

The Accessible Stall Podcast

Episode 49: Wonder

E: HI I'm Emily Ladau

K: And I'm Kyle Khachadurian

E: And you're listening to another episode of The Accessible Stall

K: What are we gonna talk about today, Emily?

E: We're gonna talk about *Wonder*.

K: Oh, isn't that wonderful?

E: Oh I see what you did there

(Comedy cymbal crash)

K: Let's talk about it

E: *(laughing)* Kyle did that sound effect live so that's why it's funny. Anyway, I know that *Wonder* the book and movie are controversial and so I'm gonna get one thing out of the way really fast. I know and I agree that the kid should've been played by someone who actually has a facial difference. I also know and agree that is technically problematic that the book was written by somebody who had no particular experience with facial differences. And I want that to be clear that I feel that way throughout the entire episode because that's not really what we're gonna focus on.

K: Having said that, I liked it.

E: Yeah, me too and I feel weird about it.

K: I don't feel that weird about it. You would though. I like a lot of disability movies that the greater community doesn't. But we tend to give a pass to the good ones. Like the whole Disability Community likes *Margarita with a Straw*

E: Yeah it's a good movie

K: Of course it is. Even though that actress does not have CP, but she fooled people with people with CP. So, you know should've but she did a good enough job where it really didn't matter.

E: I struggle to reconcile my concerns with what I liked about it. But I think it's worth talking about what I did like about it because the overarching messages were not bad. In fact I would say that the massive issue with *Wonder* the movie is how it was marketed.

K: Yeah, I would also agree with that. We should probably link the trailer, but if I remember it right it was just like this somber, uplifting tone with like an undertone of sadness in the background. And like this little boy with this space helmet on and, "Oh look he took it off and look at his face and oh woe is him!"

E: Yeah I just remember it being the epitome of Inspiration Porn...the trailer that is. I'm gonna admit, I didn't read the book because I just really wasn't interested at the time when it really was a big deal when it first was around. So I broke my rule here of you gotta read the book before you see the movie. But I think that the movie is what caused the book to become more of a cultural phenomenon than it already was. And I think that marketers took off with it. And they did this whole thing like this, "Choose Kind" campaign and "Bring a real life Auggie to your classroom!" And just all this ridiculous, objectifying stuff. It was the marketing that ticked me off. If I could've just watched the movie in the context of just the movie, I think I would've felt a lot different.

K: You see that's funny because I wasn't subjected to any at all. I saw one trailer, once like six months before it came out when I was in the movie theater seeing something else, and then I forgot about it. And the next thing I knew reviews popped up from Disabled people saying that it was vaguely good. I was like, "What's *Wonder*?" And then I Googled it and was like, "Oh yeah, that movie!" And then a couple months after that I watched it and I liked it. So, I think I agree with you. I wanna believe that had I been so inundated with it as you're describing that I would've felt the same way. But seeing it just in the context for what it was, my problem with it was not even with the movie. I was saying to Emily earlier that my problem with it was really like it was seeing reality reflected back at you because there were a lot of situations that were unfortunate but realistic if you grew up with a disability and...the movie did it right. So I wanted to dislike it but really, you can't dislike something for showing you something you know to be true so it was this weird dichotomy I guess but I actually really ended up enjoying the movie.

E: Yeah, I definitely tried to go in with an open mind watching it. And obviously, my disability and general activism that I'm always wearing it seems are gonna impact how I perceived the movie. But the more that I think about it...I guess spoiler alert if you haven't seen it yet, I was pretty much with the movie and fine with everything that was happening because it felt realistic. And then at the end I was annoyed because Auggie was awarded a medal at his graduation. I'm thinking about it now as we're discussing it, that's also realistic. But the thing is, I see it and you see it as realistic because we know that disabled people get awards for existing all the time. SO I think that I'm taking something away from it than a non-disabled viewer would. Basically they would see it as, "Oh my God they did the right thing it was so inspiring!" And I'm seeing it as like, "Yeah, that happens."

