

Dear Dr. Bowker and CUROP Admissions Committee,

I am a second-year student pursuing a degree in English, a concentration in creative writing, and a minor in gender studies. As a writer and a reader, I strongly believe in the power of storytelling. As an intersectional feminist, I also believe that stories can and should depict good and diverse forms of representation. Works of speculative fiction are particularly potent for activism via storytelling. Genres like fantasy require the reader to think beyond the confines of their biases and subjective worldview. The unfamiliarity of fantasy thus allows readers to explore social issues and foreign experiences in a way that stories firmly rooted in reality cannot.

Fantasy can introduce readers to a perspective they may not otherwise consider. For a reader who does not know a blind person or someone with PTSD, the only exposure they get to such experiences might be accidental. Perhaps they will look to the common fantasy narrative that blind people have extrasensory perceptions and connect this to real world stereotypes about superhuman hearing. Maybe they will absorb the message that strength means suffering through traumatic experiences alone. These narratives influence opinions about disability, but also beg the question: why are certain bodies deemed worthier of happy endings or heroism than others?

These are issues I wish to explore in-depth through CUROP. If accepted, I will analyze disability stereotypes in several popular fantasy novels. The manifestations of disability studied will include sensory and physical disabilities, mental health issues, and learning disorders. I will examine the pervasiveness of disability erasure via villainization, magical cure and compensation narratives, and other stereotypes. Finally, I will analyze thoughtful disability representations and argue that these result from authors actively integrating intersectional frameworks into their stories. This work will be grounded in disability studies, queer theory, and gender studies.

Although it is still early in my education, I am working towards earning my Ph.D and a career in academia (alongside fiction writing). CUROP will provide me not only with a great opportunity to learn more about an area I'm passionate about with guidance and resources, but also a chance to strengthen skills I will need for a future in academia. I will be able to expand my research skills, develop a professional relationship with my faculty supervisor, and unify my different research interests. I would love to come out of this program with a well-researched paper to submit for publication, but I also intend on sharing my findings online so that they are accessible to everyday readers, fantasy lovers, and individuals seeking inclusive representation.

Thank you in advance for your time and consideration,

## CUROP PROPOSAL

### The Cloak of Disability — How Disabled Persons are Made Invisible in Fantasy and Portals to Better Representation

Anything is possible in the strange realms of fantasy, from supernatural beings and quests to rebellions against tyrannical regimes. Some of the genre's most foundational conventions—like magic and a foregrounding of the unfamiliar—make subversion an inherent trait of fantasy. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson notes that “the mythic perspective dislodges the dominant viewpoint, opening a discursive space for imagining new ways of being” (131). Fantasy can thus become a potent vessel for social commentary, introduce readers to a diversity of characters, and disrupt hegemonic frameworks. Trends in publishing indicate that there is both an increasing desire for and output of such content. As more authors write about diverse experiences, it is worth examining whether these depictions are accurate or if they perpetuate harmful stereotypes. For this research, I will critically engage with representations of disability in several popular contemporary fantasy novels. These books have large readerships (baseline of 100,000 Goodreads ratings), making their messages about disability widely disseminated. With a few exceptions, most contain representation written from an outside perspective.

There is a notable trend in narrative arcs surrounding disabled characters, which I refer to as “The Cloak of Disability.” The Cloak of Disability is the pervasive erasure of disabled bodies and persons in fantasy literature. There are many ways in which disability is rendered invisible, with the bulk of these falling into one of two categories: the unhappy endings and the presumed “happy endings.” The first consists of transforming disabled characters into villains, killing them off, or otherwise condemning them to a life of pain and non-heroic passivity. The second category is subtler. It allows authors to claim diversity without honouring the real and embodied experiences of the groups they represent. These include cure narratives where one waves a (sometimes literal) magic wand at disability or employs supernatural aids and abilities that negate disability entirely. Both categories communicate that disability and the disabled body are undesirable. Using literary analysis and an intersectional feminist lens, I will explore the myriad manifestations of disability in fantasy. I will also establish a link between better disability representation and increased attention to characters with multi-dimensional identities (e.g., characters that are disabled *and* queer, rather than just one of these).