Harry Potter and the Stigma of Disability: Squibs as Outsiders to the Magical Universe

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ABSTRACT
In the young adult book series Harry Potter, there exists a class of citizens known as Squibs. By all accounts they can be considered a disabled group: they have a ‘disease’ (no magical abilities) that detracts from their overall quality of life and prevents them from operating at a normal level within society. This paper will prove that Squibs are restricted within the fictional world by the institutions of school and government. It will do so by studying Argus Filch and Arabella Figg, two of the most visible Squibs in the series. In this case, the social model of disability and Michel Foucault’s theories about government restrictions on disability will support the idea that Filch and Figg could succeed within the Harry Potter universe if the barriers put in place against the disabled Squibs were removed. In addition, the paper expresses the hope that the fans of Harry Potter will be able to rectify the discriminatory mistakes that the author, J.K. Rowling, has created against Squibs.

Although children’s books and disability studies are two subjects that do not often overlap, the intersection of these two is arguably more important than any other genre, since children’s books often serve as the first pieces of meaningful media that reach young audiences and shape their worldview for the rest of their lives. Because of this, the portrayal of disabled people within fiction is vital, especially for a work as canonical as the Harry Potter series.

Harry Potter is a book series by J.K. Rowling about a young boy who learns that he is a wizard. The novels follow his journey through his new magical school, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. This seemingly innocent storyline is juxtaposed with a longstanding battle between Harry and an evil wizard named Lord Voldemort. While Voldemort is eventually defeated, the stigmatization of Squibs in the series is not. In the Harry Potter (HP) universe, Squibs are people who are born to at least one magical parent but possess no magical powers. Because of this, they are often seen as outcasts to the wizarding world. The two most notable Squibs in the HP series are Argus Filch, the caretaker of Hogwarts, and Arabella Figg, Harry’s neighbor. This paper will explore the treatment of each character, as well as the ways in which they are marginalized by the magical universe. Throughout the Harry Potter book series, the prominent Squibs, Argus Filch and Arabella Figg, are restricted in school and government through the lens of the social model of disability and Michel Foucault’s theories on disability in government. The social model of disability shows that Filch could be included in certain non-mandatory necessary skills in Hogwarts if he had the chance, while Mrs. Figg could participate further in the magical community without the gatekeeping perpetuated by the wizarding government.

From the moment these two characters are introduced, the narrative ensures that the reader is left with a negative impression of them. Before acknowledging the characters’ personalities or purposes, Rowling (1998) first describes their appearances. Filch is shown with “bulging, lamplike eyes,” a “bulbous nose,” and jowls that are aquiver every time he is seen within the books. Similarly, Figg is described as a “mad old lady...[whose] whole house smelled of cabbage” (Rowling, 1997) and who is always dressed in some form of tartan clothing. Though it is unclear whether Rowling intended for the two Squibs to be portrayed as less attractive than other characters, it is a theme she keeps up throughout the novels. Neville, a friend of Harry’s, is first described as fat and rather clumsy, referring to Neville’s supposed closeness to Squib-dom with very few magical powers in the earlier books. As the series progresses, though, he grows into his wizarding skills and accordingly becomes more attractive. Merope Gaunt, Lord Voldemort’s mother and suspected Squib, is described in a flashback, saying “her hair was lank and dull and she had a plain, pale, rather heavy face. Her eyes, like her brother’s, stared in opposite directions” (Rowling, 2005). In fact, Rowling seems to mark all undesirable characters
with ugliness, giving unpleasant appearances to various evil characters as well. This would indicate that Rowling, consciously or not, considers Squibs to be as harmful to society as characters like Wormtail or Professor Snape (both followers of the evil Lord Voldemort).

