Disability Representation in Marvel Comics and the MCU: Professor X

Hi! Welcome to the Underground Bookshelf. Underground Bookshelf is an online platform that celebrates diverse perspectives in literature. The goal of this platform is to enable minorities, women, queer folks, and people with disabilities to see themselves reflected in the art/ media they consume. A new short story or resource is posted every week. The stories and resources on this website are free. They will always be free because everyone deserves to have access to stories that reflect them and their experiences. You can find the link to the website and the social handles below. For accessibility reasons, I also upload my YouTube scripts to the Underground Bookshelf website, so if you would like to read along, or would just rather read instead of watch, you can find it there.

My name is Laura Browne-Lambert. I am a queer, neurodivergent writer, and I have a functional neurological disorder that was triggered by COVID. I mention these things because they are an important part of who I am and how I experience the world. I don’t hold back from including them in the things I write about because I didn’t find enough characters like me in the books I read growing up and I still don’t now. And my goal is to be part of changing that for the next generation of readers. You can find my first book on Amazon. It’s called, *The Wood*, and it is a coming-of-age book about a girl who is exiled from her community for what is believed to be witchcraft. It has themes like identity, self-acceptance, accessibility, and found family. I’ll put the link below in case you’re interested.

Before we get started, I have to mention that this video discusses disability and disability tropes. In my own life, I tend to use the terms disabled people and people with disabilities interchangeably, so that’s what I’ll be doing in this video, but not everyone does. Some people prefer to use exclusively identity first language as in the case of “disabled people” in order to emphasize the way they have absorbed their disability into their identity. Others prefer to use person first language to emphasize that they are a person and not a diagnosis. If you’re interacting with a person with a disability and you’re not sure which language they prefer, it’s OK to ask them in the same way that you might ask for someone’s pronouns. Anyway, since this video will focus on disability, I wanted to get this out of the way at the beginning so that you understand my word choices throughout the video. I’ll also warn you that I will use the c-word later in this video – for those who don’t know what I’m referring to, I’m referring to the word “cripple.” There are some folks in the disability community who have reclaimed this word for their personal use, but it is a highly controversial word to use and is considered offensive if used by anyone who does not have a disability. In this video, it will only be used in the context of a trope that uses this word in the name of the trope. Please don’t ever use this word in reference to a person.

Today’s video will be part of a series. One of my not-so-guilty pleasures is Marvel Comics and the MCU. So yes, I am coming out to you all as a Marvel nerd, just – shh – don’t tell anybody. I’ve thought for a while that I could probably talk for years about the highs and lows of representation in Marvel Comics, TV shows, and the MCU and today, we are going to start testing that belief. As I mentioned, this video will become part of a series, so over the course of this series, we will see exactly how many years I can talk about this particular niche when it comes to representation.

Marvel is my comfort zone. It’s what I watch and read to feel comforted on bad days, when I’m feeling down or my body isn’t cooperating with me. My introduction to Marvel was X-Men Evolution which ran for four seasons from November of 2000 to October of 2003. I know, this is a really easy way to date me as a child of the 90s and early 2000s. But, I remember being sucked in by the fictional world of super-powered mutants and the themes of diversity, inclusion, and accessibility presented through characters whose mutations made them look different, have different abilities, or have different needs and experiences one another. At that age, I didn’t have language for the ways I was different, but I knew that I was and the X-Men was one of a small number of pieces of content that I could identify with that made me feel seen.

Marvel Comics and the MCU have both had MANY hiccups when it comes to representation – or lack of representation over the very many years that Marvel has entertained us, so today, we’re going to focus on just one character – Charles Francis Xavier, commonly known as Professor X. Professor X first appeared in Marvel Comics in Issue 1 of *The X-Men* which was released in September of 1963. He’s well known for establishing his School for Gifted Youngsters in which he educates children with the x-gene mutation. The mutation gives humans unique and unusual powers and makes them genetic minorities within the Marvel universe. Their minority status creates much of the conflict over the course of the X-Men’s history with human governments and laboratories often targeting mutants and mutants like Magneto retaliating violently. Despite having his own paramilitary strike team in the X-Men, Professor X’s goal is to create space where humans and mutants can coexist peacefully, and he uses his team of X-Men to quell the violence and protect both humans and mutants from each other and from outside threats.

