



Bodily Humor and Ideologies of Disability in *Joey Pigza Swallowed the Key*

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Since the advent of the We Need Diverse Books movement in 2014, the fields of children's literature, library science, and publishing have been growing conscious of the representation of non-normative experiences in children's texts. Chloe Hughes and Elizabeth A. Wheeler's introduction to the special issue of the *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies* on literature for young people acknowledges the potential for explorations of disability in children's literature as these texts shape diverse frames of reference for readers (262). Yet, as Beverley Brenna notes, there is a distinct scarcity of characters with identifiable special needs as protagonists as they have been "relegated to subsidiary positions" in children's books on North American awards lists over the last twenty years (100). This lack extends from awards lists to the general corpus of children's literature, where characters with special needs tend to serve as tools for the growth of the protagonist rather than embodying their own growth. Brenna notes that even while these secondary characters do not necessarily perpetuate stereotypes about the issues or disabilities they have, "...they also do not serve to correct stereotypes related to perceptions of people with exceptional needs as incapable of leadership or heroism" (100). Brenna connects the invisibility of protagonists with disabilities to the historical invisibility of people with disabilities in North American society. In her assessment of North American award-winning books in the last two decades, Brenna notes two specific titles that she considers "well worth attention" for their portrayal of characters with special needs: Cynthia Lord's *Rules* and Jack Gantos' *Joey Pigza Swallowed the Key* (101). Brenna's basic description of *Joey Pigza Swallowed the Key* as a book that "...deal[s] with ADHD and offer[s] the potential of Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder in the depiction of the title character" does little to elucidate what makes the book well worth our attention, making further inquiry necessary (101). Similarly, following David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder's work on narrative prosthesis, I acknowledge that narratives frequently rely on disability as a narrative device for challenging cultural norms, so that the character with a disability becomes a metaphor rather than a political and social agent (222-23).

It is not enough, then, for a protagonist to be disabled, but the ideologies surrounding the character, and throughout the text at large, should also be interrogated for their depiction of disability. It is these issues that this paper tries to address through the exploration of the use of humor in the first book of the Joey Pigza series, *Joey Pigza Swallowed the Key* (1998). Drawing on theorists of humor in children's literature as well as theorists working at the intersection of comedy and disability studies, the use of humor is framed, particularly bodily humor that relies on episodes where Joey's body is out of control, as a means of giving voice to the protagonist with a disability as well as critiquing the ideologies around disabilities in education. Further, the paper argues that Gantos' text ultimately reinforces the ideology of "normality" by having Joey, the disabled child protagonist of the novel, rejoin the class only once he can act "normal" because his medicine makes him "better."

Ideology is part of all aspects of our lives and "[a]ll things produced in a culture are expressions of that culture's ideology" (Parsons 113). McCallum and Stephens note that narratives cannot exist without ideology but that ideology is not inherently negative, as is typically assumed; instead, "[w]hether textual ideology is negative, positive, or more or less neutral will thus be determined by the ideological positioning of a text within culture" (359). If ideology is implicit in all texts, it becomes important to understand the ways in which ideology is employed by the texts, especially as they will impact the positioning of the reader toward the subject. Ideological analysis, then,

...scrutinizes the cultural work a children's story does: who it rewards or punishes (and why), how it depicts stereotypes and power-relations, and how it is oriented (as celebrating or critiquing) the existing social, political, and economic structures of the society in and for which it has been written or produced (Parsons 116).

McCallum and Stephens argue that "[r]epresentations of *transgression*...are an important way children's literature makes ideologies apparent and seeks to redefine or even overthrow them" (367). One of the most prevalent forms of transgression in children's literature comes in the form of humor, making comedy a potentially useful tool for critiquing ideologies.