K: Yeah but Auggie addressed that. I mean, that's not gonna stop people from seeing it how they wanna see it, to your point. But I like that he even addressed that too. Like he says at the end "Well all I did was finish 5th grade!"

E: Yeah like, "Why am i getting this?" But he does say...I even like how he spins it, but I really worry that the actual message gets very lost in the overly inspiring-sappy- giving him a medal-scene. Where he's reflecting, this wise little ten year old, on the fact that we all have experiences that we're dealing with and blah, blah, blah, and common ground and equal footing, whatever. Like he's saying these relatively intelligent things for a ten year old but I'm worried that everybody's takeaway is that you should give the disabled kid a medal.

K: Uh, I hope you're wrong. I really hope you're wrong. Unfortunately I don't think you're wrong. But I don't think you're wrong. I really liked other things too. I liked the semi-realistic apartment sizes in New York City. They didn't live in the *Friends* apartment. Although *Friends* did explain that like eleven times, but you know, still.

E: Everything felt very real and nuanced to me. And while the marketers over here are busy drumming up, "Choose Kind" that was said like once in the movie. And I just really think that the movie approaches differences in what I thought was a pretty realistic way. And all the hubbub around the movie completely ruins that for me. And I really wish that somebody could watch it through our lens like yeah, "We've experienced this, like this is real." Because then people would stop doing it. But instead, I'm worried that people first people pity Auggie and then pity him. You get what I'm saying? I imagine there's this big difference in our perception versus someone else's....Of how the movie is.

K: I see exactly what you're saying because I'm on your side here. I felt the same way. At the same time, when I watched the movie that was the journey the movie took me through, you know? You have the scene where in the beginning like Auggie's afraid to go to school, and then he makes a friend, and then the friend turns on him, and then the friend apologizes and then they went on the retreat, and then they confront the bullies and that's the turning point in my head and "Hooray!" And I feel like that sort of is what you're describing. In the end you're not supposed to be inspired by Auggie, you're supposed to be proud of him that he went through that and came out whole on the other side, you know? Yes, he did what every ten- year -old does but he did it with obstacles that not every ten year old has and I know we know that but I think that if there was going to be a perceptual shift, that that's where it would be. I hope it's not lost on many people. Like I said before, I hope that you're wrong about that, but I don't know, I don't know, I share your concern mildly.

E: It's just that I want to be optimistic especially after having seen the movie, but I just know that with the lens through which I viewed it, was one where I was looking for relatable details and I appreciated how nuanced the movie was and how there was complexity and character development and each person had a storyline in some way and it wasn't just about Auggie's

facial difference like there were experiences that showed a person's disability is one aspect of a full and complex life. You know like the dog dying? Sorry, spoilers!

K: That was completely unnecessary by the way. The whole movie would've been the same without that.

E: But honestly I feel like it was like *Marley and Me Junior*. which Owen Willson also happens to be in. But honestly it was totally unnecessary but I think the point is like it was a reminder that not everything is about Disability when you have someone with a disability in your life.

K: One thing that I wonder about, no pun intended that the movie touched on that I was surprised to see...and this is something that might actually make another episode by itself, and what a surprise we always do that. But it was the fact that he was interested in science, was likely due directly to his disability. It started off with his obsession with astronauts, which the movie implies he has because their helmets cover their face and he grows up with that, and he ends being obsessed with science, obsessed with space and he's a very, very smart kid. And I've often wondered how much my CP has somehow in some way affected what I'm interested in. Because I'm not interested in the things I can't do at all, except skateboarding. But that's only one thing. And conversely the things I am interested in, are very easy to when you have CP. And you might hear that and go, "Of course!" But is that because I have CP? Like, if I was born without CP, would I still be computer nerd, I don't know. But the movie sorta touched on that and I commend it for that really because I like that bit.