In addition to their looks, Squibs are given disagreeable personalities. Rowling constantly emphasizes Filch's sour manner. He is called detestable, bad-tempered, and a failed wizard. Rowling also regularly informs the reader that Filch was hated by all of the students at Hogwarts. But it is not just the students who dislike Filch. Indeed, even teachers engage in the antagonism, as “Harry and Ron (Harry's best friend) were delighted to hear Hagrid call Filch ‘that old git’” (Rowling, 1998) in Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone. Likewise, Figg’s original description includes the fact that she is boring and generally an unpleasant person to be around. However, unlike Filch, Figg's character is ostensibly restored when she is revealed to be a member of the Order of the Phoenix, an underground network of witches and wizards who opposed and actively fought against the rise and rule of Lord Voldemort. This is seemingly where the Squibs diverge from each other. Filch is only ever seen as an unlikable caretaker, a character with no positive qualities or even a reasonable amount of depth. Despite his abundant abilities as a caretaker, he is portrayed as useless and annoying. Figg, on the other hand, proves herself to be indispensable when she is confirmed as a member of the Order of the Phoenix, and thus is immediately given positive characteristics. This is often seen in disability studies, where a disabled person can only be justified in their existence when they make themselves useful to able-bodied individuals. Because Figg is seen as a hero, she is allowed to have redeeming qualities; however, since Filch is seen as a nuisance, he is allotted none.

It is again unclear whether or not Rowling did this intentionally. Even if Rowling's stigmatization of disabled characters was not deliberate, her target demographic is children. The likelihood of a child understanding the complexities of Squib emotions is limited, meaning that almost all of them read on with a hatred of Filch, and, to a certain extent, Mrs. Figg. Such depictions may show children that discriminating against disabled people in real life is acceptable, as it is in the novels. In writing Harry Potter, Rowling chose to perpetuate an already strong stigmatization of a minority disabled group amongst young readers by characterizing Squibs as horrible until proven brave. There appears to be a brief attempt to counteract this when Ron mentions that, if Filch truly is a Squib, “it would explain a lot. Like why he hates students so much...He's bitter” (Rowling, 1998). However, while Ron says this, he laughs and almost suggests that Filch deserves this abuse on account of his nastiness. Such behavior from Ron neutralizes any good that may have come from the dialogue.

In actuality, Ron had an insightful moment with this...
answer. One of the main reasons for Filch's crotchety disposition comes from the fact that he is a non-wizard living amongst wizards, forced to watch them perform magic while knowing that he can never do the same. He also suffers from an abundance of prejudice and discrimination from the outside wizarding world, simply because he is a Squib. Ron's Auntie Muriel explains the stigma best, telling the group that “Squibs were usually shipped off to Muggle (non-magical human) schools and encouraged to integrate into the Muggle community... much kinder than trying to find them a place in the Wizarding world, where they must always be second class” (Rowling, 2007). This behavior is so normalized within the HP universe that Filch has learned to expect aggression based on his blood status. In Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets, Filch believes that Harry has put Filch's cat, Mrs. Norris, into an unresponsive and statue-like state because he discovered that Filch is a Squib. Between sobs, Filch screams that “[Harry] did it...he knows I'm a- I'm a-...He knows I'm a Squib!” (Rowling, 1998). In almost all of the HP novels, students play tricks on Filch and try to make the castle as messy as possible so that his job becomes harder. Yet Filch does not talk about these things as if they are out of the ordinary, because they are not. He -- and the entire Squib community -- are accustomed to being looked down upon or seen as inhuman, being constantly prepared for these discriminatory attacks as a result of the intense stigmatization against them within the magical universe.

It is perhaps for this reason that Filch and Figg’s lives are so divergent. Filch relishes in the arrival of Professor Umbridge in Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix, despite the fact that she is an evil witch who makes the lives of the students unbearable. He feels that way towards her because it is the first time he has ever been included in anything, or had his ideas taken seriously. For years, students and teachers alike in Hogwarts took advantage of him, acted condescending towards him, and refused to listen to anything he said about the improvement of the school. When Professor Umbridge arrives, she sees that he has been pushed aside for a long time and seizes the opportunity to use him for her gain. When Filch suggests physical violence as punishment against students, Professor Umbridge welcomes the idea. This is the first time Filch has ever been valued by someone and he basks in the glory of it, going out of his way to aid Professor Umbridge. In contrast, Figg has been a part of the Order of the Phoenix for several decades. She has always been welcomed into an accepting group as a valuable member, and therefore does not feel as excluded from the magical universe as many other Squibs do. Since she is not resentful towards wizards for treating her poorly, she does not retain many of the mean personality traits that Filch possesses. The variance in outcomes of these two case studies shows the possibilities for what Squibs could be, if they were treated properly.