Various scholars have addressed the prevalence of humor in children's literature, asserting that humor is never quite as simple as it

may initially seem. David L. Russell's conceptualization of comedy in literature rests on the notion of the comic spirit, which he defines as "the optimistic denial of human limitations" (117). The heart of comedy, then, is optimism and revolution. He writes of comic vision as that which, "...gives childhood its relentless spirit, its revolutionary nature, its irrepressible optimism. The comic spirit looks at limitations as challenges to be overcome," and this outlook is sustainable only by children and visionaries (117). Russell situates his definition of comedy and the appeal of humor in the inability of characters to conform to societal expectations. Humor comes from the juxtaposition of incongruous ideas and rebellious spirit of the differently abled person, and is further exacerbated by the value judgment (right or wrong) attached to those behaviors that are incongruous with societal expectation. Comedic "wrong" behavior extends from the inability to adhere to social norms, making comedy impossible without social order. Russell argues that as children grow older and become aware of social structures they come to enjoy the breach of these structures as well, leading to the delight in such comedic literature. Ultimately, though, the comic spirit encompasses the idea that in the end good will prevail and social order will be restored, as comedy "...rejects any tacit acceptance of a less than perfect world"(117). The readers are then still forced to contemplate the societal restrictions and imperfections as the upheaval of societal expectations causes child readers to become aware of and contemplate such expectations, Russell characterizes comedy as revolutionary, despite its ultimate return to social order.

Implicit in this idea of revolution and social expectations is the indication that humor is intended for more than just a laugh. Julie Cross, in her study of humor in junior literature, notes the shift in the way humor functions, "...from traditional, morally didactic texts which are largely concerned with 'personal' morality, to books that overtly deal with 'serious issues', often encompassing wider, 'societal' concerns, in which humor is also used to temper or mask a message in some way" (26). She also notes the standard use of humor to sugarcoat didacticism by masking overtly didactic messages with comedic elements (35). Humor, then, is a tool that authors use to teach their child readers some sort of lesson or message largely based on a serious social issue. Alternately, she also writes that "[s]lapstick incidents are frequently used to diffuse what might otherwise be quite serious situations, possibly creating relief from anxiety within the child reader" (29). Russell, too, ascribes to humor the power to grant child readers "...temporary psychological relief from [societal] restrictions" (118). Along with societal restrictions, psychologists address the use of humor to deal with seriousness in case of tragedy. Eric Jaffe refers to

various studies of psychology that link humor and tragedy. He writes, "...jokes help people cope with the hard times in life" (n.p.). Humor, then, functions as a means of both addressing serious issues and providing relief from the experience of those issues.

The first type of transgressive humor Cross identifies in her study is the "deliberately transgressive character" or the "naughty" child, which she identifies as the primary type of humorous character that shows up in junior fiction (40). Cross links the experience of the deliberately transgressive character with Russell's notion of temporary psychological relief, noting that "[t]he child reader has the benefit of seeing/imagining a child getting away with behavior no 'normal' child could expect to get away with, and this is fun to read about" (42). She goes on to say that reading about "naughty" characters is "a 'safe' way of venting feelings as the transgression is vicarious and not 'real' and so there are no serious repercussions for the child readers" (42). If comedy is useful for delivering messages about serious issues to child readers, and transgressive humor, in particular, causes readers to question and think critically about the limitations of society, transgressive humor then seems to be the perfect vehicle for addressing important topics in children's texts, which is just what Jack Gantos does with *Joey Pigza Swallowed the Key*.

While comedy and humor have been theorized in children's literature, and the connections between comedy and disability have been explored in general, the role of this connection specifically within children's literature has not been fully explored. There have been a number of instances in which scholars have taken up the use of humor within disability studies, most notably in the special issue of *Body & Society* (1999), the 2003 Disability Studies Quarterly Symposium, and the special issue of the *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies* (2013). In their introduction to the special issue of *Literary & Cultural Disability Studies*, guest editors Tom Coogan and Rebecca Mallet note the particular congruence of prominent frameworks in both disability studies and humor studies and the ways in which examining the two fields together can help to solidify our understanding of both (247). Similarly, Alan Shain argues that, "Humour allows a direct attack on dominant approaches to disability" (340). Shain frames comedy as a means of disability activism as it prompts audiences to think critically about disability. In particular, Shain draws on comedy's attention to the abnormal to reverse the hierarchy between able bodies and bodies with disabilities; through his stand-up comedy, Shain asks his audience to identify with his experience as a person with a disabil-

ity and laugh at the “outsider” with a problematic attitude or understanding of disability, while simultaneously addressing beliefs or perspectives the audience potentially holds themselves (338). Thus, it is “...the response I receive to my impairment—not my impairment itself—that is the fodder for ridicule” (339). In this way, then, disability humor has the potential to function as disability activism. Although we can see it as an element of activism and critique in Gantos’s text, it is ultimately Joey and his disability, rather than those around him, who become the source of laughter.

