

EMPOWERING THE DISEMPOWERED:
A STUDY OF THE INTERACTION OF MAGIC AND DISABILITY IN
FANTASY MEDIA

RESEARCH PROJECT

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SCHOOL OF DESIGN: BA(HONS) ANIMATION

THE UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH

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14 JANUARY 2021

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to extend my thanks and gratitude to everyone who helped me bring this essay together. Though it was an ambitious undertaking, trying to tie together fantasy studies, disability studies, character and literary analysis, psychology, biology and sociology amongst other, Dr Merlin Seller was an invaluable supervisor, guiding me through the minefield and offering support, ideas and advice when I was lost in the trenches with only a vague idea of ‘something about fantasy and disability’, and I’m truly lucky to have had them as a supervisor. I would also like to thank my partner Chloe, for her support and belief in my abilities at times when I was doubting myself, and for bravely and honestly sharing her personal experience with PTSD with me to help facilitate an understanding of how trauma affects a person. Thanks to my best friend and fellow fantasy aficionado Ryan for being my eleventh-hour proof-reader and a sounding board for ideas on how to approach the subject, and thank you to my friend Blair for his enthusiasm about the topic of disability issues and encouragement. Similarly, my classmates James, Mhari and Amy were an invaluable support system during this endeavour, and I will always appreciate their help, even if sometimes that help amounted to little more than shared sympathy for how confused we were when it came to referencing. I’d also like to thank my mum, for her faith in my abilities and endless support of me finding my own place in the world and doing things on my own terms – something that means everything to an autistic person. Thank you also to Dr Nichola Dobson, whose encouragement to speak openly and honestly about my experiences as an autistic person and explore it in ways that felt right to me was incredibly affirming, as was her enthusiasm for the crossover of disability studies and fantasy. Because he’d be very upset if I didn’t mention him, thank you to my cat Smaug – yes, my cat is named

after the dragon from *The Hobbit*, I really am a fantasy nerd after all – for making me smile when I needed a pick-me-up and calming me down when I was stressed out (cat purrs are apparently scientifically proven to reduce blood pressure. I don't have a source for that, but my experiential evidence supports it). And finally, thank you to the creators, creatives and authors whose works inspired me to write this essay, and all the other fantasy writers, artists and creatives who have given me so much joy, wonder and imagination over the years.

IMAGES

Figure i: Nickelodeon, 2005-2008. [Toph's seismic sense] [image online] Available at: <<https://i.redd.it/bjceh9u6dot11.jpg>> [Accessed 12 January 2021].

Figure ii: Nickelodeon, 2012-2014. [Korra's hallucination] [image online] Available at: <https://thefakegeekgirlblog.files.wordpress.com/2014/10/tumblr_nd57w0grag1r8li0qo3_1280.jpg?w=1100&h=500&crop=1> [Accessed 12 January 2021].

Figure iii: Botanicaxu, 2014. [Kaladin] [image online] Available at: <https://64.media.tumblr.com/aa009264eff6fe23b9fac94a9c33c882/tumblr_nba2gzCIrg1qmgrs2o1_1280.jpg> [Accessed 12 January 2021].

1. INTRODUCTION

“Fantasy, particularly when there is magic involved, is beset with traps for the writer, and André Norton is not immune to a particularly strongly baited one: the magical cure.[...]Many other world fantasies hold out the image of magical cure for wounds and disabilities; many science fiction titles present the cures not as magical but as "miracles" of science. Why should this be so? Why is the fantasy world so full of the desire for perfection, and the predicted future so full of devices to procure it? Partly the habit must be due to tradition: very few "high" fantasies do not nod to the mythical, perfect archetypes.”

- Jane Stemp, “Devices and desires: science fiction, fantasy and disability in literature for younger people” (2004)

Stemp concisely argues a particular problem the fantasy genre has had over the course of its history: its treatment of disabled characters. She also nods to a potential source of it, that being fantasy’s genesis as an evolution of myth, poetic epics and folklore which overwhelmingly lionise able-bodied, physically perfect heroes. More specifically, the quote above illustrates a specific problem fantasy has with its disabled characters, where the presence of magic in a fantasy narrative is all too often used as a device to circumvent the very real limitations of disability.

