honor to serve as guest feature editor for *NCLR*'s 2024 issues. My role as guest editor has given me the opportunity to merge my teaching and research interests in Southern literature and Medical Humanities, including Disability Studies. I've discovered texts, writers, and artists of North Carolina that were new to me, as well as deepened my appreciation for familiar texts and authors.

Reading about disability experiences, whether they are those of authors through memoir and autobiographical writing or those of fictional characters, can cultivate awareness, understanding, and empathy, and lead us to a more inclusive society. North Carolina is home to many writers and artists with disabilities, whose voices have often been marginalized or overlooked, and we hope that featuring Disability Literature plays a role in highlighting the great talent and diversity of the writers' experiences.

This Winter issue's feature section begins with the 2023 Alex Albright Creative Nonfiction Prize essay by Laura Hope-Gill, in which the author details her experience living with and recovering from an occipital lobe brain injury, coupled with her existing sensorineural hearing loss. Hope-Gill's own beautiful acrylic art is interwoven throughout the essay's pages, in much the same way that she intertwines themes related to her love of art with her injury and disability experience in her essay.

Also included is a moving piece of writing by North Carolina State University Professor of English Elaine Neil Orr, "The Anchored Raft," words she delivered to the NC State Department of English Spring 2023 graduates. In her remarks, she recalls from her childhood in Nigeria a hardwood red raft that floated in a river she swam in. In mid-life,

while a professor at NC State, she was diagnosed with end-stage renal disease and had to go on dialysis for a two-and-a-half-year period. At that time, getting out of bed and going to work was difficult, but her students and her love for teaching steered her forward. Orr uses the floating raft as a metaphor for the ways our loved ones, colleagues, teachers, and students can serve as our anchors in difficult times – and how we, too, can anchor and guide ourselves in turbulent waters. I am certain her words must have inspired the graduates that day, and they are useful to us all.

There are several book reviews in this section, too. First, Annie Woodford reviews Kelley Shinn's memoir *The Wounds That Bind Us* (2023). Shinn lost both of her legs to bacterial meningitis in high school as a runner looking ahead to a career in college athletics. Woodford describes how Shinn takes readers on her journey from that time and other challenges of her teenage years; to her adventures in Bosnia-Herzegovina, where she traveled to bring attention to the plight of landmine victims, many amputees like herself; to the deep meaning she found in becoming a mother.

Next, Patricia A. Dunn reviews Halli Gomez's novel *List of Ten*, winner of the 2021 North Carolina AAUW Award for Young People's Literature, which centers on sixteen-year-old Troy, who has debilitating Tourette syndrome (TS) and Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD). Dunn details how the story follows Troy as he moves from a desire to end his life due to his pain and embarrassment over his conditions to finding the will to live despite his struggles. As Dunn notes, Gomez's fiction is informed by her own experiences living with TS, adding authenticity to the narrative.

According to reviewer Jessica L. Allee, Kati Gardner also draws on her own experiences – with cancer and amputation in her case – to develop characters and conflict in her 2020 Young Adult novel *Finding Balance*. Allee outlines Gardner's story of a group of teenagers going through many of the typical joys of those years, such as dating and friendship, as well as the challenges, such as navigating school social dynamics. But, Allee points out, the teenage protagonists of Gardner's novel have other issues to deal with, such as bullying and navigating the medical system, due to the effects of cancer.

This first 2024 issue provides a taste of what is to come in the feature sections of the year's other issues – more finalists from the Albright Creative Nonfiction Prize contests, for example. The print issue will also include an interview with James Tate Hill, who selected Laura Hope-Gill's essay for the Albright Prize. Hill's 2021 memoir *Blind Man's Bluff* recounts his experience with Leber's hereditary optic neuropathy, a condition that made him legally blind. Forthcoming, too, in the print issue: literary criticism by scholars in the fields of Disability Studies and Appalachian and Southern literature focusing on texts by well-known writers Ron Rash and Lee Smith, as well as a lesser known North Carolina writer, Mary Herring Wright, whose memoirs capture her experiences growing up Black and deaf in the Jim Crow South. And as always, the special feature section – in all of this year's issues – also showcases beautiful artwork alongside the writing, much of it by artists with disabilities.

Be sure to subscribe to *NCLR*, if you don't already, to receive this important issue, featuring North Carolina Disability Literature. And in the meantime, enjoy the pages to follow. ■

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