Aside from the discrimination aspect, there is no reason for Squibs to be forced out of the wizarding world because of their lack of magical ability. It is the structure and organization of the HP world, not the Squibs’ dearth of magic, that causes this exclusion to happen. Such removal can be explained by the social model of disability, which is “the view that social practices and attitudes render people disabled by making it difficult or impossible for those with physical or mental impairments to participate fully in social and economic life” (Heery & Noon, 2017). Essentially, this says that it is not the physical body that maintains disability, but rather the society that creates barriers and refuses accommodations, leading to “the implication...that social practices...should be adjusted to allow the full inclusion of disabled people in social and economic activities” (Heery & Noon, 2017).

In regard to the HP novels, most of the theory comes to fruition inside of Hogwarts. Squibs are forbidden from attending the school on the grounds that, since they have no magical abilities, they could not survive at the school of magic. While this may seem logical, in reality this rule does not stand up to inspection. Hogwarts offers seven core classes, including Transfiguration, Charms, Potions, and Astronomy, which operate much like the core classes of English, math, science, and history in the Muggle world, as they all must be taken every year. In addition to these core classes, as a student gets older they are allowed to take more advanced elective courses, including Arithmancy, Divination, and Muggle Studies. Surprisingly, only three out of the twelve total classes require the use of a wand at all times. Since Squibs cannot perform wandwork, it would be impossible for them to pass Transfiguration, Charms, and Defense Against the Dark Arts. However, the rest of the courses either never call for a wand, or only do so occasionally, with some of the professors agreeing their classes do not require wands. On the first day of class, Potions Master Professor Snape articulates that, since “there is little foolish wand-waving here, many of you will hardly believe this is magic” (Rowling, 1997). Additionally, the teacher of Care of Magical Creatures, Rubeus Hagrid, has only a rudimentary understanding of magic, leading him to rarely requiring it for his classes.

The result of all of this is that Squibs would be perfectly capable of participating in these courses. In fact, Neville excelled in Herbology, even though he could barely perform wand magic at the beginning of the series. Likewise, Merope brewed an extremely powerful love potion without the aid of her abysmal wand skills. While there have been no instances of actual Squibs partaking in these courses, there is ample evidence to suggest that, with some training, they would have no problem completing the tasks laid out for them. However, the social model of disability prevents this from happening. Throughout the HP novels, Hogwarts never considers the idea of allowing Squibs to engage in the non-wand necessary courses, thus perpetuating their impairment.
Without the ban on Squib participation, the disability that comes from being a Squib would effectively disappear. The best example of this is Filch. He has already proven his ability to live within a magical space. As Harry himself notes, “Filch knew the secret passageways of the school better than anyone...and could pop up as suddenly as any of the ghosts” (Rowling, 1997). He has also shown that he has a strong work ethic and a desire to do the best that he can. Throughout the series, Filch is always doing his job by catching students out of bed after curfew, stopping them from misbehaving in the halls, and keeping the castle spotless, all without the aid of magic. As such, he would be an ideal candidate for a program that catered to Squibs, allowing them to participate in what they could, and offering assistance for the few things that they could not do. This would remove what the social model of disability calls physical barriers, or objects that prevent a disabled individual from accomplishing something. In the Muggle world, an example of this could be a building that only has stairs without a ramp or entrances to rooms that do not have Braille translations. At Hogwarts, those physical barriers would include the barring of Squibs from magical education and classes.

In addition to physical barriers, the social model of disability “emphasize[s] that the problems faced by the disabled arise as much in discrimination as they do in particular physical or mental conditions” (Heery & Noon, 2017). Accordingly, the barriers that Squibs face within the wizarding world come as much from attitudes as they do from literal restraints in Hogwart. As one might recall, Squibs are discriminated against by the entire wizarding world. Many times they are described as second class citizens or other derogatory names. They are shamed to the point of forced integration into the Muggle world. People who believe in and feed into these stereotypes about Squibs are actively creating invisible barriers to the magical world against them. These attitudes can also reflect on the physical barriers to Hogwart in assuming that, since Squibs cannot carry a wand or perform magic, they also cannot succeed in non-wand necessary courses. These attitudes reinforce the physical ban against Squib enrollment by ensuring that no one in the Hogwart administration will change their minds about allowing Squibs to attempt classes. If everyone believes that they are incapable of such success, these people will keep the barriers of the social model of disability in place forever. It is a combination of these factors that keeps Squibs oppressed by the institution of school, as seen through the lens of the social model of disability.