E: I didn't think about that. Like I didn't think about it as Disability playing some role in your interests. I imagine it does. I mean I'm not interested in I don't know, snowboarding. I guess I just thought of that because of the Olympics. But I'm interested in the things that I can do. I'm really interested in going to plays, museums, concerts, you know taking in cultural things that don't require physical ability. So I suppose that if I was not disabled, I would be doing something different. I'm really interested in choreography, but it's not obviously something that I do, it's just something that I think is really cool. And maybe in another life I would be a choreographer. And I'm sure plenty of people are gonna be like, "You still can be!" Like, not the point here. But jumping off of what you said, even though it's not exactly the same point, I think it's worth noting that Auggie is intelligent, and in no way coddled by his family and his teachers. He's really not. I mean, and nd that's something I just really appreciate so much. The teachers don't ever treat him differently in the classroom, they don't give him easier work, they don't assume that he's not intelligent. You know...I just, I like that. I really like that His family and his teachers treat him like they treated everyone else, and I appreciated that and I think that's worth noting.

K: Yeah I agree. I think his parents were excellent. His whole family, but especially his parents. He has a sister too. I found, I saw a lot of my parents in his parents particularly in the way that they "handled" his disability. My parents did the same thing, especially my dad, he was just like Owen in that movie where it's like, "Hey kid, I love you but I know the world might not so you gotta learn to deal with it now." My dad did not say that to little me, but that's basically what he

was getting at and that's sort of what Owen Wilson does in this movie as Auggie's dad. And I appreciate that because you don't even see that kind of parenting in regular movies with parents where the kid isn't disabled. It's always some stereotype pair where it's like lazy or a helicopter parent, and I don't know these parents felt real, they felt like real people.

E: Oh yeah. I was thinking back to earlier on in the movie where Auggie was upset and he calls himself ugly. And rather than this stock response and, "You're not ugly, you're beautiful." The mom actually says, "You know, I hear you, but do you realize that everything that is on your face is part of who you are?" And just this very real answer where she acknowledges that some people aren't gonna accept what he looks like but what's important is for him to accept what he looks like. And then he's like, "You're my mom it doesn't count!" And she's like, "No I'm your mom and it counts the most because I know you the best." And I'm like, "That's some excellent Mom logic!"

K: Yeah, exactly! And even the scene between him and his sister where she's complaining about what a horrible day that she's had. And he comes back with, "Yeah well you think your first day at school was bad? I look like this! And guess how kids treat people who look like THIS?!" And I was like, "Yeah..."

E: But at the same time th family's like, "Auggie, not everything revolves around you. It's not always about you, your problems are not always the biggest problems, get over yourself."

K: Wasn't that great? Like I swear, that's what made this movie different than like every other one, every other disability movie... where it's like, "No, you're the main character but you don't always matter the most."

E: That was probably largely due to the storytelling aspect of it where they kept switching perspectives

K: Oh for sure

E: Which I also thought was great! I mean really, I don't particularly care if we get hate for this episode, cause I'm not saying that I don't see all the flaws, I'm just saying that for all the flaws, I really do think that this movie did the best that it could. It could've done better in some ways, but all things considered, I'm not that mad at it. And there are so many other Disability movies like *Me Before You*, that just upset me in every possible way because they leave you with a horrible, horrible message about Disability. I feel like this movie just tried to be real life and yes I think the people who were trying to sell the movie really overdid it with the pity and the inspiration. But the movie itself, I just...I don't think it was that bad.

K: Yeah, yeah. Even little things like the fight between him and his friend. I'm not gonna spoil the movie but him and his friend have a fight.

E: Oh yeah sorry we're like ruining everything (*chuckles*).

K: And they apologize to each other over Minecraft. And I know that sounds stupid....

E: No, I loved that!

K: Ten year olds play Minecraft and you know, of course, it's so much easier to apologize to your nerdy best friend when you're both playing a video game, rather than face to face. Like that has happened, that is real, that's true. You know what I mean? Like, they thought of that.

