

**Revolutionising the Depiction of Individuals with Disabilities in Apocalyptic Fiction:
A Study of Select Short Stories from *Defying Doomsday***

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Abstract:

As human beings, all of us, at some point in our lives, as a result of a sudden accident, an illness, or due to old age, are potentially vulnerable to disability. Yet throughout history, the experiences and voices of disabled individuals have always been sidelined and overlooked. With the emergence of the Disability Civil Rights Movement, individuals with disabilities not only gained the opportunity to advocate for their rights but also began to be represented in literature. Despite an increase in the inclusion of disabled characters across genres, in most apocalyptic fiction, individuals with disabilities are quite often portrayed as secondary characters or are used as plot devices to enhance the emotional stake of the narrative. Considered to be one of the first works of fiction that subverts the traditional notions of “survival of the fittest”, *Defying Doomsday* is a groundbreaking short story anthology featuring protagonists with a wide variety of disabilities. By analysing the depiction of disability in select stories from the collection, this paper aims to explore the disabled character’s journey through the apocalypse and offers a fresh perspective on their survival in the midst of a world in ruins. Challenging ableist tropes in apocalyptic fiction, the paper investigates how these disabled protagonists are multifaceted and

have more to tell than mere tales of impairment. It will also examine the unique qualities of resilience, perseverance, and adaptability that help these characters triumph in the face of adversity.

Keywords: disability, ableism, apocalyptic fiction, survival, resilience

The term ‘disability’ has been used and treated in varied ways across different ages and time periods. Our perceptions of disability for the most part have been shaped by fear, ignorance, and the need to adhere to the state of normalcy. “Disability is a social enigma. Throughout history, people have felt compelled both to stare at the disabled people in their midst and then to turn their heads in discomfort” (Berger 1). After years of being underrepresented, it is only in recent years that characters with disabilities have been included in literary narratives. However, in the realm of apocalyptic fiction, it was always believed that only an able-bodied character would be able to survive through the harsh conditions of the apocalypse. Challenging this narrow perspective, this paper will examine how the revolutionary anthology *Defying Doomsday* subverts the traditional representation of disabled characters. By analysing the portrayal of disabled protagonists from select stories in the collection, this paper will investigate the realistic depiction of living with a disability and the character’s resilience and adaptability as they navigate through the apocalypse.

Until the late twentieth century, individuals with disabilities were not given any importance in literature. However, the Disability Civil Rights Movement eventually led to an unbiased representation of individuals with disabilities in literature, both fiction and non-fiction. Initially viewed as incapable of fully participating in life, the depiction of individuals with disabilities became increasingly realist and, unlike former days, was based on their viewpoint. Both readers and authors aimed at authentic portrayals of disability. On one hand, the publication

of autobiographies by disabled individuals increased, and on the other, important fictional works in the twentieth century began including characters with disabilities. William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) is one of the first novels to have a poignant depiction of intellectual disability through the character of Benjamin Compson. Stripped of his Christian name, his disability was considered to have brought shame to the family. But Faulkner offers his readers a look at the world through the eyes of Benjamin, an individual who was discriminated against as a result of his disability. *A Son of the Circus* (1994) by John Irving features characters with varied disabilities, notably achondroplasia, a genetic disorder that results in a form of dwarfism. Irving portrays these characters as unique individuals who have their own sets of strengths and drawbacks but are resilient in times of adversity while also emphasising society's treatment towards such individuals. Elizabeth McCracken's *The Giant House* (1996) portrays James Sweatt as the protagonist, who grows abnormally tall due to a medical condition. Her depiction of James details both his unique perspectives about life while also explaining the physical limitations that he undergoes.

In the twenty-first century, the inclusion of disabled characters as central figures to the plot significantly increased. Christopher John Francis Boone from *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (2003), Melody Brooks from *Out of My Mind* (2010), Rose from *Wonderstruck* (2011), Cormoran Strike from *The Cuckoo's Calling* (2013), Archer Hale from *Archer's Voice* (2014), Ada Smith from *The War that Saved My Life* (2015), Gus Peake from *Wild and Crooked* (2019), and Verónica from *Breathe and Count Back From Ten* (2022) are classic works of fiction that represent a paradigm shift in literature, where disabled characters are no longer confined to stereotypical secondary roles but are fully realised individuals who take on the roles of protagonists.