In this essay, I aim to explore the interaction that magic can have with disability in fantasy media. To do so, I will be looking at two works that share commonality in that they both use what is known as a ‘hard’ magic system. Hard magic systems are intentionally bound by rules and limitations as to what their magic can and cannot do, rules on how it is invoked and used, and how it interacts with the world that gave rise to

it. They are treated like a rule of nature rather than mysticism, knowable and rational. Just as gravity is bounded by rules and works the same way no matter where on Earth you are, so too does a hard magic system maintain internal consistency in how it functions. As Brandon Sanderson's Second Law of Magic states: "The limitations are more interesting than the powers". The two works I will be looking at are Nickelodeon's *Avatar* franchise of animated television programs, consisting of *Avatar: The Last Airbender* and *The Legend of Korra* (referred to from here on out as *ATLA* and *LOK* for brevity), and Brandon Sanderson's own ongoing fantasy novel series *The Stormlight Archive* (referred to as *TSA* or simply *Stormlight*). I will be doing so by undertaking character studies, looking in-depth at two characters per work to explore how the presence of magic influences the portrayal of their disability.

I believe that magic can be used to augment our understanding of these fantasy worlds, namely in how disability is affected by the presence of magic, as personified in the narratives of these works' disabled characters. My interest in this topic is as a disabled person myself, one with an autism spectrum disorder, and as a person with a lifelong affinity for fantasy and desire to work in that genre. Magic systems and magic powers can be used as a tool to explore disability, trauma, identity, society and otherness ('otherness' here meaning 'distinct and separated from and by dominant socio-cultural groups through stigmatizing a difference' – in this case, the dominant groups of able-bodied and neurotypical individuals stigmatizing and dominating differently-abled, neurodivergent and non-normative-bodied people). Through this essay, I hope to show that magic does not have to solve, replace or ignore disability, but can in fact work alongside it as two non-exclusive, intrinsic and important parts of the same character and world.

2. AVATAR

2.1 INTRODUCTION

In the world of Nickelodeon's animated *Avatar* series, comprising the series *Avatar: The Last Airbender* (2005-2008) and *The Legend of Korra* (2012-2014) - a sequel series set 70 years after the original show - the main expression of magic powers is in 'bending'. Bending occupies a space between mental and physical expression, with much emphasis placed on spiritual matters throughout the series, but the use of bending relies on physical movements inspired by various martial arts. It is tied to the four classical elements – earth, fire, water and air – with each having its own distinct style of movement and associated philosophical approach. This in itself could be considered an ableist approach to magic due to its reliance on physical movement inherently precluding non-normative bodies from using it (although *LOK* does show a waterbender with no arms who uses waterbending to create liquid prostheses for herself). I won't be discussing this in detail in this essay as my focus is on the impact of magic on individual characters, but it does bear mentioning, even if just to show that I am aware of the potential issues in creating a magic system that operates with such a reliance on movement.

Bending is strictly manipulation of the elements, not the ability to create them out of thin air. A firebender accomplishes this by using their own internal body heat, while a waterbender needs a source of water. Each person controls one element, although the eponymous Avatar – a role passed down to one individual in each generation through reincarnation of the Avatar Spirit into the person in a process known as the Avatar Cycle – can control all four. The central protagonist of each series is this Avatar – Aang in *ATLA*

and the next generation's Avatar, Korra in *LOK* – as they struggle with the weight of the Avatar role. The Avatar is required to bring balance to all peoples on earth, just as they balance the four elements. One of the Avatar's other powers is the Avatar State, a state of being that allows the Avatar to channel increased power and perform incredible feats of bending through the shared knowledge of their past incarnations. It is presented as a defensive state for the most part, often manifesting in response to extreme physical or emotional danger. If the Avatar is killed while in the Avatar State, the Cycle of reincarnation will end permanently, and the Avatar will forever cease to exist.

2.2 TOPH BEIFONG

Toph Beifong is introduced in the second season of *ATLA* as a skilled earthbender. Much of earthbending is focused on striking the earth with the feet to tear chunks of the ground out for further manipulation. Toph embodies this physical and spiritual connection with the earth better than any other character, as Toph is a blind character who relies on physical contact with the ground to 'see'. Her blindness has honed her other senses, including increased sensitivity in her mechanoreceptors which allows her to 'feel' vibrations in the ground and translate that into a type of vision.