This, of course, is a very brief overview and the character of Xavier does have a long history. We’ll touch on some elements of it that are relevant to disability representation, but there is a lot more to his story that we won’t be able to get to in this video. If you’re interested in learning more about Xavier’s early years, you can check out Charles Xavier from Earth 616 in the Marvel Database on marvel.fandom.com. Today, I want to touch on some of the disability tropes that this character falls into as well as ways that the character is empowering. Representation is often imperfect, but I think we can pull out some examples of positive representation as well as negative representation when it comes to this character.

Xavier’s Disability

Professor X is one of the most famous fictional wheelchair users out there, but there are multiple explanations for how he acquires his disability. In the movie, X-Men: First Class, the explanation is quite simple. Xavier and Magneto have an argument in the middle of a battle and Xavier is struck by a bullet deflected by Magneto. In the comics, he repeatedly receives injuries to his legs, recovers and then is injured again. His first traumatic injury to his legs occurs in issue 20 of The Uncanny X-Men when an alien combatant drops giant stone blocks on him. He later transfers his mind into a clone of his younger body and regains the use of his legs. He becomes paralyzed again when he receives a spinal cord injury during a battle with the Shadow King. At a later point, Magneto pretends to heal Xavier using Nano-Sentinels to reconstruct the parts of his spine that were damaged, so Xavier becomes briefly ambulatory, but he returns to being a fulltime wheelchair user with paraplegia after Magneto revokes the technology. I KNOW. It gets really complicated! The cycle of disability and magical cure continues over and over throughout much of Xavier’s history in the comics. The movies and television shows largely treat his disability as permanent although he is often depicted as ambulatory during psychic battles or flashbacks to a time before his injury. Now, disclaimer, as much as I’ve tried, I haven’t consumed every single piece of Professor X content out there, yet, so there may be some exceptions somewhere that I’ve missed. What can I tell you? I’m not perfect.

Professor X’s character is treated to a variety of tropes related to disability. The tropes I’d like to dive into in this video are: Magical Cure, TV Paraplegia, The Genius Cripple, Disability as Sacrifice, Disability and Sexlessness, and Disability and Victimhood. While there may be some tropes that I’m missing, these are the biggest ones that stand out to me as a fan of the X-Men.

Magical Cure

Let’s start by defining the Magical Cure Trope. This trope is when a character with a disability is either cured through actual magic or through the magic of comic book science OR through their disability becoming obsolete because of the power of the technology integrated into their body. Bucky Barnes or the Winter Soldier is a good example of this. While he is an amputee, his bionic arm is so advanced that we as an audience can pretend he isn’t disabled and can ignore the struggles that he faces as an amputee. I’ve got a lot to say about the way Bucky Barnes is treated in both the comics and the movies, but we’ll have to talk about him in a different video.

Unfortunately, Professor X is not immune to the Magical Cure Trope. As I described earlier in the video, the comic book version of Professor X consistently alternates between using a wheelchair and being cured by alien magic and comic book science. Whether intentional or not, the Magical Cure comes across as a way for the artists to avoid having to deal with the complexities and nuances of a character with a disability.

The movie version of Xavier is subject to the Magical Cure treatment as well, but I think it has a somewhat better outcome. In X-Men: Days of Future Past, Xavier takes a serum that allows him to trade his telepathic powers for the use of his legs. This is a really great example of comic book science because why this works is never really clear. As the movie progresses, Xavier runs into sticky situations in which he would have benefitted from the use of his powers. For example, when he goes to break Magneto out of a high security facility, he fumbles through unconvincing lies to try to get people to listen to him. If he’d had his powers, he could have given instructions, and no one would have thought twice about obeying him. Obviously, that’s the sketchy side of his powers and we as the audience have to trust him to always use his ability to read and control minds only for good, but his ability to remove people’s will does contribute to his complexity as a character who makes decisions that effect people around him without asking permission.