Due to his constant violation of rules, Joey, the narrator and protagonist of *Joey Pigza Swallowed the Key*, might initially be read as transgressive through his resemblance to Cross’s deliberately transgressive or naughty character; however, Joey’s transgression actually stems from bodily humor. McGillis argues that children’s humor revolves largely around the body. He notes that, “Slapstick, caricature, parody, the grotesque, ridicule, and the improbable in human predicaments concern the body, and so too does nonsense” (258). In his overview of humor and the body in children’s literature, McGillis describes bodily humor with such phrases as “their behavior was larger than life,” “big bodies,” and “excess in the aid of humor” (259, 262, 263). Bodily humor, then, can also be read as transgressive, in that it highlights the bodies’ excess of social norms. Although McGillis is mostly referencing body mass, each of these phrases characterizes Joey’s body very well, though he is never described as physically large. Joey’s bigness and excess come in the form of his ADHD, which gives him excess energy which he cannot control and larger-than-life behavior that serves as a source of humor for the readers and often for other children within the text as well. Joey’s behavior is often the cause of laughter for his classmates. He begins his narration with such a moment: “One day, we were doing math drills in class and every time Mrs. Maxy asked a question, like ‘What’s nine times nine?’ I’d raise my hand because I’m really quick at math. But each time she called on me, even though I knew the answer, I’d just blurt out ‘Can I get back to you on that?’ Then I’d nearly fall out of my chair from laughing” (Gantos 3-4). Joey goes on to say that he eventually does this so many times in a row that his classmates are distracted and Mrs. Maxy sends him out into the hallway (4). Even after being sent into the hallway, due to his excessive energy, Joey goes on to bounce like a ball all over the hallway and then ties his belt and shoelaces together to unwind himself like a top and spin around (4). It is moments such as these, where Joey’s body is functioning in *big* ways, that provide the main source of humor throughout the book. The difference here, though, is that Joey’s behavior is not intentionally excessive, solely for the pur-

pose of making others laugh, but rather inherent in his body and his disability, and the reader is asked to laugh at how Joey's disabled body performs, rather than at others' reactions to it.

While being the main source of humor, Joey's body is also the main source of conflict in the book. Even in the first scene, we begin to see the issue with the way Joey's excessive body is treated, particularly by adults and authority figures. When Mrs. Maxy comes out into the hallway as Joey is spinning around like a top, she tells him, "Settle down for five, and you can rejoin the class" (5). Mrs. Maxy is essentially telling Joey that he has to get his body under control in order to come back into the classroom, that he is being punished for his own body chemistry. She does not acknowledge that Joey's body does not work in the same way as the rest of the children, and as such does not allow him to settle down, especially "...after lunch, when [his] meds had worn down" (3). Even while knowing that the alternative to not settling down is being sent to the principal's office, Joey is not able to follow such directions, as is made obvious by his response: "I nodded, and when she was gone I wrapped the belt and laces around my middle and gave it a good tug and began to spin and spin and slam into the lockers" (5). This episode encapsulates the entire first chapter of the book which works to frame Joey's inability to control himself because of a behavioral issue rather than a medical one, a framework which is carried out throughout much of the text. In the following chapters, Joey goes on to explain his ADHD, which he never names directly but rather refers to as being "wired," and the ways in which it causes him problems. He details incidents with his grandmother, his mother, and in his school that all ultimately come down to his inability to follow the rules, which are intended to exert normative control over his out-of-control body.

Despite his obvious inability to control his body in this initial scene and, as we learn later, Mrs. Maxy's awareness of his history, it takes several more incidents before Joey's situation is aptly dealt with. On his first day in Mrs. Maxy's class, after she has read his file, she "...give[s Joey] a fair chance to show just how good [he] could be," overtly indicating an understanding of his condition as one of bad behavior rather than a medical issue (18). When Joey demonstrates that he cannot control his energetic impulses, Mrs. Maxy sits him down and tells him the rules: "I had to stay in my seat, she said. No running, jumping, or kicking. Keep my hands on top of my desk. I wasn't allowed to look over my shoulder. No touching the person in front of me. No fidgeting and no drawing on myself. And I absolutely wasn't