There are two ways to read this. The first reading is that this is simply narrative convenience, allowing the writers to create a blind character without having to deal with the difficulties of a truly unseeing character. Dolmage (2014) asserts that this type of character treatment falls into the "Overcoming or Compensation myth [where] the person with a disability overcomes their impairment through hard work or has some special talent that offsets their deficiencies". At a first glance, it is easy to place Toph in this category, referred to by Shapiro and referenced by Dolmage as the "super crip". She cannot see,

but her earthbending powers effectively allow her to still make out the terrain, essentially removing the limitations of visual impairment. However, the second reading is that this is an alternate conception of ‘sight’ as it pertains to Toph – much in the same way blind people in our world may rely on touch, hearing and associated systems like Braille to navigate the world. In the series, this ‘sight’ is presented visually as almost being like sonar, with waves emanating from Toph’s contact points on the ground and reverberating through the surrounding terrain. In this view, Toph’s earthbending powers are not a replacement for her sight, but merely an augmented and improved version of touch and sound, an extension of the senses that are critically important for many blind people in our real world. Ingold (2000) refers to this combination of touch and hearing as “multi-modal feeling-hearing[...]which is neither touch, echo nor motion, but a blending of all of these”. There are several other instances in the series that lend more credence to this second reading over the first, instances where the writers consider not only the physical limitations of Toph as a blind character, but also her limitations as a character who ‘sees’ through multi-modal feeling-hearing.



Figure i: Toph's 'seismic sense', depicted visually as akin to sonar or soundwaves. (Nickelodeon, 2005-2008)

In one instance, with the group of protagonists in a desert, Toph mentions that it is difficult for her to see in such an environment. The sand is too ephemeral, too shifting, too lacking in solidity for Toph to really be able to read much through it, leaving her 'vision' occluded in the same way that a thick fog may inhibit the view of a seeing individual. In another instance, Toph is trapped in a wooden cell, a material with no earth in it, and though she can feel the presence of the cage around her, she cannot tell what material it is and has to be told outright that it is wooden. In another, the soles of her feet are burned, and the damage done to her feet – her main sensory organ – inhibits her ability to sense through the earth, in much the same way a blind person with calluses on their fingertips may struggle to read Braille. It is mentioned several times that Toph cannot see or feel events happening in the air, often having to ask for a running commentary on

events that occur in the sky. These instances all combine to create a depiction of Toph that is both treated as a blind character, but also still limited by the alternative way they interact with the world in lieu of sight. Toph's earthbending 'sight' is not a true replacement for visual sight, as it has unique challenges and limitations of its own that no amount of earthbending can overcome.

Toph's blindness is also a large part of her character, worked into both how she sees herself and how others see her, most notably her parents. Toph was born blind, and her parents sheltered her from the outside world, believing her to be fragile and unable to look after herself due to her blindness. In fact, Toph was sheltered so much that very few people in the world even knew the wealthy Beifong family had a daughter, and Toph's chafing against this strict control and condescension informs a large part of her character. Dolmage would call this the "Disability as an Object of Pity" myth, where "people with disabilities are regarded as sad and impotent". Toph's rejection of this pity and straining against the overprotective nature of her parents is a key component to her character, and cements her as a character that explicitly defies disability tropes. In one scene, she confronts how her parents' treatment of her has impacted her life, stating "I'm twelve years old and I've never had a friend". In Dolmage's view, this would place Toph's story in yet another category, that of "Disability as Isolating and Individuated" due to her parents' intentional isolation of her. Dolmage explains this myth by stating "[disabled people] rarely have romantic relationships or enduring friendships", and again Toph breaks free of this myth as the desire for enduring friendships is her impetus for joining the protagonists, and over the course of the series she does indeed form extremely close and enduring friendships with them, and in LOK we find out that Toph had children to two separate men, indicating a healthy romantic and sexual life. In Toph's backstory, she

learned earthbending after running away and encountering large creatures called badgermoles in a cave (who, in the show's fiction, were the 'original' earthbenders who passed their art down to humans). By listening and feeling their movements through the earth, Toph was able to teach herself earthbending, and after returning home began to secretly take part in underground earthbending combat tournaments under the pseudonym 'The Blind Bandit'. This speaks to a desire to form her own community and relationships, to find a sense of belonging that she never had in her parents' household, where she was treated on the basis of her earthbending ability and not by her visual impairment. When the protagonists encounter her, she runs away with them to teach Aang earthbending and to escape her oppressively sheltering parents. This all stems directly from not her blindness itself, but the way she was treated because of it. Toph is presented as a spirited, fiercely independent individual who at first clashes with the group due to her personality. She assumes that any help offered is a gesture made out of pity for her because of her blindness (as an extension of her displeasure and resentment at her parents' piteous treatment of her), and initially lashes out at these attempts because of this, finding it hard to accept that others may want to help because it is an inherently good gesture. Her need to prove herself and shoulder all of her own burdens is a direct result of her sheltered upbringing, with her trying to show that she is capable of handling her own problems. In doing so, she is rebelling against the way her parents treated her and rebelling against preconceived societal and cultural notions of the ability of blind individuals. Her parents treated her as an individual incapable of making their own way through the world, someone who needed to be protected and helped, and in doing so created a young woman who is fiercely resistant to the idea of relying on anyone besides herself, absolutely determined to prove her capability.