E: It also does a great job depicting bullying.

K: Oh yeah, yeah where it shows not only bullies as one dimensional you know, "I suck and that's it!" But as deeply flawed characters are also real people and also where the bullying aspect of their life comes from too. Like, it was just so good. And Daveed Diggs was in it.

E: Yeah that's true like they even show you that bullying comes from somewhere. And I think that's worth noting because I hate to bring it around to Donald Trump but I'm gonna do it and stick with me here. Everybody thinks that the worst thing that Donald Trump has ever done was mocking a disabled reporter. Right? So that's what makes him the *worst*. And so this kid mocking Auggie for his facial difference, you know in most movies he would just be characterized as the worst. And look I'm not saying that Donald Trump isn't the worst. He's the *worst, the worst*. But I am saying that in this movie it wasn't just like, "Oh this guy mocked a disabled person, that's the worst possible thing you can do!" It was like he's mocking someone who's different than him, let's explore where he's doing that. Where is that coming from, and that's not the worst thing that you could ever do in the whole world. You shouldn't do it, but like...

K: Bullying is horrible but in terms of it being the worst thing in the world, like no it's not. Like it's just not...there's war. No I'm serious, like I'm not saying it's a tiny issue because it's not. It's a very serious issue and no one should do it and we need to teach kids to stand up for themselves and all of that, I'm with you, I can hear your angry Tweets, yes!

E: And we need to stop kids from bullying in the first place.

K: Of course

E: But there's always this assumption...I don't even know if I'm articulating this right. It's like, you could bully a kid without a disability and you're just like a bad kid. But you bully the disabled kid and like "Oh my God!"

K: You're extra bad. Yeah, well

E: This movie didn't do that though!

K: I know, it was good.

E: But do you get why I brought up Donald Trump?

K: Well yeah, because he did that. And because the word think he's the worst because of that. Like really, that's where your line was?

E: Yeah yeah yeah yeah, that's what I mean.

K: I mean fine, sure that's where your line was, everyone's got one I suppose. You know, really? That was it huh? I also liked there's a moment where they have to take a class photo

E: Yes I know exactly what you're talking about.

K: And Auggie like tries to run out off the frame right as the timer goes off so that he's not in the photo. And the teacher played by Thomas Jefferson from *Hamilton*, Daveed Diggs like pulls him in at the last second. And it's just like that one moment, he didn't even have to say a word, he doesn't even say anything to him except like, "Where are you going?" or something like that. They don't have a conversation, it was just like a one second thing. And in that moment that was the teacher teaching him how to just have a little more confidence in himself. I love that! Like that is such a thing, that is so real and it was such an organic thing and it wasn't forced and it wasn't like, "Here's a life lesson, let's spell it out"

E: "Let's talk about this son!"

K: No I'm serious.

E: Yeah!

K: It's like the movie presented a very organic situation, it didn't treat it's audience stupid is really what I'm getting at. It was able to articulate that without having to spell it out that that's what the teacher was doing and I really liked that.

E: It also in that same scene, it really highlights the awkward moments where the photographer is kind of...He sees Auggie and pauses for a minute and takes Auggie in. And the teacher is just like, "Wait a minute, hold on now." He doesn't actually get into a whole lecture about why like this photographer needs to stop staring at Auggie. Everything is just natural in how it happens. Like yes this is awkward, yes you want to get out of the photo, yes I'm gonna show you why you should be in the photo, let's move on with the story.

K: There was also another scene in the cafeteria where Auggie notices this girl that was in one of his classes and she was sitting at a table with a bunch of friends who either were making fun of him or just making fun of everyone they saw. And she gets up walks away from these horrible people, and goes to sit with him, and he automatically thinks that she's just sitting with him because she feels bad. But then they start talking and he argues with her and she gets pissed and she ends up saying, "No I like you, I just want some nicer friends. Like why don't you get it, I just wanna sit with you because you're nice! Not because I feel bad."