allowed to say anything until I raised my hand and was called on” (20). While these rules are not out of the ordinary as far as classroom rules go, they are not rules that Joey’s body has the ability to follow. Jared David Berezin notes the seemingly immovable tension between ADHD and general classroom expectations embodied in James M. Christian’s study of the literature of ADHS: “...symptoms typically worsen in situations that require sustained attention or mental effort or that lack appeal or novelty” (qtd. in Berezin). Although Mrs. Maxy should be aware that his disability prevents Joey from adhering to the rules, she goes on to tell Joey that her rules “apply to *everyone* in the class” and that she makes no exceptions (Gantos 20, emphasis in original). In *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*, Rosemarie Garland Thomson defines disability not as a property inherent to the body itself but as a “...product of cultural rules about what bodies should be or do” (6). Joey’s body does not, and often cannot, do what cultural (and classroom) rules say it should, and as such falls within Thomson’s conception of disability. In an article on invisible disabilities, Ellen Samuels writes, “...the dominant culture’s insistence on visible signs to legitimate impairment,” and this insistence seems to be at work here (325). Although we can see Joey’s disability at work in his actions and inability to control himself, for all intents and purposes it is not considered a visible disability because he appears able-bodied. Thus, Joey does not automatically receive extra help or understanding as his lack of visible impairment perpetuates the cultural conception that he is “normal” and simply badly behaved. Mrs. Maxy expects Joey to be able to follow the rules as everyone else is expected to, although presumably exceptions would be made for other visibly more apparent disabilities.

Because Joey’s disability is not starkly visible, he is expected to adhere to the same rules as everyone else and when he cannot do so, he is punished just as he would be if his transgressions stemmed solely from bad behavior. The previous scene in which Joey is removed from the classroom is one of the examples of of Joey’s punishment for being incapable of following the rules. Many such incidents occur in the novel, for instance, after Joey gets sent to the nurse for sticking his finger in the pencil sharpener, he is identified as being potentially dangerous to himself and others, but Mrs. Maxy still does not recognize Joey’s need for assistance and accommodation. Instead, she tells him that if he isn’t able to adhere to the rules, “...[they’ll] have to send [him] down to the special-ed class for extra help” (Gantos 25). Each time Mrs. Maxy addresses Joey’s inability to follow rules, she implies a punishment, so that even getting the special attention he needs because of his disorder becomes a punishment for being different.

Joey's experience with alienation and punishment due to rule-breaking reflects a very real experience of children with disabilities, particularly ADHD. In her analysis of the Joey Pigza books, Marah Gubar states that, "[c]hildren's texts that feature disabled child protagonists often share two primary goals: to allow children with impairments to see themselves represented in literature, and to persuade other child readers to empathize with their peers," both goals which she identifies as present in the Joey Pigza series (219). Gubar's statement implies that it is important that the texts present accurate portrayals of the experiences of children with impairments. Joey's story does present an accurate portrayal of this experience, as is made clear by an article in which Berezin relates an anecdote from his youth where he was moved from his regular in-the-middle-of-the-class desk to a big grey desk at the side of the classroom because his "hyperactive-unable-to-focus-finger-tapping-pencil-chewing-mind-racing-thirteen-year-old-self" could not function like the rest of the class (N.pag.). Berezin goes on to confess that it was a "privilege" to be in the same space with his able-bodied classmates, "...and my teacher suspended that privilege, separating me from my fellow students" (N. pag.). He emphasizes the importance, in this action, of the regulation of disabled bodies incapable of performing according to the rules: "...the disabled body performs abnormal behavior. Accordingly, the enforced segregation, and in turn subjugation of the disabled body's performance of abnormality remains vital for the maintenance of the dominant class's definition of normal versus abnormal, powerful versus powerless, valuable versus non-valuable" (N. pag.). Berezin's description of his experience is uncannily similar to what Joey experiences in Mrs. Maxy's classroom. Gantos is creating a realistic protagonist with a disability, as his story closely reflects that of an actual person with the same disability, but their experiences differ in terms of the visibility provided by each situation. Berezin notes that he "...performed [his] disability—[his] deviation from the norm—in a removed, yet visible space" and doing so allowed him to demonstrate "...the consequences, namely segregation and loneliness, of not performing the 'normal' expectation" (N. pag.). Gubar writes that the invisibility imposed on students with disabilities "...suggests that there is something shameful about having a disability" (224). The obvious similarities between Joey's and Berezin's stories not only emphasize the genuineness of Joey's position as a disabled child protagonist, but also reinforce the reality of the ideology toward "accommodating" disabled bodies in the classroom that Gantos is critiquing.