Toph's character is completely informed by her blindness, but not subject to it in a stereotypical way. While aspects of her character may initially fall into common, harmful disability tropes, Toph's character is driven by a desire to break free of the strictures that her disability and the typical narrative patterns of disabled stories would attempt to consign her to. The writers have done the work to present a sensible, viable alternative to sight for Toph as an extension of her earthbending powers, while also considering the limitations of using her power in such a way. Toph's personality is also influenced by her blindness – or rather, informed by how she was treated because of her blindness rather than the blindness itself. Toph never displays or expresses any resentment or wish to see like others do, she simply wishes to be acknowledged as a capable, strong, determined young woman who is living life on her own terms, and not the terms that external forces such as her parents or her blindness dictate to her.

2.3 KORRA

The sequel series to *The Last Airbender* revolves around the eponymous Korra, Avatar Aang's direct successor in the Avatar role, in a more modernised, globalised world. In contrast to how *ATLA* depicted its most notable disabled character, Toph, Korra is instead not disabled from birth but deals with disability in the form of PTSD because of the experiences she has throughout the show. Korra's character arc deals with trauma, issues of self-identity tied to her Avatar powers and the importance of external support for trauma victims. I refer to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (2013) in classifying post-traumatic stress disorder as a disability, as its inclusion evidences that it is currently considered a disability in the field of psychology, and under the United Kingdom's definition of 'disability' per the Equality Act 2010,

PTSD qualifies as a “mental impairment that has a ‘significant’ and ‘long-term’ negative impact on your ability to do normal daily activities”.

Korra’s introduction is designed to establish her as the opposite to Avatar Aang. While Aang was a peaceful, fun-loving, spiritually-minded younger teen who struggled with all bending styles except airbending, Korra is introduced as a young child easily wielding fire, earth and water while declaring “I’m the Avatar! You gotta deal with it!”. As time skips forward and we see the grown Korra, she has become a strong-minded, direct, impatient and confident 17-year old who tackles problems head-on and relishes the physical side of bending while struggling with her spirituality and has not mastered airbending – the element her predecessor was most comfortable with. Within the first episode we can see that a large part of Korra’s self-identity is predicated on being the Avatar, from her jubilant celebration of it as a child, to when she arrives in Republic City and deals with a gang of robbers with her bending powers directly rather than let the city’s numerous police forces handle it, something she is chastised for by Republic City’s chief of police. Korra’s first instinct is to always take the direct approach, often bulldozing her way through problems using not just the powers of the Avatar, but also the social status that being the Avatar accords her. Season 1’s antagonist, Amon, is an anti-bending revolutionary with the power to remove people’s bending. Korra evidently greatly fears not just Amon but the loss of her status as the Avatar, shown by her nightmare at the beginning of Episode 4, where Amon tells her “after I take your bending away, you will be nothing”. This shows that Korra’s identity is inextricably linked to being the Avatar, and that without it she would not matter. Amon actually does remove Korra’s powers towards the end of Season 1 and leaving her despondent, lost and grieving not just the loss of her powers, but the loss of what she perceived as her ‘self’, her identity as the

Avatar. She clearly considers her loss of Avatar-hood as meaning she is unworthy of affection or love, telling Mako to go back to Republic City, saying he doesn't need to "do her any favours" as she's "not the Avatar anymore" and rejecting his declaration of love. In laying bare her emotions, crying and grieving what she has lost, she was able to finally connect to her spiritual side and communicate with the past Avatars, which restored her bending powers. This can be viewed as allegorical for a support group, comprised of people who have gone through similar events in their lives and know the specific burdens the individual carries. Korra's seeking help and admitting she needs it allows her to move past the perceived loss of her self and reconnect with who she is now – someone who has gone through that loss and trauma, that violation of something Korra has built her identity around, and come out the other side. After the restoration of her powers, she is able to reciprocate Mako's love and tell him she loves him too. Overall, while this arc is effective for establishing Korra's conflation of her identity and conception of herself with the role of the Avatar, it deals less with trauma itself due to how quickly it is introduced and resolved in the final episode of Season 1, but lays an important groundwork for the later, more detailed exploration of trauma that Korra experiences in Seasons 3 and especially 4.