While Filch is most directly applicable to the social model of disability, Figg’s situation speaks more to the theories of Michel Foucault regarding government and disability. The introduction of the book *Foucault and the Government of Disability* by Shelley Tremain offers an oversight of the main works of Foucault in this subject. She discusses Foucault’s idea that “power functions best when it is exercised through productive constraints, that is, when it enables subjects to act in order to constrain them” (Tremain, 2015). Foucault theorizes that this is done most effectively when guiding the possibilities of actions and determining the outcomes of these actions. In this sense, power is not a simple repressive force, but rather a limit on the number and types of choices in conduct that a person can make. While this may sometimes present itself in the form of outright bans, most often it is “a way of acting upon an acting subject or acting subjects by virtue of their acting or being capable of action” (Tremain, 2015). Essentially, Foucault is saying that, if a source of power wants to remain in power, it is in their best interest to dictate the choices of their subjects without explicitly telling them what to do. The source of power should also normalize this process so that the subjects are unaware that they are being manipulated into a set of restricted choices.

This is seen most explicitly through Figg’s interactions with the Ministry of Magic, which is the wizarding government for the United Kingdom. Figg deals with the Ministry of Magic more frequently than any other Squib in the series. Hence, Figg is constrained and repressed by the magical government more than any other Squib. This is demonstrated most thoroughly in *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*. In this novel, Harry and his Muggle cousin Dudley are attacked in their hometown by dementors, or dark creatures who consume happiness and create an atmosphere of darkness and despair. Harry produces the spell that drives them away, only to find Figg standing at the end of the road watching him. It is quickly revealed that she is a member of the Order of the Phoenix who has been sent to watch over Harry, much to the surprise of the protagonist himself. The problem with this is that Harry, as an underage wizard, is not allowed to use magic outside of school. Since it is the middle of the summer, Harry gets a letter from the Ministry of Magic informing him that he will need to go to a disciplinary hearing in a few weeks to decide what will happen to him.

At the disciplinary hearing, Figg arrives to give testimony on Harry’s behalf. Immediately, there is an indicator that the Ministry of Magic is not simply giving Squibs productive constraints, but rather attempting to erase them entirely. When Figg tells the Wizengamot, or the wizarding high court of Britain, that she is from Little Whinging, they say that it is impossible because no witch or wizard currently lives there. Figg quickly replies by saying, “I’m a Squib...So you wouldn’t have me registered, would you?” (Rowling, 2003). The implication here is that the government is not tracking Squibs at all, possibly because they do not consider them to be real wizards. This is evident throughout her testimony and beyond. The Wizengamot leader, Minister of Magic Cornelius Fudge, attempts to embarrass her by pressing her about her parentage, then questions the rest of the justices about whether or not Squibs could even see dementors.
instead of plainly asking Figg. The trial is almost stopped because of the fact that she is a Squib; when it is allowed to continue, it is with much skepticism from the crowd of witches and wizards on the panel. At one point during Figg's story, Harry glances up to see “a dumpy wizard with a large black mustache in the second row leaned close to his neighbor, a frizzy-haired witch, and whispered something in her ear. She smirked and nodded” (Rowling, 2003). A few lines down, Harry watches as “Fudge snorted derisively” (Rowling, 2003) in response to Figg’s descriptions of the dementors. In all fairness, Harry and the reader could agree that it does not sound as though Figg truly can see dementors. This point is repeated after she leaves the courtroom, at which point Minister Fudge loftily notes that she was “not a very convincing witness” (Rowling, 2003). Be that as it may, it is not right for the government to mock her. In this case, the government is acting in a derogatory manner towards a disabled witness, which in turn causes her to have more nervous actions. Though they do not completely repress her by barring her from testifying, the Ministry of Magic limits Figg’s choices by performing doubt and discrimination upon her action of telling a story. Also, the fact that she does not seem shocked by the Wizenmagot’s behavior towards her speaks volumes about the true nature of the government. Not only are they working to restrict her ability to testify, but they have normalized this and their other discriminatory attitudes to a point where she is accustomed to it. In this sense, Foucault was correct: those in power can maintain their power by limiting outcomes and normalizing the process.