In Days of Future Past, Xavier also has a complicated relationship with his telepathic abilities. He is one of the most powerful known mutants on the planet at the time, but because his powers allow him to experience the thoughts of others, he spends time wallowing in the pain he feels coming from other people, which impacts his mental health. So, in a way, the serum he takes not only magically cures his paraplegia, but also relieves him of the mental pain he takes on from other people.

The aspect of the Magical Cure Trope in Days of Future Past that stands out from other Magical Cures in Xavier’s history is that in this movie, he ultimately chooses to give up using the serum that temporarily removes his paralysis and suppresses his telepathic abilities and accepts that he is his best self as a disabled, superpowered mutant. This is almost unheard of when it comes to disability tropes, especially because so many of the tropes revolve around cures and death. Many movies follow the trope that it’s better to be dead than to live with a disability. Million Dollar Baby is a perfect example of this. In this movie, the protagonist becomes paralyzed during a boxing match and convinces her coach to help her die because she can’t bear to live under her new circumstances. Because so many plots have to do with the idea that disabled people must either be cured or killed entertainers communicate to their audiences that disabled people just shouldn’t exist. This both reflects and reinforces our society’s tendency to deprioritize and devalue people with disabilities. So the fact that Xavier accepts his disability and the worth he has a disabled mutant is worth recognizing. Seeing a character with a disability see value in their whole self exactly as they are is rare, and watching Xavier journey toward self-acceptance, and self-worth is meaningful.

TV Paraplegia

TV Paraplegia is a pretty easy trope to get a grasp of because so many characters have exemplified this trope. Artie Abrams from Glee and Sam Worthington in Avatar are just a couple. Characters like these are pretty exclusively played by non-disabled actors to show their disability origin story through a flashback or because the character is disabled in some contexts but not others – like when Sam in Avatar controls the body of his Naavi avatar. In TV Paraplegia, the character almost exclusively has cut and dry waist-down paralysis without any of the complexities of actually living with paralysis or another form of mobility impairment. They don’t need a catheter or have issues with continence, they don’t worry about pressure sores or urinary tract infections. They don’t use braces like Ankle Foot Orthotics. They don’t have chronic pain, muscle spasms, partial paralysis, or a dynamic disability that effects them differently depending on the week, day, or hour. TV paraplegia is an easy way to have a disabled character without having to deal with the complexities of living with a disability.

Professor X is an example of TV Paraplegia because his paralysis is binary. While there are some people who experience complete paralysis, there are a great many people who experience varying degrees of paralysis and there are many wheelchair users who are not paralyzed at all, but who use a wheelchair for other reasons that impair their mobility. TV Paraplegia tends to support the idea that ambulatory wheelchair users are faking their disability. TV Paraplegia also tends to limit the agency of the wheelchair user. In both the comics and the movies, Professor X is often pulled out of his wheelchair and thrown around by villains. When I see these scenes play out on the page or on the screen, I think of all the videos of people with disabilities who are under arrest for protesting and are bodily lifted out of their wheelchairs by the police and carried away to the police cruiser. Or I think of wheelchair users who are unable to use their personal device to access their seat on an airplane. It’s not uncommon for wheelchairs to be damaged during air travel and airlines are only required to lend people the most basic manual wheelchair. For people who need highly customized power chairs, situations like this can be really dangerous because they lose independence and risk potentially fatal pressure sores caused by the wrong type of chair. Like these real life people, when Xavier is removed from his wheelchair or his wheelchair is damaged, his agency is compromised and he is put at risk of injury or an infection that he may have trouble detecting because of his paralysis, but these things aren’t addressed in the comics or the movies. A really noteworthy example of this is in the movie, X-Men: Dark Phoenix when Jean Grey telekinetically lifts Xavier out of his wheelchair and manipulates his limbs to force him to climb the stairs. This complete loss of agency coupled with taunts creates onscreen drama without truly addressing the mental and physical consequences of the way his vulnerability as a disabled person is taken advantage of.