The inciting incident for Korra's post-traumatic stress disorder comes at the end of Season 3, when its antagonist Zaheer nearly kills Korra through mercury poisoning while she was in the Avatar State. Though she survives, and her powers remain intact (unlike in Season 1), Korra is physically weakened and unable to actually make use of her powers as she can barely walk. The show explicitly shows that Korra is dealing with post-traumatic stress disorder, as she is haunted by hallucinations of Zaheer, hallucinations of her own Avatar State-powered self and the memory of being brought so close to death.

By this time, Korra's connection to the past Avatars has been completely severed, and she also finds herself unable to enter the Avatar State – due to the associated trauma of nearly dying while in it and not through the removal of her actual spiritual ability to enter it. While she still technically has her powers, her weakened physical state (to the point of leaving her wheelchair-bound for a time) prevents her from using them due to the movement component of invoking them, and the inability to enter the Avatar State represents her remaining traumatic memories of what happened to her the last time she entered it. To Korra at this point, being the Avatar is intrinsically linked with trauma, pain and near-death – as evidenced by the image of herself in the Avatar State being one of her recurring hallucinations - and the effect this has on her identity is notable. Korra's recovery takes several years, and in the background of this a fascist empire has been rising in power, but Korra finds herself unable to do anything about it, unable to be the balancing force that the Avatar is supposed to be. Unable to connect to past Avatars and pushing away her own living support group, Korra spends a portion of Season 4 as an isolated figure, until she meets someone who is able to help her deal with her trauma and reconnect with her role as the Avatar – an aged Toph Beifong. Through her discussions with Toph, Korra comes to the realisation that she must confront her trauma directly and deal with the enemies of the past before she will be able to deal with the enemies of the present. After removing the remaining traces of mercury in her system through bending, Korra confronts the antagonistic Kuvira but is defeated, signifying that while she is physically back to normal now, there is still a large mental block that she must move past before she can truly be the Avatar once more. Simply having her powers back is not enough to help Korra move on. To Korra at this point, the idea of being the Avatar is not tied to powers, the ability to enter the Avatar State or the ability to connect with her past lives – it is a

mental state, a way of being, that she is unable to achieve until she confronts her trauma. To do so, she confronts Zaheer directly in the Spirit World, and in doing so is able to let go of her fear.



Figure ii: Korra's hallucination of her Avatar State-empowered self. (Nickelodeon, 2012-2014)

Korra's arc through the four seasons of *LOK* is explicitly about trauma, societal expectations of the Avatar and how she deals with the hardships that come as a result of that. Shifts in Korra's character are signified by loss of ability – in Season 1, the loss of her powers; in Season 2, the loss of her ability to connect to past Avatars; and in Season 4, loss of physical ability and the loss of the mental state needed to be the Avatar, despite still maintaining her powers. Korra's self-image and self-confidence is intrinsically tied to being the Avatar and possessing the Avatar's powers, and the loss of that reflects a personal loss of identity for Korra each time.

3. *THE STORMLIGHT ARCHIVE*

3.1 INTRODUCTION

This section of the essay deals with Brandon Sanderson's ongoing high fantasy series, *The Stormlight Archive*, consisting of four books as of writing: *The Way of Kings* (2010), *Words of Radiance* (2014), *Oathbringer* (2017) and *Rhythm of War* (2020). *Rhythm of War* was released in late 2020, while this essay was being written, and so much of the analysis is centred around the first three books but important points from the fourth will be included where they are necessary.

In *Stormlight*, magic is known as Surgebinding, powered by the eponymous stormlight, an energy similar in function to the common fantasy trope of 'mana' that is carried by the highstorms that regularly sweep the continent of Roshar. Simply having access to stormlight itself is not enough to use magic, as the ability itself is linked to the mythical Knights Radiant, ten orders of warriors, healers and diplomats who are able to use Surgebinding due to a bond with a magical creature known as a spren. It is with these sentient individuals that the Knights Radiant make their bond by speaking Oaths or Ideals, and dependent on what Oaths they speak and what type of spren they bond, the Radiant in question gains access to two powers known to their order.

