

PASSING FOR SIGHTED IN NARRATIVES OF BLINDNESS

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INTRODUCTION

- While the concept of *passing*, in which a person belonging to a marginalized group *passes for* a member of a dominant group or vice versa, has traditionally been evoked in the context of race, sexuality, or other identities, the phenomenon also applies to identities of disability such as blindness.
- Ellen Samuels¹ introduces passing in the context of disability as a disruption of the assumed binary between disabled and nondisabled. She explains how passing as nondisabled both serves to minimize stigma and creates barriers to rights and resources predicated upon obvious markers of difference.
- Passing emerges as a major typology of nonfiction blindness narratives, including the memoirs *The Planet of the Blind* by Stephen Kuusisto² and *Now I See You* by Nicole C. Kear³.
- However, passing remains noticeably absent from representations of blindness experience in fictional narratives, even those such as Madeleine L'Engle's *The Young Unicorns*⁴, Anthony Doerr's *All the Light We Cannot See*⁵, and John Green's *The Fault in Our Stars*⁶ which depict complex and dynamic visually impaired characters.

THE ABILITY AND DESIRE TO PASS

- According to Kear and Kuusisto's accounts, the ability to pass for sighted often involves certain prerequisites – namely partial vision and the lack of visible markers of difference.
- Partial vision enables passing by lessening the necessity of accommodations or adaptive technologies, such as a mobility cane or guide dog, which often serve as immediate, visible markers of difference. Without obvious markers of difference, onlookers are less likely to notice a disability, and people with disabilities are more likely to pass.
- The desire to pass often derives from mainstream cultural influences such as stigma, bias, and discrimination. According to Kear and Kuusisto's memoirs, explicit or implicit familial influence encouraging passing also contributes to the desire to pass.

THE ACT OF PASSING

- While factors such as partial vision, the lack of visible markers of difference, and parental influence enable and encourage Kuusisto and Kear to pass, the act of passing itself becomes an incredibly complex and personal endeavor.
- In these two cases, passing for sighted is a conscious choice that requires energy and effort to uphold.
- Both Kuusisto and Kear detail the amount of time and energy they put into passing for sighted, pretending they can see better than they actually can.
- Kuusisto mentions repeatedly how exhausting passing for sighted is. For Kear, passing requires time and energy spent lying to keep her blindness a secret from friends, coworkers, and strangers.
- These decisions are informed by shame surrounding a stigmatized disabled identity and fear of the pity and prejudice of others. While passing reduces their encounters with stigma, Kear and Kuusisto face other challenges as a result of passing, such as the denial of accommodations in both interpersonal and institutional settings.

Nicole C. Kear

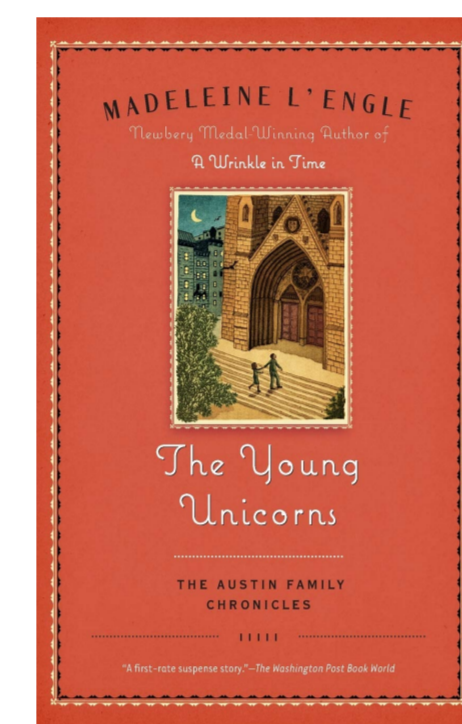


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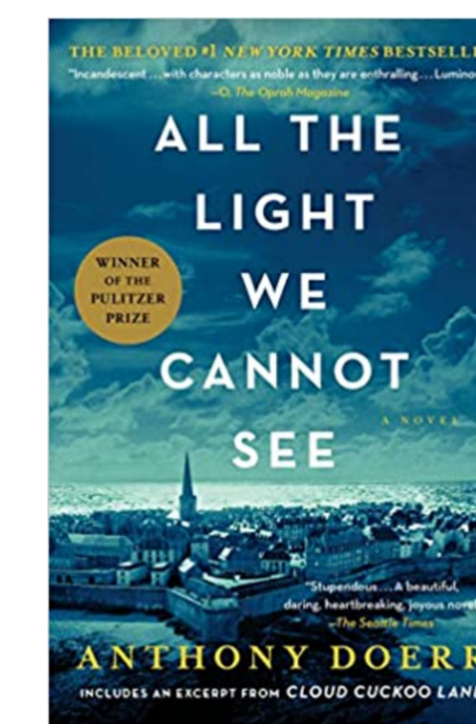
Stephen Kuusisto



