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## **Downfall to Friendliness?: Analyzing Common Tropes in *The Boy***

### ***Who Loved Too Much***

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One of the most commonly held misconceptions regarding the disabled population is that living with any disability automatically decreases the quality of life. It is assumed that any deviation from society's established norm for the perfect brain and body must be a burden. Both the physical and social implications associated with disability have forged in the minds of many the idea that a disabled life could not possibly be a good life. This overarching negativity, however, is turned on its head when considering Williams Syndrome, a rare genetic disorder more accurately described as happy syndrome. This so-called disability is not only a biological source of that individual's happiness, but also of their great vulnerability. Jennifer Latson's novel, *The Boy Who Loved Too Much: A True Story of Pathological Friendliness*, follows Eli, a young boy with Williams, and his mother, Gayle, as they navigate an unkind world with their own unique sense of love. Their story emphasizes the cost not of disability, but of the suffocating grip of societal norms, as well as the need for strong advocacy, not control.

In the fast-paced, self-serving, capitalistic society of today, everyone is expected to contribute; And how much you can contribute quickly determines your value and worth to the world. With this outlook, it seems disability *forces* people to slow down and get extra assistance, when in reality this is far more sustainable for everyone. As Susan Wendell wrote in *Rejected Bodies*, "When the pace of life in a society increases, there is a tendency for more people to become disabled, not only because of physically damaging consequences of efforts to go faster, but also because fewer people can meet expectations of 'normal' performance..." (qtd. in Bailey

286). Our societal pace itself is simultaneously disabling and isolating, even to those that do play by its crushing rules. Because of this, people with disabilities are viewed as infantile and often miserable because of their given disability. Their voices are frequently minimized and viewed as inferior, even when it comes to decision-making in their own life. They are discredited simply because of their disability. And while everyone should have the right to live freely and happily, Eli and Gayle's story offers a unique perspective on these common stereotypes. Not only does Williams syndrome give Eli elevated happiness, but it also strips him of the skepticism needed to navigate an unforgiving world. So while his disability does not negatively impact his quality of life, it tolls on his mother, who must be heightened to the world around them.

Disabilities are viewed as a misfortune, something that takes away from life's full potential. Those who subscribe to this belief may then be surprised to meet twelve-year old Eli, who would "hug a stranger as eagerly as he'd hug his grandmother" (Latson 39). His favorite things include vacuum cleaners, twirlies, and music, and everyone he meets is a friend. He has a boundless curiosity and a knack for using his charm and a grin to win adults over. When asked, "What is Williams syndrome?" he cocked his head thoughtfully. "It's...he began, then broke into a wide smile. 'It's like a party!'" (Latson 106). Eli associated the phrase not with anything in regards to himself, but with the holiday parties, summer picnics, and awareness walks he had attended. While Eli surmised that he was able to identify the trait in others with Williams, it never held any negative connotations in his mind or life. Although he struggled to form deep social connections, particularly with children his own age, every interaction was worthwhile to him, regardless of the outcome. Take school lunch periods, for example, typically a prime time for socialization. Eli's lunchtime experience, on the other hand, as described by a teacher,

... was agonizing to watch because he spent the whole period looking around for someone to talk to. But it wasn't agony for Eli. He looked forward to lunch every day, walking to the cafeteria with a bounce in his step and a smile on his face. He high-fived everyone he saw, including the boys who'd recently reduced him to tears, whose taunts

he quickly forgave, or forgot. When asked, he'd call them his friends, regardless of whatever they might have called him instead. (Latson 88)

Eli was blissfully unaware of the social ladder that is established so early in life and is content, regardless of where others may place him on this ladder. He is perfectly non judgemental and enthusiastic about everything the world has to offer.

While Eli is the picture of happiness, his mother, Gayle, obviously has a different perspective on her son's condition. She does everything with the fierce love of a mother, but is also very aware of the stigma surrounding disability. She herself was in strong denial when Eli initially began displaying signs of delayed development and the syndrome was suggested. Gayle thought that... "Williams syndrome meant nothing to her - nothing specific - and yet something about it filled her with dread" (Latson 15). Even after genetic testing had confirmed there were twenty-six genes missing on Eli's seventh chromosome, Gayle brought in family photos, hoping to prove his tell-tale traits were from the family line, not a genetic fluke. As he began to hit milestones, "She wanted to believe her son could be the one to break the curve" (Latson 27), and she "clung to the dim but real hope that he would be an exception to the Williams syndrome rules" (Latson 38). Though she loved her son regardless, it was evident that she did feel at a great loss because of his disability.

In addition to the delayed milestones, Gayle felt she did not get to have the same excitement for her child's future as other parents, because Eli would never amount to as much in the eyes of society. This loss of excitement about the family's future following Eli's diagnosis can be tracked through Gayle's scrapbooking. For instance,

The early pages show a young couple embracing the joys of parenthood: cradling Eli at his first Christmas, picking pumpkins with him as a toddler, posing with him next to Big Bird at Sesame Place theme park. In later pages, their smiles look plastered on - more noticeably so in contrast to the thousand-watt grin of their chipmunk-cheeked child... Gayle gave up on the project, which lost its charm after her marriage dissolved and the family shrank to two. In any case, she was too busy taking care of Eli to bother with

bedazzling its block letters. (Latson 41)

It is clear that she does, at times, feel deflated because of Eli's differences, never quite getting over the unanswered question of why her.