Even when Joey gets help at school, the underlying ideological structure of bad behavior governs his interactions with the special education classroom as well. Eventually, Joey's mishaps end up getting him sent to the special education classroom to get "a little extra help" (Gantos 35). Mrs. Jarzab, the principal, escorts Joey to the special education room and explains the situation to him by comparing it to other instances in which students struggle with material. She tells him, "[s]tudents who have trouble with math get extra math help. Or if they have trouble reading we give them reading help....But you can't sit still very long and keep your mind on your work. So, we're going to give you some sitting help" (35). Mrs. Jarzab likens Joey's rule-breaking and subsequent expulsion to the special education room to a student struggling with a concept who needs tutoring. The issue here is not comprehension of a particular concept but capability. But even as she frames this move as giving Joey extra help, Mrs. Jarzab confirms Mrs. Maxy's position that it is, in fact, a punishment. Joey tells her, "Mrs. Maxy said I was going to be sent there if I didn't settle down," and Mrs. Jarzab tells him that the special education classroom will "...help [him] learn not to break [the rules]" (37). This indicates that even as he has been identified as needing attention and accommodation for his disability, the emphasis is on correcting Joey's behavior to adhere to the rules, attempting to fit Joey into the normative standard, rather than changing to rules to accommodate Joey's body. The focus of his time in the special education room, which is located in the basement—Joey calls it a dungeon—and contributes to the invisibility of the students with impairments, is to sit in "the Big Quiet Chair," that is highly reminiscent of a time-out chair, and practice his sitting-still skills (38). When Joey gets too rowdy in class, he gets sent to the basement classroom for "a focus session" until he can calm down and be allowed to rejoin his regular class (45). The special education program, then, is operating under the same flawed ideology that Joey's condition is a behavioral one that can be remedied by forcing him to follow the rules.

The faulty ideology that students with (invisible) disabilities should be able to adhere to the rules regulates the accommodations of the special education students at Joey's school but does not truly help Joey. Cross notes that "...'child' narrators in contemporary texts are homodiegetic—they are telling their own story—and so they are not narrating as all-knowing adults outside of the story, but are positioned as witty, 'child' characters addressing other youngsters" (56). The homodiegetic narration is particularly important here because it makes it possible for Joey to give us a glimpse into his internal consciousness. It is his narration that shows us that Joey is not intentionally mis-

behaving; he has good intentions and wants to stay out of trouble, but his body impedes that process. Early in the narrative, Joey says, “I am how I am because Grandma was born wired, and my dad, Carter Pigza, was born wired, and I followed right behind them” (Gantos 8-9). From the beginning, we are told that Joey’s excess energy is a physical product of genetics, a position which he reaffirms throughout the story. At several points, Joey expresses the sensations of his disability. His medicine, which works in the morning, tends to wear off after lunch, leaving him feeling “...as if [he] was sitting on a giant spring and it was all [he] could do to keep it from launching [him] head first up into the ceiling” (19). Several times Joey describes the difficulty he has in listening and paying attention; in one instance, he says, “I had nothing against questions. I just didn’t like listening to them, because some questions take forever to make sense” (34). Through these experiences, we see that Joey does not disregard the rules; he simply can’t focus on listening to them even though he *wants* to follow them. He makes attempts to self-regulate his body by “[hanging] onto his desktop...with all [his] might...as if some giant was holding [him]” or “[closing his] eyes and [sitting] on [his] hands because sometimes that helps settle [him] down like [he’s] in [his] own straightjacket” (41, 49). But Joey’s self-regulation of his body is not enough. He only goes to the special education room three times before the final incident that gets him sent to the special education center, and each of these three instances finds Joey relegated to the Big Quiet Chair to settle down. In fact, the main strategy is to let Joey tire himself out so that he falls asleep. While this approach does get Joey’s hyperactivity under control, it does not allow him to participate in the learning atmosphere of the classroom. Rather than truly trying to address Joey’s issues, the special education classroom, placed in an invisible space devoted solely to children with disabilities, resorts to the same ineffective tactics as his regular classroom.