There is mention made of who is able to bond with a spren. At one point, Kaladin insists that he cannot be a Knight Radiant because he, in his own mind, is "broken", to which his spren Syl replies (of the Knights Radiant of the past): "They all were, silly". This, I'm ambivalent and conflicted on. It seems to imply that being 'broken' in some way or another is a prerequisite for being able to make the bond with spren, which may bring to mind issues of the superpowered disabled characters who are extraordinary

specifically because of their disability – the “super cripp” that Shapiro mentions. On the other hand, this brokenness is never said to explicitly be cognate to disability, as we have also seen addicts and people wracked with guilt become Radiants. This could be problematic though, as one could take the view that such a generic state of ‘brokenness’ elides any meaningful differences and erases the vastly different psychological, medical and sociological mechanisms of different disabilities and character traits. There is also the possibility, on the other hand, that Sanderson intends this as a way to normalise disability, trauma and otherness, by implying that the ideas of normativity in regards to mental and bodily function are not representative of life as a whole, especially since these books are being written contemporarily in a time where knowledge of mental health and disability issues is becoming more common and discussion of the same is becoming less taboo. It may be that Sanderson wishes to reflect our world as it stands now with a more open and honest approach to disability, but as the series is still in progress and this hasn’t been addressed in the books, there is little in the text to be able to definitively say which of the readings is more supported by the books themselves. Personally, I would like to believe that Sanderson’s intentions are the former, but I do acknowledge the problematic nature of equating the ability to use magic with non-normative bodies, neurodivergent brains and non-normative mental states.

3.2 KALADIN STORMBLESSED

Kaladin, insofar as a member of an ensemble cast can be, can be looked at as the central character of *The Stormlight Archive*. The first book in the series, *The Way of Kings*, has numerous flashback chapters dedicated to Kaladin’s past and how it led him to where he is currently. He is the character who we’ve gotten the biggest insight to over

the course of the three books currently released. Starting off the series as a slave, betrayed and sold into servitude by a man he trusted, and branded with glyphs on his forehead marking him as such, his past is full of pain. He joined the army to protect his younger brother and failed, and he feels like he failed his father by joining the army instead of becoming a surgeon like his father wished. Kaladin is driven by an intense need to protect, which is balanced out dramatically with how personally he takes it when he is unable to. The idea that he can't quite protect everyone never really takes root in Kaladin's mind, and the fact that he is able to Surgebind worsens this. Kaladin can be seen as a deconstruction of the typical heroic archetype – he is young, protective, skilled and blessed with impressive power – but these traits are counteracted by his, in my opinion, more important traits. Kaladin is distrustful, traumatised, guilt-ridden and depressed. Magic does little to change any of this, and in fact exacerbates it.

Kaladin's struggles revolve around being unable to accept the idea that he is not responsible for being unable to save everyone. He expects to be able to solve all problems and protect everyone with his powers, but it simply has not clicked that he can't. Every loss his men take in battle is taken as a personal failure, with Kaladin mentally admonishing himself for being unable to protect them. One scene that shows this particularly well is towards the climax of *Oathbringer*, where his companions are fighting for their lives and close to being overwhelmed. Kaladin, exhausted, is unable to help them, and his spren Syl urges him to speak the fourth Oath of the Windrunners, which is shown in *Rhythm of War* to mean truly accepting that he cannot save everyone (previously, speaking a new Oath was shown to replenish the character's stormlight, heal their wounds and re-energise them). If Kaladin had been able to acknowledge that he cannot always take responsibility for loss, and that in war, people will die, and that it's

not his fault, he would have been able to save his companions with the burst of energy speaking a new Oath gives. And yet, Kaladin cannot bring himself to do it. He refuses to admit that he can't save everyone. Kaladin's hero complex and martyr complex are inextricably linked to one another, and the expectations he places upon himself to save others worsens his mental state when he is unable to uphold the impossible standards he creates for himself. In *Rhythm of War*, he is finally able to speak the Fourth Oath, stating that he "knows the words. [He has] always known the words" showing that though Kaladin knew intrinsically that he cannot save everyone, he refused to accept it until that moment, placing incredible pressure on himself (along with the associated societal pressure and expectations of being a Knight Radiant) to always be the hero. In his mind, he has access to magic for one reason only – to protect – and failing to do so is seen by Kaladin as an exacerbated failure, that he was unable to protect in spite of his demonstrable power.