But when it came to apocalyptic fiction, disabled individuals had no space for representation. As a genre that explores the disintegration of the world and the ensuing struggle for survival, the concept of ‘survival of the fittest’ highly influenced the depiction of characters in apocalyptic fiction. With time, authors began to include a few disabled characters in apocalyptic literature, but their limited portrayal reinforced societal stigmas and ableist ideologies that view disability as a form of liability. But in recent years, authors of apocalyptic fiction have challenged this idea through the inclusion of disabled characters and by portraying them as individuals who are fully capable of surviving the apocalypse. *The Fire Sermon* (2014) by Francesca Haig, *On the Edge of Gone* (2016) by Corinne Duyvis, and *Dyschronia* (2018) by Jennifer Mills are a few fictional works that describe the reality of disabled characters in an apocalyptic setting.

Hailed as one of the first apocalyptic texts with disabled characters at the forefront, *Defying Doomsday* is a short story anthology published in 2016. Edited by Tsana Dolichva and Holly Kench, the stories in the collection feature protagonists with a wide range of disabilities. By depicting disabled protagonists, these stories go beyond narrating usual tales of impairment and focus on their complex experiences in the midst of an apocalypse. The first story in the collection titled ‘*And the Rest of Us Wait*’ revolves around Iveta, a sixteen-year-old singer and songwriter living in a temporary shelter in the Netherlands along with her family and other survivors during a catastrophic comet collision. With thousands of wealthy individuals and medical professionals leaving on generation ships or finding permanent shelters, the majority of the population is left struggling to find a temporary shelter. After living in a refugee centre for a few days, Iveta and her parents move to a temporary shelter with minimum safety and conditions of living. Diagnosed with hydrocephalus, “an abnormal buildup of cerebrospinal fluid deep

within the brain” (National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke), and spina bifida, also known as split spine, a birth disorder “caused by the incomplete development of the fetus’ spine” (Cleveland Clinic), Iveta has had a clubfoot with partially paralysed legs since birth and has undergone a spinal implant to alleviate her chronic pain.

Having lost her wheelchair during the travel to the shelter, Iveta’s prosthetics and equipment are not charged. As she’s trying to make sense of the situation, there is a sudden burst of electromagnetic pulse, and the electricity in the shelter goes out, leaving people anxious and terror-stricken. As a result of the terrible darkness and the sudden earthquakes, a few refugees experience massive heart attacks. Iveta, understanding the seriousness of the situation, speaks up and says, “Listen up! Get on the beds! Keep the paths clear!... Keep the paths clear! Keep quiet! If your neighbour is hurt, help them to the exit. Keep the injured in the hallway until someone finds a doctor” (Duyvis 14-15). Her thoughtfulness eventually helps the refugees to calm down a bit and offer aid to their fellow survivors. Iveta’s altruistic nature is thereby revealed when she prioritises the needs of others more than hers. Due to the EMP, Iveta’s spinal implant dies, leaving her with severe pain in her KAFOs [Knee-Ankle-Foot Orthosis] and making it impossible for her to sit or stand properly. Speaking of her deteriorating physical condition, says Iveta:

Until yesterday, I’d have said my implant wasn’t a concern, but that EMP proved me wrong. Instead, I get to worry about running out of whatever medication you give me. Or my cerebral shunt clogging and my hydrocephalus killing me with no one around to replace the shunt. Or being unable to disinfect my catheter and getting a UTI with no antibiotics around, or my KAFOs breaking with no one to repair them, or my scoliosis getting worse with no one around to build a brace. (Duyvis 23)