E: Yeah, I don't like being accused of things and it's like... But I also get that, it's like, "Wait, why are you being nice to me?" Cause I'm gonna tell you a bit of a story real quick...When I was in high school, middle school, I don't know, whatever. I was young and naive. Anyway, the point is one of the "popular girls" in my grade started messaging me on Instant Messenger, and rather than just like have a conversation with her, you know back in the good ol days of AIM I was like, "You're talking to me? Like, why are you talking to me?" And I kept waiting for there to be like some malicious intent, and there never was, and nothing ever happened and that's the end of the story.

K: But I mean, that just goes to show that that's a real situation. And it was funny because it was on both sides. You know, they had an almost equal footing. You know, they had a reason in that one moment to be annoyed at each other and they ended up becoming friends. And then there was the moment where they like shake hands or high-five or something and the entire cafeteria is staring at them because you know if you touch Auggie you like, get The Plague. Not really, obviously.

E: They say it weird. They say it like, "Plaagh"

K: Yeah, they say, "Plaagh."

(Emily laughs)

K: Which was the second most annoying part of the movie. The first most annoying part of the movie was that there's only one "WOW" in the movie and they give it to his mother, Julia Roberts, not Owen Wilson...and everyone knows how Owen Wilson says "Wow!" We have like four listeners who know exactly what I'm talking about.

E: Yeah, I just. Gosh...I only just watched the movie tonight. Like, we're recording this pretty soon after I watched it. And I went in expecting to be so annoyed at everything... and I wasn't! And..

K: Is that a revelation?

E: Well I'm just like worried that I'm like a bad disabled person. In all capital letters.

K: Please. I mean I usually give Disability movies the benefit of the doubt. Because I like a lot of them. And the only one I haven't seen is *Me Before You*, because I just don't...care.

E: I'm telling you, if there ever was a movie that's not worth your time.

K: No, I believe you, I believe you. But like, I've seen *The Theory of Everything*, I've seen *My Left Foot*. And I understand those are problematic and whatever.

E: I still haven't seen *My Left Foot*, actually.

K: Oh, it's good! But you know, I'm not the kind of person that automatically writes a movie off because of certain things. Like I like to see things before I judged them, and I went into *Wonder* not knowing anything beyond the crappy trailer I saw several months prior. And so I was expecting it to be okay, but it was actually good, you know? And it was a movie that had disability at it's focus but didn't entirely revolve around it and I mean that in the best possible way, you know? Just like real life. Like, I even liked it better than *Margarita With a Straw*. And I've seen people with CP who don't articulate CP better than that actress did.

E: I like them both for different reasons.

K: I didn't mean to...they're both very good. But *Wonder* was just more my kind of movie. They're two entirely different pieces. But my point is that those are two movies that are generally regarded as good in our world.

E: Yeah, except that *Margarita With a Straw* is more like this obscure movie that you only learn about through word of mouth whereas *Wonder* was like this motion picture phenomenon over here.

K: One thing that it sparked a debate between Emily and I about. Well not really, because we didn't hash it out. Cause we wanted to save it for you guys, was that I brought up a question that is probably going to be in another episode for sure, which is, "Would you rather see accurate portrayal...Would you rather be accurately represented factually in your story so like a non-disabled actor plays a disabled role? Or, the facts aren't as straight or the story's not as good, but accurate representation. I don't think there's a right answer. But I think it's a discussion worth having, because I think there are merits for both. Because I think that *Wonder* really hits on getting your facts on all that stuff in a row but not having an actor who has the disability that he's portraying. Which I get it, like there's a total debate to be had there and I'm in agreement with people who say that accurate representation requires accurate representation. But, at the same time if your story is told right, I can't be too mad at it. And again, that's a different episode, but that's my...two minute version of my side.