Trauma is also a key part of Kaladin's character, as it is with others in *The Stormlight Archive*. It is best signified by the literal scars Kaladin is left with; the slave brand placed on his forehead by his traitorous commander. In one scene in *Words of Radiance*, the members of Kaladin's squad are getting their squad insignia tattooed on their foreheads. The ink rejects from Kaladin's skin whenever he draws in stormlight, leaving the brand below bare for the world to see. I choose to see this scene as a metaphor for Kaladin's trauma. He is surrounded by friends and allies who accept and love him unconditionally, yet he is unable to accept that he is deserving of those friendships and the belief of his squadmates. He can't move past the trauma he experienced in his past and experience the happiness of the moment he is in now. For Kaladin, the ink always fades away, and the scars always come to the fore. Their presence marks him as an

outsider, despite being the squad's leader. They signify, in essence, Kaladin's own perceived, internalised otherness. During this scene, he says "I guess the scars haven't finished with me yet", signifying his continuing difficulty in dealing with his trauma. The presence of the scars themselves is notable, as stormlight is shown to be able to heal wounds. At the climax of *Words of Radiance*, Kaladin heals a crushed ribcage and punctured lungs through stormlight; Renarin Kholin, who we will explore later, heals his poor eyesight with stormlight to the point he doesn't require glasses anymore; and Lopen, one of Kaladin's squadmates, is able to regrow an entire arm. Despite stormlight being shown to be able to cure much more serious injuries, it is unable to heal the scar on Kaladin's forehead, and the reason for this, as stated by Sanderson at a book signing, is a matter of self-identity.

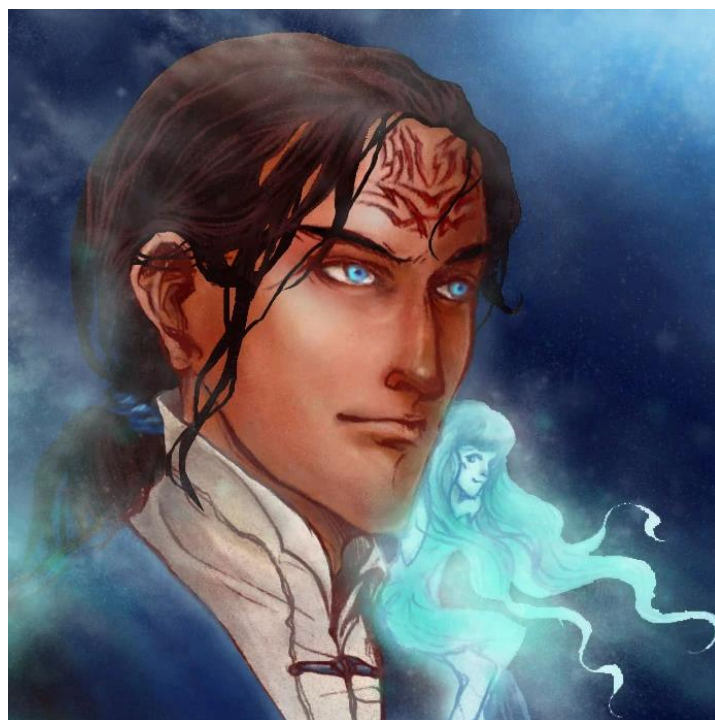


Figure iii: Kaladin and his forehead brands from his time as a slave. (Botanicaxu, 2014)

The best way to explore this is to contrast Kaladin with Lopen. Lopen is a one-armed character who remains relentlessly jovial in the worst circumstances and is always ready with a wisecrack about himself and his own non-normative body. Lopen gains the same Windrunner powers as Kaladin does, and manages to use Stormlight to regrow his arm in the time between *Words of Radiance* and *Oathbringer*. Sanderson stated at the signing referred to above, that the reason Lopen was able to do is that he “does not identify as a one-armed person” (Sanderson, 2017). He views himself as Lopen, and Lopen is still himself whether he has one arm or two. In contrast, Kaladin’s physical scarring is emblematic of who he is. Kaladin does not see himself as able to exist without his depression or trauma. These make up a core pillar of who Kaladin is, and because of this, he is unable to heal the scars and accept happiness in his life. When Kaladin speaks the Fourth Ideal and accepts that he does not have to carry responsibility for his failure to protect others – that he does not deserve his trauma – the scars flake away, showing Kaladin finally moving past his burdens and trauma. This represents a material shift in how Kaladin sees himself, his abilities, his relationship with his powers and his role in the world, and it is symbolised in the scars physically and metaphorically fading away.