Though she knows well that her health is deteriorating, Iveta does not panic or create discomfort of any sort to those around her. With medicines running out and absolutely no electricity in the shelter, she is clueless about what the future holds but maintains her composure. Somehow, she begins to adapt to the current situation. Trying to find some source of distraction and comfort, she meets Vera and Ginta, two sisters who love her music. The latter, who has a prosthetic arm, shares a special connection with Iveta over their shared experiences of disability. With a few containers, the three start making music and singing together. Being a passionate pursuer, Iveta is not deterred when her fellow survivors are unhappy and disapproving of their choice to sing amidst such a devastating situation, calling them silly teens. In fact, she announces that they would perform a song the next day. Following a few earthquakes the next afternoon, everyone is gripped with fear thinking about the dwindling rations, shrinking candles, and reducing air supply. As announced, the girls perform together to no applause or encouragement from the others. Yet, Iveta and the girls are happy about their first attempt to bring some solace. Author and cognitive behavioural therapist, Michael Neenan, states in his book *Developing Resilience: A Cognitive-Behavioural Approach* that “a survivor and a person demonstrating resilience are not necessarily undergoing the same process of recovery . . . A survivor can be consumed with bitterness and blame while the resilient person is displaying personal growth and pursuing important goals” (Neenan 8). Using this illustration, we can understand the contrast in the thought process of Iveta and the others. While the other survivors are trying to merely survive through the apocalypse, Iveta focuses to adapt, grow and thrive amidst the adversity, thereby bringing a positive change. Despite most survivors blaming the comet collision for their miserable state, Iveta has ample opportunities to blame the apocalypse and feel outraged about

its dangerous repercussions. But, she willingly chooses to be at peace with the situation and believes it is important to take one day at a time, highlighting her resilient nature.

Though the future remains uncertain, Iveta is strong-willed and determined to find happiness and peace even in the smallest of opportunities. Caught between life and death, Iveta, along with the girls, continues to perform and find joy in music. Surprisingly, the others join in and enjoy, understanding the fact that life is fleeting and it is important to live the remaining days with utmost love. Iveta's disability does not obstruct her passion to find joy and peace through music. She eventually emerges as an embodiment of hope to those around her, emphasising that one's disability does not diminish their ability to live. Her final words in the story are some of the most poignant statements about equality in the midst of a catastrophe:

Equality means that . . . even if we're not the same, we get the same chances. But here's the thing. People like me, or like those in the med bay—I'm not confident about our survival chances. I know you aren't, either . . . You can't promise us we'll live. I get that. But you can promise us that, if we don't survive, it's not 'cause you didn't give us an equal chance. It's not 'cause you sped it along. (Duyvis 41-42)

Another compelling story in the collection, '*Five Thousand Square*' by Maree Kimberley, follows the lives of Kaye and her children, Tilda and Ren, as they try to escape their sea-inundated area. Considered to be an unwelcome disease at her age, Kaye is diagnosed with arthritis, the "inflammation or degeneration of one or more joints" (Medline Plus), causing severe pain and stiffness that results in restricted movement. She shares a beautiful friendship with Micha, a friend from the arthritis support group, despite their radically different political ideologies. With their respective parties losing the previous election, the new government believes in building technologically sound satellite cities, calling it a New Age of Reliability.

The previous governments had been very keen on the health sector, as they believed that good medication would result in healthier citizens who paid better taxes. Whereas the current government's optimistic view convinced people that technology equipped them to withstand both natural and human-made disasters. While several people believed so, Kaye and Micha, who had no belief in this propaganda, have always been keen to keep themselves equipped in case of any unforeseen disaster. By listing out essential items, the two have already stocked enough food, medicines, and clothes at Micha's place, highlighting their readiness to face even the worst of situations.

At four one morning, Kaye receives a message from Micha about the sudden burst of water bodies, asking her to immediately come home with her children. Despite gripping fatigue and waves of exhaustion over her body, she still rises from the bed and immediately wakes her children, giving them three minutes to dress up and grab anything essential and leave with her. The children reach the front door, and as she opens the latch of the egg-shaped sola-bub, her joint pain worsens. "The misshapen knuckles on my left hand—a legacy of the six month period when my meds had been out of financial reach—loomed like desert hills" (Kimberley 174-175). The above statement highlights the uniqueness of her body and the increased pain she experiences, which is a direct result of not receiving proper medication due to governmental policies. She struggles to do some of the smallest and simplest of tasks because of arthritis, but she does not believe it to be hindering her ability to live. Though the others look at it as her disability, Kaye does not view it as a difficulty. Rather, she is confident about handling things in her style and is unbothered even when the others see it as her disability.