It is because of the prevailing ideology that Joey’s invisible disability is a behavioral issue that he becomes truly dangerous to other students, and it is his dangerousness that gets him sent to the special education center. The idea that Joey should be able to control his body and follow the same rules as everyone else, rather than being given the special attention and accommodation he needs, leads to a series of lapses in supervision, which ultimately lead to the final incident. After being left with a substitute teacher who was not aware of his situation, Joey sneaks out to an assembly for the gifted and talented students and decides that he is going to do something great for the world by making a bunch of bumper stickers (67). As he is working,

Mrs. Maxy leaves Joey unsupervised, and when the safety scissors won't cut his poster board, he goes to get the teacher scissors. He's running back to finish his project quickly when he trips on the ear of a bunny slipper and accidentally cuts off the tip of another student's nose as he falls. Although this incident is an obvious accident, there is still more at work than appears on the surface. When Joey's class goes to the Amish farm on a field trip, Joey gets sent to the bus to wait while the rest of the students are carving pumpkins (a task too dangerous for Joey to be allowed to participate in). Despite knowing Joey's character thoroughly, Mrs. Maxy sends him to the bus alone, but instead of going to the bus Joey goes to find the shoefly pie the students got to eat that he was denied. The sugar buzz from eating an entire pie sees Joey climbing to the roof of the barn and jumping into a haystack and spraining his ankle. It is because of this lack of supervision that Joey ends up wearing the bunny slipper that he trips on. Then, when Mrs. Maxy has to go to a conference, she leaves no indication for the substitute teacher to introduce her to Joey's special needs, which allows him to slip away to the assembly for the gifted and talented students. Finally, Mrs. Maxy leaves Joey alone with his project so that he has access to the sharp scissors and the freedom to run with them in his hands, which is when the accident occurs. It is quite likely that if Joey had been supervised in any of these situations Maria would still have the tip of her nose. While looking back at this incident, we may see a grotesque sort of humor in it—we were always told not to run with scissors and for good reason—but we must also acknowledge the serious consequences of the inability or unwillingness of these educators to provide Joey with the attention he needs.

Gantos positions the special education center as taking the right approach to dealing with Joey's disability. From the moment Joey arrives, the difference between Joey's regular and special education classrooms at his school and the special education center is obvious. Special Ed, Joey's caseworker, starts off by telling Joey that the center is "...definitely *not* a place where you go because no one else wants you or likes you anymore. It's not a place for punishment" (Gantos 96, emphasis in original). Immediately, Joey is given someone whose job it is to pay special attention to him and his needs, and the center is positioned explicitly as *not* a punishment. Special Ed goes on to tell Joey that his being at the center is not about him "being in trouble" but about "getting [him] better" (99). Joey's entire first day there is spent talking to Special Ed about his home and school life, with Ed trying to understand and help him as an individual rather than just trying to make him control himself. Through the center, Joey gets the attention he needs; they find the correct medicine and nutrition plan, along with

working one-on-one to help Joey learn to make good decisions. While the workers at the special education center do not entirely disregard the behavioral aspects of Joey's situation, they also acknowledge that the situation is a combination of both medical and behavioral factors, which both need to be addressed. The success Joey has with this two-pronged approach to his disability, which is free from the dominant ideology perpetuated by the educators at his school, signals that the correct approach to take is the perspective that does not view Joey's disability as a behavioral issue that requires punishment rather than assistance and accommodation.

No one in the narrative ever comes out and says, directly, that the school's approach to special education is wrong. In an article written for *School Library Journal*, Jack Gantos addresses the topic of ADHD and how it should be approached in classroom settings. He writes, "Teachers and librarians need to be trained and equipped to spot their behavior and direct their enormous energy toward obtainable tasks. School systems need to address the issues of ADHD kids and prepare to meet their needs" (64). It is obvious that these are the thoughts that Gantos is addressing through *Joey Pigza Swallowed the Key*, as we see almost all of these issues come up.

Although Gantos has constructed his book to critique the perpetuation of certain ideologies about visible disabilities and special education, the text itself is also imbued with and perpetuates problematic ideologies of normality. Parsons notes that ideological criticism is generally not concerned with the beliefs or intentions of the author because "...the ideological landscape of a fictional story may unconsciously reproduce the author's values and assumptions without the author's direct awareness of her or his own biases" so that what the author believes or intends the story to say or teach "...may not give access to ideological positions in the text, many of which exist as covert curricula beneath the overt story" (115). The actual ideologies at work in a text, then, are often not explicit even to the author himself. McCallum and Stephens, too, address the invisibility of ideology: "Ideologies can thus function *most powerfully* in books which reproduce beliefs and assumptions of which authors and readers are largely unaware. Such texts render ideology *invisible* and hence invest implicit ideological positions with legitimacy by naturalizing them" (360, emphasis mine). These naturalized, hidden ideologies are, then, more dangerous than the ideologies a text may be explicitly critiquing because the reader is positioned to accept that ideological position with-

out question. For *Joey Pigza Swallowed the Key*, the naturalized, invisible ideology is that of normality.