Coping with Eli's disability was a struggle in and of itself for Gayle, but it also weighed on her emotionally. She was not so lucky as to have Eli's unrelenting positivity, meaning the cruelties of the world he so easily shook off hurt her all the more: "Eli himself was perpetually unlocked, open, vulnerable. He carried a welcome sign wherever he went. Gayle was the only barrier between him and everything that lurked outside the door" (Latson 14). The typical insensitive comments made by those uneducated on disability, including her own family, cut deep. In one instance in which her uncle referred to his daughter's behavior as retarded, Gayle's face paled, whereas "Eli, oblivious, reached for another spoonful of sauerkraut. 'Mmm, this is good!' he said cheerfully" (Latson 79). While interactions such as these had no effect on him, they weighed all the more heavily on Gayle, who was willing to take arms for her son at the drop of a hat. In addition, because Eli saw the good in everything and everyone, "It was easy to see how his endless capacity for love could put him in danger" (Latson 6), meaning Gayle was forced to be hypervigilant to all the world's bad. In an effort to keep him safe and help him fit in, she was unintentionally overbearing in her protectiveness. She "believed the best way to give Eli a shot at social acceptance was to get him to conform to American standards of conduct..." (Latson). This meant that in certain school settings, she opted for additional adult supervision to prevent bullying at the expense of unhindered peer interaction, telling his aid "to hover. He's not making friends anyway" (Latson 87). While she always came from a place of love, her elevated fears stifled Eli's chances at meaningful social interaction and contributed exponentially to her stress. In doing her job as a mother, she "had never noticed her identity slipping away. Looking back, she could see that, not so long after becoming Eli's mom, that was suddenly all she was: Eli's mom" (Latson). She felt the need to sacrifice her own social life and, at times, her

well-being to do what she thought was best for her son.

Up to a point, Eli was seemingly content with the limited world to which his mother exposed him. As puberty approached, however, and his sense of independence grew, Gayle walked a fine line between protection and control. “It was part of the frustration many teens with Williams endured: the impulse to pull away from their parents coupled with the immaturity and vulnerability that meant their parents could not responsibly let them go” (Latson). Despite this, he had clearly communicated his desire to branch out from his mother’s side, doing things like reminding her he did not want her to sit with him and his friends at a baseball game. Oftentimes, he expressed his frustration by lashing out. The culmination of this rebellion ended with Eli saying “...I hate her, he said tearfully. I hate you, Mom, he said, looking Gayle in the eyes. It was the first time he’d ever uttered those words” (Latson 215). Instances such as these forced Gayle to question whether her extreme helicopter parenting was really for Eli or herself. Her sheltering was only hindering him from partaking in true, meaningful, social interaction; whether it be good or bad, it was life. For example, the very same classmates whom Gayle had insisted would not be Eli’s friends, surprised her when they received her presentation on Williams with open minds:

The power dynamics Gayle had envisioned in her head had been inverted: instead of seeing his openness as a weakness to be exploited, his classmates had been drawn to him and driven to defend him from the same threats Gayle herself had feared...She’d been afraid that Eli would never make a friend. But he’d had friends all along. (Latson)

This was eye opening, proving to her that Eli, just like anyone else, deserved the chance to experience life on his own terms.

This intertwined story of mother and son emphasizes just how harmful current societal norms are, not just for those with disabilities, but for everyone involved in their lives. Eli’s story shows that disability itself does not negatively impact one’s life, but trying to conform to

unattainable standards does. Whereas Eli, unaware of these social pressures, is perhaps even happier because of his disability, Gayle, who cannot ignore them, exhausts herself in the wake of these norms. In doing so, she inadvertently subscribes to the very same stereotypes she seeks to break in others. By mourning the loss of twenty-six small genes, she proliferates the idea that there is a normal body and behavior, and that this normal is better. In addition, she underestimates Eli's abilities time and time again, simply because of her own fears. This is a common theme seen in parents with disabled children. One study done by UCSF, for example, found that about fifty percent of mothers with autistic children reported elevated symptoms of depression, with levels typically corresponding to the child's behavioral problems (Berthold). This emphasizes the point that those actually living with the disability are not the ones reporting a lower quality of life because of it, it is those that subscribe to the idea of normal. The novel highlights the idea that "The rest of us don't put much thought into learning to be more like them - but we might benefit from trying" (Latson 241). As Dr. Karen Levine put it,

[There is a] little-known disorder called TROUS: The Rest of Us Syndrome. Seen from the perspective of someone with Williams, this disorder includes traits such as extreme emotional distance, pathological suspicion of strangers, and a critically limited capacity for hugging... These people very rarely say 'I love you'. They might only say it a few times a day. (*The Wall Street Journal*)

To many, it seems unfathomable that the rest of us ought to try and be more like someone who falls outside the bounds of our accepted norms - that this could only limit our productive potential. In reality, however, such strict adherence to social norms only hinders our own human experience. Imagine a world in which the rest of us were more like Eli; where the cold bounds of proper socialization do not exist and every interaction is a chance to make a new friend. When doing so, it becomes overwhelmingly clear that it is our own standards that are in need of fixing.

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