In addition to her treatment at Harry’s trial, Figg is restricted in other ways by the Ministry of Magic. The government has forbidden Squibs from buying, selling, breeding, or otherwise dealing in magical creatures. However, Squibs have a natural affinity for Kneazles, which are a sort of magical cat that has a deeper connection with humans than a housecat. The lawmakers are aware of this, yet believe it to somehow be dangerous for Squibs to possess them. This is not a control of choices, but instead an entire extinction of outcomes. Despite this, Figg is a known breeder of Kneazles. Rather than becoming a danger to society, Figg and her cats instead live in relative peace. Some of her Kneazles even played a part in alerting Figg that Harry was in danger during the dementor attack, as she tells Harry that her cat Mr. Tibbles was stationed under a car to keep an eye on him. There is no apparent reason for this Kneazle prohibition, so one can assume that the government does it simply as an exercise in control and power over the Squibs.

Additionally, the Ministry of Magic frowns upon the creation of the Order of the Phoenix, yet the Order of the Phoenix willingly allows Figg into its ranks and is benefitted by her presence. The Order of the Phoenix is not technically a governmental organization, but they act like one in many ways. They have a standing army, departments that perform different tasks, and a leadership hierarchy. It seems strange then that they would keep a Squib, while the true government restricts the group in as many ways as possible. Going back to Foucault’s theory however, there might be an alternate explanation. Productive constraints are not as widely utilized in the Ministry of Magic, but actually take precedence in the Order of the Phoenix. While Figg is allowed to join the Order of the Phoenix, she is limited to being Harry’s guardian from afar. She is not invited to any other events or given other duties. She is granted admittance to the wizarding world, which is more than the Ministry of Magic could permit her, but Figg is still restricted by productive constraints in power to essentially one outcome.

The overall goal of this paper was to reveal the mistreatment of Squibs in the HP universe. In doing so, it also showed what was possible for the future of this group. Squibs are currently forbidden from attending Hogwarts because they are unable to do magic. However, the social model of disability says that this is not a result of an issue within the Squib, but rather with the society. Hogwarts itself is disabling the Squibs by refusing to allow them to take courses that are perfectly within their capabilities, and it will continue to do so until the attitudinal barriers held against Squibs are removed. When this happens, the Squibs will have more opportunities for work and expansion within the wizarding world, instead of being forced into passing as Muggles. Likewise, the Ministry of Magic is exercising its power over Squibs by banning them from certain skills, like breeding Kneazles, and blatantly discriminating against them. In a similar situation, the Order of the Phoenix creates productive constraints to keep Squibs within a confined area of aid to the organization. Both powers protect their worlds against these supposed second class citizens, and it shows. If this manner of behavior was not condoned, however, both governments might come to realize the value of the Squib community as individuals with a unique perspective and skill set.

Although it may be too late for Rowling to rectify the harsh and discriminatory treatment of Squibs within the Harry Potter series now, it is not too late for the Potterheads, or fans of Harry Potter, to change these characters’ fates. After the release of the series, the fandom took ownership of the books, forming clubs, creating art, and -- most importantly -- fanfiction, which are fictional stories written by fans of a work using already established characters. It is through fanfiction that the series is recreated and reworked, over and over again. And it is through fanfiction that Potterheads can transform the stigma of disability surrounding the Squibs into a new canon that tells of their bravery and usefulness. Beyond the discrimination and bitterness of Rowling's world stands two characters deserving of a new life without abuse or condescension, and nuanced depictions of them may provide the forgiveness necessary for such honor.
REFERENCES


About the Author

Megan Rhodes is a sophomore from Nazareth, Pennsylvania with a double major in English and Political Science. Her areas of interest include children's and young adult literature, and gender, sexuality, and disability studies. Her previous research includes the influence of social media on the kpop industry, the development of Pennsylvania Dutch culture, and public opinion on the LGBTQ+ community.

Mentor Details

This paper was written with the mentorship of Professor Robert McRuer.

Robert McRuer is a professor of English at The George Washington University. He has published multiple books on the subject of disability. Additionally, he is considered one of the pioneers of queer disability studies, particularly for his development of crip theory.