Despite Gantos' efforts to construct a text that is appropriately sensitive to and representative of the experience of a child with disabilities and that critiques dominant ideologies surrounding the experiences of those children in school systems, Gantos ultimately maintains culturally dominant ideologies of normality. Douglas C. Baynton outlines the development of the concept of "normal" and its relation to people with disabilities. Prior to the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the prevailing metaphor was of the natural versus the monstrous, but the concept of the natural "...was to a great extent displaced or subsumed by the concept of normality. Since then, normality has been deployed in all aspects of modern life as a means of measuring, categorizing, and managing populations" (18). He goes on to say that both the natural and the normal are "...ways of establishing the universal, unquestionable good and right...Both are constituted in large part by being set in opposition to culturally variable notions of disability—just as the natural was meaningful in relation to the monstrous and the deformed, so are the cultural meanings of the normal produced in tandem with disability" (18-19). Further, Lennard J. Davis writes that, "[t]o understand the disabled body, one must return to the concept of the norm, the normal body" (3). He shifts the focus from the construction of disability to the construction of normality, since "the 'problem' is not the person with disabilities; the problem is the way that normalcy is constructed to create the 'problem' of the disabled person" (3). Normality, then, is one of the most invisible and pervasive ideologies in our culture, and also one of the most detrimental to those with disabilities.

The ideological construct of normality shows up most predominantly in Joey's insistence on his own normality and his inability to be a 'hero' until he gets 'better.' When Joey is on his dud medication that only works until lunch time, he describes the difference between his before and after lunch situations in terms of normality. Before lunch he feels "like any old kid" and "like a normal kid" whereas after lunch his "old self start[s] to sneak up on [him]" indicating that his unmedicated state is abnormal (Gantos 19, 28). Further, at one point Joey gets worked up and scours his house looking for his medicine in order to take a bunch of pills and "return [himself] to normal," indicating that this internalized ideology endangers his physical health as well as his emotional and social well-being (85). When comparing himself to the other students in the special education classroom, Joey recognizes that "it wasn't polite to stare at crippled kids" but it was

okay for them to look at him because he was “normal” (37). It is important, here, to note the two meanings of normal to understand Joey’s internalization and use of the cultural construct of normality. In one respect, normal refers to the typical state of something. Normal can also refer to conforming to a standard. Each of these definitions is at work in Joey’s understanding of normality. On the one hand, Joey’s normal state is hyperactive and his body generally out of control, yet he claims to want to use his medicine to get himself back to normal. Normal here, then, refers to Joey’s ability to conform to the standard practices of other bodies that do not have the same chemical makeup as Joey.

Joey has internalized the ideology of normality as “good and right” and abnormality (read: disability) as bad and wrong; therefore, he rejects the idea of being identified as an abnormal (read: disable) person. The connection between normal and good is further emphasized by the number of times Joey and others equate his condition to badness and behavioral issues. Joey repeatedly refers to the effects of his time without proper medication as “bad behavior” and the first time he gets sent to the special education classroom for not being able to perform normatively, he equates himself to a “...bad dog that had pooped all over the carpet” (8, 41, 37). He even refers to his medicine as “...a little white round superhero pill on its way to beat up all the bad stuff in [him]” (28). For Joey, the parts of his body that do not and cannot adhere to the social standards of normal are villains in need of punishment. In addition to equating his disability with badness, Joey rejects the categorization of badness himself, claiming that he’s “not a bad kid” and that he’s “a good kid” that “just got dud meds,” further accepting the ideology that his condition is a moral defect (85, 76). Even the back cover blurb says, “Joey knows he’s really a *good* kid, but no matter how hard he tried to do the right thing, something always seems to go wrong. Will he ever get anything right?” (Gantos back cover). It implies that even the presentation of Joey outside his own perspective emphasizes the association between good behavior and normality, thus, leading the reader to feel the same. While Joey’s normal state, in fact, counteracts the cultural concept of normality, he insists upon his ability to conform to ‘normal’ behaviors.