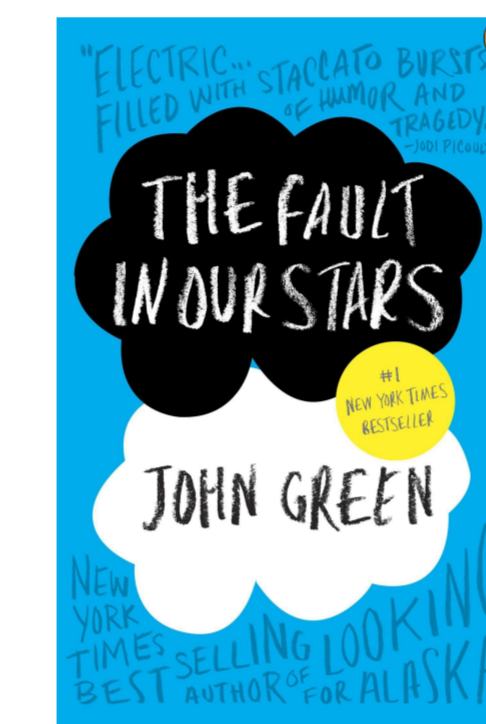
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THE ABSENCE OF FICTIONAL PASSING

- Novels such as Madeleine L'Engle's *The Young Unicorns*, Anthony Doerr's *All the Light We Cannot See*, and John Green's *The Fault in Our Stars* successfully avoid stereotypical and reductive motifs of blindness to portray dynamic, multifaceted visually impaired characters, but do not successfully represent the diversity of the visual impairments themselves.
- Round, realistic characters like L'Engle's Emily, Doerr's Marie-Laure, and Green's Isaac are depicted as nuanced characters with interests and attributes beyond their blindness, and they are all blind for different reasons.
- And yet, their experiences of blindness are hardly distinguishable. There is little, if any, description of what visual experience is like for these characters, often reverting to a presumed default darkness.
- For Emily, Marie-Laure, and Isaac, blindness is total, and thus totalizing, reducing the spectrum of vision to a binary between seeing and not seeing.
- If blindness is total rather than partial, passing for sighted becomes nearly impossible.

NARRATIVE PROSTHESIS

- Fictional accounts tend to rely on total blindness, which carries more narrative significance and utility, rather than partial vision, which enables passing and subverts the use of blindness as a narrative prosthesis⁷ – a plot device, narrative impetus, or metaphorical signifier.
- According to Mitchell and Snyder's theory of narrative prosthesis, disability offers a mechanism for marking characters with projected cultural assumptions and provides a useful explanation behind and impetus for action in any story.
- Narrative prosthesis – the function of disability in a narrative – perhaps explains why partial vision and passing for sighted are mostly absent from fictional narratives: a partially sighted blind character who successfully passes for sighted does not provide the same narrative stimulus that a completely blind character does.
- For a character to be blind but able to pass for sighted creates an extraneous narrative element.
- Passing subverts the concept of narrative prosthesis by removing the legibility of the disability and thus its narrative significance.

LIBERATION

- Liberation, which comes with the freedom of passing or the relief of its surrender, emerges as another typology of blindness narratives.
- Passing for sighted offers Kear and Kuusisto liberation from the disability stigma that informs their desire to pass. Passing allows them to navigate the world without the judgement, pity, and objectification of others.
- Eventually, both Kear and Kuusisto find it explicitly 'liberating' to surrender their ability and desire to pass as they admit their conditions to others, achieve independence and mobility as a result of accommodations and adaptive technologies, and tell the truth about their conditions, their experience, and themselves.
- Like passing, liberation is largely absent from fictional narratives. Without passing there is little room for the liberation that comes with both avoiding stigma and embracing disability identity in the face of it.

CONCLUSION

- In nonfiction accounts of visual impairment, passing for sighted (and the liberation that accompanies it or follows its surrender) emerges as a blindness narrative typology, as evidenced by Kear and Kuusisto's memoirs.
- Meanwhile, the themes of passing and liberation have not pervaded in fictional narratives of blindness and vision loss. This is perhaps due to passing's subversion of blindness as a narrative prosthesis, or functional element in a narrative.
- While themes of passing and liberation in the context of disability have not yet pervaded in fictional narratives of blindness and vision loss, future depictions of fictional passing may continue to narrow the gap between the representation and reality of disability experience.

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