Similarly, the X-Men comic books, TV shows, and movies that I’ve consumed so far don’t deal with issues of accessibility effectively. Xavier first appeared in the comics in the 1960s and the X-Men have been popular ever since. Prior to 1990 and the passage of the ADA, there was no expectation that public spaces have ramps, accessible restrooms, power operated doors, or any other public accessibility features. Even the sidewalks didn’t have curb cuts. We could argue that Xavier’s wealth shielded him from some amount of inaccessibility. He had people around him who could help him build more advanced wheelchairs and he could afford the modifications to his personal vehicle and house to navigate his own spaces freely. But we don’t really see him deal with the inaccessibility of the United States in the 1970s and 80s. Even today, there are many spaces that remain difficult for people with a variety of disabilities to access and constructing a building according to the letter of the law doesn’t always mean it is truly accessible. Of course, there may be some X-Men comics out there that touch on this, that I haven’t come across yet, but the fact that Xavier is such a popular and well-known character and we don’t have common examples of how Xavier navigates an inaccessible world says something about how non-disabled writers overlook disabled experiences. I don’t think these things are willful, but you don’t know what you don’t know. That’s one of the many reasons why it’s so important to hire people with disabilities to tell disabled stories.

The Genius Cripple

OK, so now we are talking about the trope I warned you about in the beginning. I’m not sure who coined this phrase, but I imagine that they did so with intention, because the trope itself is just as problematic as its name. This trope refers to someone whose intelligence or other abilities are so far above everyone else that they make up for the fact that the character has a disability. Common examples of this might be the blind seers who show up in Greek mythology or Captain Hook whose limb difference makes him more powerful and terrifying than any other pirate.

Charles Xavier fits The Genius Cripple narrative so perfectly it’s as if the trope was designed for him. As a powerful telepath who can control the minds of other people and detect other mutants, his power and his intelligence comes across as compensation for his disability. People can ignore the fact that he uses a wheelchair because he has PhDs in genetics and biophysics, has a noteworthy mutant ability and is highly charismatic. He is able to educate students, train the X-Men, strategize on the battlefield, and debate on the political front. He is so talented that he is forgiven for his physical impairment. There are ways that this trope makes Xavier someone to look up to, but because it is a common trope in entertainment, it can also tell audiences that people with disabilities should be constantly overcompensating for their limitations. This trope communicates that people with disabilities aren’t allowed to be normal, have bad days, take a day off, make mistakes, or struggle with things that don’t appear to be connected to their disability. People with disabilities should always be perfect, otherwise, they aren’t making up for the burden they place on others by existing in the body they have. We need characters with disabilities who are human in the sense that they have human strengths and weaknesses just like everyone else – who are allowed to make mistakes and even be average. Xavier is a character we can look up to, but sometimes it’s healthy to have characters like him be relatable, too.

Disability as Sacrifice

Each of the occasions that Professor X becomes paraplegic is the result of a sacrifice he makes, usually on the battlefield. It is the price he pays for protecting mutants, humans, or the earth. This is a trope that shows up repeatedly in comic books. Daredevil becomes blind when saving a man from a chemical spill. War Machine becomes paraplegic during a fight with other Avengers. Misty Knight receives an injury while responding to a bombing as New York police officer. Each of these characters does something heroic and pays for their heroism by acquiring a disability.

This is true of Xavier in the comics whose legs are crushed on the battlefield and again when his spine is shattered in battle. It’s also true in the live-action movies. In First Class, he acquires a spinal cord injury while trying to stop Magneto from bombing both American and Russian armies.

I think we should recognize that this trope comes from somewhere. Many veterans come home from war with physical and/or psychiatric disabilities and illnesses. And so, it’s a reality that some people do sacrifice their health or their able body while trying to protect people they care about and we should honor them. And also, there are very many other ways to be disabled that are often not explored. People can acquire a disability or a chronic illness from an accident, abuse, an illness, medical malpractice, ageing, genetic predisposition, the list goes on. And people can just be born that way. I would argue that if we worried less about the origin of superheroes disabilities, we might make space not only for representation of people who were born with a disability, but also for actors and artists who can speak to that experience. So often, we excuse casting non-disabled actors for disabled roles because we have to tell the story of how they acquired their disability. But I think this is one of many things that holds us back from creating inclusive work spaces in the entertainment industry as well as creating truly inclusive forms of representation on the page and the screen.