If Joey’s correlation between his disability and badness were also part of the critique Gantos is making in regard to the treatment of ADHD, we could read Joey’s self-criticism as a comment on the damaging effects of the dominant ideologies surrounding invisible disabilities, but as it occurs at the end of the book and is never redressed, it

just affirms this correlation. After Joey has a brain SPECT test, the doctor tells him that his “...problems are not neurologically severe,” which indicates that Joey’s disability is not as severe as it could be and he is closer to “normal” than he expected to be (Gantos 139). After this revelation, as Joey notes, “everything was different” (141). When Joey lifts up his shirt and his stomach is covered in Band-Aids, Special Ed finds the situation humorous (as opposed to the first time it happened and Ed was angry) because now “[i]nstead of being sick, I was just being a kid. Now that I was getting better, people could like me more” (140-41). While it is possible that the statement that people liked him more when he was getting better is merely Joey’s perspective, it is a fact that the first time Special Ed finds Joey covered in Band-Aids, before they knew his full diagnosis, he is upset, whereas now they can laugh about Joey’s behavior because, as the doctor informs them, “[i]t’s normal” (140). Further, Brenna notes the importance of books with disabled child protagonists who are heroes and leaders in their own right, but Joey does not actually fit this bill. If Joey were to be a hero or leader *in his own right* the story would end with Joey achieving that in his disabled state. Instead, Joey is only a hero when he gets “better.” We see this in his interaction with the mother of Harold, another student in the special education classroom. When Joey returns to school, which he is only able to do once he can perform normally and sit still, Harold’s mother tells him, “You give me hope, Joey....If you can do it, then maybe Harold can too, someday” (153). Joey finds this amazing because he “...never thought someone would ever point to [him] and say [he] gave them hope that someday their kid would be like [him]” (153). Joey’s hero status only comes once he has achieved normalcy and his body can behave as everyone else’s does. Further, once Joey has overcome his disability, his hijinks end and he is no longer the source of humor; thus, the bodily humor is not functioning as the kind of disability activism Shain outlines.

Perhaps this ending is inevitable because, as Russell notes, transgressive comedy demands a return to order, and social order is ultimately also subject to the ideology of normality. We see the same cycle in the next book in the series, *Joey Pigza Loses Control* (2000), when Joey goes to visit his father; the main conflict and source of humor in this story is when Joey’s father flushes his medicine patches down the toilet, veritably unleashing Joey’s disability and causing him no end of grief over the summer. Resolution only comes when Joey’s mom comes to pick him up and he once again has access to his medicine patch. Each of these books hinges on comedic moments of Joey’s disabled body transgressing social norms but the moments of humor only occur when Joey is unmedicated, positioning Joey’s body, rather

than the larger cultural rules about how bodies should perform, as the problem. While the medication of ADHD is not inherently bad, the way Joey being medicated is framed in these texts, as a means of achieving a normal status, reveals an underlying ideology about disability that undermines the critique Gantos is making. It seems, then, that despite the usefulness of comedy in learning and the potential for its use as disability activism, Russell's assertion that comedy sees limitations as challenges to be overcome is problematic when that comedy deals with disability because disabilities *are* essentially limitations, but using disability as the source of comedy posits it as something that needs to be overcome and ultimately reinforces normality. The trajectory of Joey's next adventure reinforces the argument that even though Gantos is precise about critiquing ideologies about disability in his first Joey Pigza book, the truly powerful ideology remains the normal being the ideal. Russell's assertion that comedy rejects the acceptance of a "less than perfect world" indicates that Joey's out-of-control body is less than perfect, so that even as the comedic elements of the text are transgressive, they do not function as disability activism (117). Beverly Brenna praises *Joey Pigza Swallowed the Key* and Jack Gantos for the portrayal of a child protagonist with a disability. Joey is a funny, engaging, and realistic character who triumphs at the end of his story. Through Joey's story, Gantos provides a pointed and valid critique of the ideologies that surround children with disabilities in classrooms. But while this explicit critique of ideology is important, it is perhaps more important to take a hard look at the "unconscious system of beliefs" perpetuated by our society (Parsons 113). These invisible ideologies are the most dangerous since they are readily absorbed by readers without awareness and cannot be dealt with transgressive comedy.



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