3.3 RENARIN KHOLIN

Renarin is the last character I’ll be looking at, who I believe is notable for how he seemingly breaks the pre-established rules of the magic system, and how this ties into his position as a character on the autism spectrum. I will be drawing on some of my own experiences as an autistic person here, but I am fully aware that my specific experience cannot and does not represent the wide variety of different lived experiences amongst autistic individuals.

Renarin is the son of Dalinar Kholin, a feared soldier and general which, in the fictional Alethi society he grew up in, is considered the highest calling for men. It is a strictly gender-divided society, with men expected to be warriors and women expected to be artists and scholars, to the point where men are forbidden from learning to read and write the more complex script used by women and instead have to make do with a simplified set of glyphs. Renarin is established as a character who is unable to reach these hegemonic ideals of masculinity, due to poor eyesight, epilepsy and, according to Sanderson at a book signing, an autism spectrum disorder. Evidence of this can be seen in the first book, where Renarin ‘stims’, playing with a small box in a repetitive manner, a habit often found amongst autistic people (referred to by the *DSM-5* as “stereotyped or repetitive motor movements, use of objects or speech”). Renarin later in the series joins Kaladin’s squad, a group of misfits from all corners of the continent and all walks of life, with Kaladin’s second-in-command Teft even stating outright that it’s the best place for him since he doesn’t truly belong in Alethi high society, further pointing to his discomfort with formalised social rules, also common amongst autistic people. In *Oathbringer*, Renarin takes an interest in scholarly work, an area previously reserved exclusively for women, something that could indicate the noted higher correlation of autism in people with gender dysphoria or gender-diverse individuals compared to the cisgender population (Warrier, et al., 2020). Several characters note discomfort around Renarin, feeling he is too quiet, knows too much, asks uneasy questions or feeling like Renarin is studying them. This is, unfortunately, a common response to autistic people in real life too, with the reason usually being that the autistic person is aware of the consequences for breaking social rules but not understanding what those rules are, and so they choose to observe and learn in order to avoid negative attention – an act that brings them negative

attention in the end anyway. All this is to say that there is plenty of textual evidence to depict Renarin as an autistic character, even without Sanderson's statement enshrining it as fact.

The source of Renarin's magic also emphasises his otherness, his place outside the rules. Just as he exists outside the confines of strict hegemonic roles of gender and propriety, so too does Renarin the Knight Radiant exist outside of the rules of the magic system. Renarin's magic does come from a bond with a spren, but in Renarin's case the spren has been corrupted. Yet he managed to bond it anyway, something that no-one even knew was possible. The way his magic works is different from the rest of the Order he belongs to, namely in that he can see the future, something considered taboo. For all intents and purposes, Renarin is part of the magic system, and yet exists outside it in his own niche that no-one else can fulfil. Another character with precognition even refers to him as a black spot, where he cannot read potential outcomes involving Renarin, again pointing to Renarin's place outside of the system. Renarin's magic and his bond are emblematic of Renarin's existence as a person on the autism spectrum – part of the system, but outside it, untethered by rules that he unintentionally breaks. Renarin is neither a warrior, a scholar, a noble, a lower-class member of Kaladin's squad or a true Radiant. He is simultaneously all and none of those things, an anomaly both in society and in the strict magical weave of Roshar.

4. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, magic and disability can intertwine in interesting and exciting ways to create new narratives in the fantasy genre. The interplay of magic and disability can be used for a multitude of purposes. In Toph's case, it allows us to explore alternate conceptions of sensory experience by showing how earthbending and enhanced touch and feeling can be a viable alternative to sight, if not an exact replacement for it. Toph's character arc also shows how magic can empower someone to break out of harmful disability narratives and harmful societal narratives. Korra and Kaladin's arcs show how magic and identity can intertwine, and the harmful effects tying one's self-worth to what they can do rather than who they are can have. Their arcs also show how magic is not always enough to overcome disabilities or trauma. In Korra's case, she must face her trauma head-on and learn to consign it to the past, while in Kaladin's he deals with his trauma by acknowledging, externalising and accepting core truths about himself as a person. Neither of these resolutions to their arcs revolve around their ability to use magic, instead coming as moments of personal growth and insight that anyone could achieve, magic or no. Renarin's case study shows how intentionally breaking the rules of hard magic systems can be used to evoke a concept of otherness, and how both disability and magic can be used to inform the audience about the fictional world and society of the work, and the character's place within it – or outwith it, as the case may be.

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