Disability and Sexlessness

I’m not actually sure of the title of this trope, but the trope is a common one. In our society, we have a tendency to infantilize people with disabilities and treat them younger than they actually are. I’ve heard stories from friends with disabilities who have gone up to a register to buy groceries and had a cashier change their voice to a higher register and speak to them as if they are a small child, or who have gone to dinner with friends or family and had a server ask one of their companions for their order rather than ask them directly. These are everyday interactions that infantilize people with disabilities, but in entertainment, one of the ways we can see this infantilization quite clearly is in the assumed sexlessness of people with disabilities.

An example of this is An Affair to Remember. In this movie, a woman, Terry, is struck by a bus and can no longer walk. In response to her new situation, she refuses marriage because she is no longer capable or deserving of marriage, sex, or children. While this is a really blatant example, Xavier’s is a little more sneaky. In the comics, his relationship with Moira falls apart after he has been drafted and sent to war, leaving him single and disabled when he seriously injured on the battlefield. In the movie X-Men First   
Class, after he acquires his disability, he kisses CIA Agent Moira McTaggert, who he had been flirting with throughout the movie, as a way of distracting her while he wipes her mind of all memory of him. He suggests that this is the best way for him to protect her and the mutants she knows about from becoming known to the CIA, but it also serves as a way to make sure he is not romantically involved.

Throughout the comics, movies, and TV shows that I’ve found so far, I haven’t seen a disabled Charles Xavier romantically involved with anyone. This is different from most other Marvel Superheroes. While there are some like Daredevil who have romance and are disabled, Daredevil’s disability is a lot less visible than Xavier’s. I think this oversight is particularly noticeable in X-Men content because of how large the ensemble of characters is to choose from. Wolverine, Rogue, Jean Grey, Cyclops, Raven, Magneto, and Iceman are just a few of the prominent mutant characters who have romantic entanglements. But Charles Xavier is known for being on his own. His lack of romance reflects the ableist assumption that people with disabilities are unworthy of romance, sex, marriage, and parenthood – all things that we reserve for adulthood. When we exclude characters like Xavier from the same things his peers get to experience, we indicate that his disability makes him unworthy of these parts of the adult human experience. And we signal that real life people with disabilities shouldn’t get these things either.

Disability and Victimhood

We touched on this earlier in this video, but I want to make sure we state it plainly. Professor X’s disability makes him more vulnerable than many of the other X-Men despite his power, and his vulnerability is taken advantage of on countless occasions. He is repeatedly tipped down stairs, dumped out of his wheelchair, moved telekinetically, abducted, attacked, injured, or otherwise targeted on the battlefield because of his vulnerability. There are two main things that this treatment does that I want to mention.

Firstly, let’s think about what this treatment in the movies does to disabled fans. Although Charles Xavier is an incredibly powerful mutant, the vulnerability of his disability puts him at a distinct disadvantage and disabled fans receive this message over and over again every time another terrible thing happens to Charles that doesn’t happen to any of the other X-Men. Watching or reading X-Men content, we are reminded of the way that people with disabilities are made vulnerable, used, abused, and devalued by the society we live in. If we didn’t know that already, the pandemic should have taught us this. People with complex medical conditions continue to be at greater risk of severe illness or death from COVID, but not even medical professionals wear masks anymore.