With their lives at stake, using all her might, Kaye and her children get into the sola-bub and begin their journey to Micha's place. On their way, a wall of brown water hits the sola-bub

leaving the three of them struggling for breath. As the sola-bub drowns a bit, Kaye loses herself for a minute, hitting her head on the ceiling, but the cry of her children helps her get a hold on herself and not panic. As a single mother, she faces even the most dangerous circumstances with absolute bravery. Due to the intensity of the water, the sola-bub comes to a stop, and Tilda, noticing a little girl tapping the window, informs her mother. Looking at the child, Kaye's conscience is filled with questions. Clueless about their own rate of survival, she is guilty about abandoning the child at a time like this. Her humaneness wins over. Breathing heavily and forcing a smile to ease the child's fright, she battles to open the door with her muscle pain bringing her to tears. As her bones are crushing, she strengthens herself saying, "I've given birth. Twice. No drugs. I can do this" (Kimberley 181). Constantly encouraging herself by reflecting on her triumphant challenges of the past, she strengthens herself. Her actions reinforce the ideology that "resilience is actually about managing emotions, not suppressing them" (Neenan 9). Within seconds of the water roaring from outside, she pulls the child in and wraps the child around her. With every ounce of her strength, she restarts the sola-bub as she feels "pain scored up my [her] leg, a burning sensation like a tattooist's needle going over the same piece of flesh again and again" (Kimberley 183), and they travel through the stench as they pass through floating houses, sofas, metals, dead animals, and even human body parts.

As they reach the foot of the hill on which Micha's house is situated, Kaye realises that the sola-bub would slip down the hill due to the unpredictable surface. Exhausted and her complete body in pain, she says, "inflammation gripped my shoulders in a vice so tight I could barely raise my arms above my waist. All I wanted to do was sink on my rubbery legs, fold into the corner of the sola-bub and sleep" (Kimberley 185). Despite her desire to rest, Kaye exhibits remarkable courage in protecting her children. Fully aware of the fact that her children have no

one to turn to except her, she mentally prepares her children and the little girl to be confident and stay close to her as she instructs them to take one step at a time and climb up the hill. She steps out and keeps the children close behind her as they begin walking. Struggling for each step, Kaye's only motive is to safeguard her kids. Speaking of which, she says, "throbs of pain gripped my shoulders again. I gritted my teeth and ignored them. Nothing was going to stop me getting my kids to safety. I'd scream with pain with every movement if I had to, as long as I got us through" (Kimberley 186). Conveying the intensity of Kaye's physical pain, the striking imagery used in this passage brings to light her resilient nature and maternal love. Enduring the excruciating pain, she prioritises her children's well-being over her discomfort. Due to her strong sense of determination, they finally reach Micha's home and live safely for weeks with the supplies they had stored.

It is true that tough times demand resilient minds, as surviving itself becomes a challenge. Both Iveta and Kaye from *Defying Doomsday* exhibit impressive resilience and manage their emotions skilfully as they navigate through the apocalyptic world. Though their disability poses a threat and makes things awry, they still adapt to the situation and focus on living through these challenging times with perseverance and determination. They are embodiments of how "resilience is not characterized by the absence of emotion or the presence of positive emotion . . . [and] since resilience requires you to have a flexible response to adverse events, you're not stuck in your negative feelings" (Neenan 10). While both of them grapple with natural feelings of anxiety and panic, they are able to process them and have a positive outlook on life regardless of the external factors affecting them. Iveta's actions prove that she is a classic example of a disabled individual whose mobility is limited, not her heart. Constantly mocked for her precarious health and teen music, Iveta's willpower and resilience are boundless, demonstrating

the enduring power of art. Kaye's disability, on the other hand, is in no way a hindrance for her to fulfil her motherly responsibilities. Regardless of the severe pain she experiences along the way, she is committed to protecting her children and the little girl, even at the cost of her own life.

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