E: I hear you, um, it's really context dependant for me. And again, I know I'm gonna sound like a broken record but it's really dependant on the marketing for me. Movie itself is good, but like

one of the very insightful arguments against the movie was the commercialization of Facial Difference. So the fact that the facial difference aspect of the story was used as this huge marketing campaign and selling point when in fact that that's not how the whole movie itself feels. So I feel like everything surrounding the movie was done wrong, horribly, horribly wrong. And I understand and agree with the arguments about commercializing facial difference and taking a non-disabled kid and trying to make him still be cute while having a facial difference. Like I read that the costume designer...or uh, the Makeup Artist or whoever it was tried to make Auggie very wide-eyed and kind of adorable. So I just think that the approaches to everything were not great, and that's where I would've loved to have a kid who have actually had a kid with a facial difference actually portraying a kid with a facial difference. That's where I think that movie would've done a lot better in terms of marketing and it's message. I'm trying to separate that frustration, that rightful frustration, with what you were saying earlier which is that it really does reflect a lot of reality back at you.

K: And I mean, no one's a stranger to a movie trailer not accurately portraying what you see in a movie! That's the other question, like, is that the worst thing? I mean, either way, you're still getting disability out there. Either way, no matter who's representing whom, you're still getting the story out there and if the story's told well, then it doesn't matter! In contrast to that horrible Jake Gyllenhaal movie that's out right now, that's about like some amputee olympian or something, I don't know. But it's horrible because it's like, why is it Jake Gyllenhaal? Then it matters! But with this it's just like, everything's right because this is in the grand scheme of the entire movie, a very minor detail that does matter but doesn't take away from anything. It's just that had it been there, it would've added to it, in my opinion. The actor having a real facial difference that is. So I'm very, I'm at a crossroad because yeah sure the kid would've had a real facial difference, of course. And commercializing Disability is wrong. Sure, okay. But on the other hand, he didn't and the movie portrays it accurately and because it was commercialized people went to see it even if the marketing was terrible.

E: That is a good point!

K: I want people to see it, I want people to think that that's what Disability is like, because it is, it is. All of it! You know? And it's like, is that worth the trade off? Yeah maybe, I don't know for sure but this movie is a great argument for it. And that's why the rest of the conversation needs to be a separate episode. It really is, it was a stark contrast to most other movies portraying Disability, that's for sure!

E: I agree, I do. I'm really struggling with the fact that we just did a whole episode that has a relatively positive spin on something that's been largely perceived as negative but I guess doesn't it go back to our literal favorite thing,

K: What's that?

E: Pick your battles!

K: Oh, hell yeah!

E: I mean, we have like two things that we're constantly saying, "Pick your battles" and "There's a lot to unpack here." And there was a lot to unpack here, about why we should pick our battles.

K: Mhmm. Man, I think that's a very succinct, nice point to wrap it all up, to pack it back in. To pack it all up rather. Do you have any Final Takeaways?

E: Yeah, um I think that actually was my final takeaway; that we have to...No, we cannot throw the baby out with the bathwater. I hate to use cliches, I really do but sometimes I think it sums it up better than I can. I'm mad about a lot of things surrounding the movie but I'm not throwing that baby out with that bathwater! I think that on the whole, it serves a purpose. And I still worry as I was saying earlier that perhaps the purpose it serves for me and for Kyle is not the same message that not disabled people got out of it but I gotta have faith in people right now, I'm just really trying here.

K: No, you should. My final takeaway is also a cliché um, and it's the message of the movie which is, "Don't judge a book by its cover!" Honestly. I know the irony is not lost on me with what I did there but I really believe that especially with this movie. Like, you're doing yourself a disservice if you dismiss this movie because of that reason. Because you're doing what this movie tries to teach you to not do. Which is precisely why the movie was made anyway. So do yourself a favor, see it before you judge it. If you hate it, then you hate it but seriously it's worth your time.

E: I think what's gonna end up happening is exactly what happened to us, there's gonna be aspects that you don't like but you're gonna see some of the worth.

K: Yeah. On that note, Goodnight everybody!

E: Thanks for listening!

K: See you next time!

E: Bye!