Secondly, when we focus solely on Professor X’s vulnerability, we fail to recognize his strengths. Culturally, we may find ourselves doing this as well when we are surprised that a person with a disability is good at cooking or has a talent for music. In Xavier’s case, we often see him fall on the battlefield as in the case of X-Men Dark Phoenix when he, Cyclops, Storm, and Nightcrawler show up to prevent Magneto, Beast and a few others from trying to kill Jean Grey after she begins her transformation into the Dark Phoenix. This fight takes place in a busy street during rush hour traffic and is filled with barriers for wheelchair users and I think it’s valid that Xavier struggles with those throughout the fight. But Charles is a powerful enough telepath that if the writers had wanted to, they could have had him prevent much of the fighting from taking place simply by using his powers more effectively. If he can freeze an entire office of CIA employees as he does in X-Men: Apocalypse and all the White House Staff as he does in X2: X-Men United, he could surely use his powers more effectively on the battlefield than he does. If the people telling Xavier’s story did more to balance his power, the impacts of his disability, his personal strengths, and his weaknesses, we could signal that real people with disabilities have strengths, weaknesses, talents, interests, and complex personalities as well.

It’s Not All Bad

Based on everything I’ve said so far, you’re probably wondering if I actually like Marvel, the X-Men, or Professor X and the answer is YES, I really do! Professor X is one of my favorite characters and a lot of that has to do with the fact that he is a character with a disability who is respected by his peers. Other characters never ask him if he can do something or if he should be fighting alongside them. As a matter of fact, in X-Men: Dark Phoenix, Raven specifically calls him out for getting all the political glory and capital from the X-Men’s success at preventing violence between humans and mutants without being on the battlefield with his peers. She goes as far as to tell him: “It's funny. I can't actually remember the last time you were the one risking something.” Little moments like this might create conflict in the plot, but they also show that his peers look at him and see a whole person without making judgements about what he can and cannot do. They know that having the right tools enables Xavier to do a great deal and they assume that he belongs everywhere that they do.

Accessibility

Earlier, I argued how Marvel fails at accessibility by not showing many realistic instances of inaccessibility in Earth 616’s infrastructure. In fact, some of the speaking engagements he attends like in Dark Phoenix may not have been accessible to someone using a power wheelchair, but the newer movies in particular do make some subtle steps that I appreciate. For example, at his speaking engagement in Dark Phoenix, he is unable to make use of the podium, so he has to hold a microphone in his hands and speak from the side of the stage unlike other speakers who get to use the podium and take up the center of the stage.

Throughout the movies, TV, shows, and comics, he also has to get through the security doors to Cerebro, which is the device he uses to enhance his powers so that he can locate mutants on the other side of the world. Because the X-Mansion is built per his instructions, security doors like the one to Cerebro have ID readers that operate at his eye level, making them uniquely accessible to him. The building is outfitted with elevators and ramps so that he can navigate it freely. This is another testament to his wealth which protects him from having to live in an inaccessible house or work in an inaccessible workplace, but it does show a sort of dreamworld designed for universal accessibility.

He also has the money and resources throughout the movies, TV shows, and comics to design mobility devices that enhance his mobility in ways a standard wheelchair might not. For example, in some of the comics and in his cameo in Dr. Strange: Multiverse of Madness, he uses a wheelchair with bulldozer-like treads. In Days of Future Past, he uses a hover chair so that he doesn’t have to worry about stairs and other barriers. Of course, technology like this which either doesn’t exist in the real world or is financially inaccessible for most people isn’t a logical solution to real world infrastructural inaccessibility, but it does show that a world could exist that doesn’t limit people with disabilities and I appreciate that Xavier represents that.

Inclusion

Xavier’s interactions with other people with disabilities, impairments, or mutations that make them different exemplifies inclusion and acceptance. In the movie X-Men Apocalypse, he welcomes Scott Summers to his school for mutants and tests him on his abilities. At the time, Scott wears a blindfold at all hours to keep the laser beams from getting past his eyelids and causing damage or injury to anyone or anything within his line of sight. Professor X casually provides verbal cues to assist Scott in navigating his environment without his sight rather than taking away Scott’s agency. He also makes sure that Scott is outfitted with sunglasses that will allow him to see without damaging things with his eyes. Although this is a fictional genetic mutation, we can see this as metaphor for making sure that people with disabilities have access to the technologies and devices they need to live as authentically and independently as possible.

Another example from this same movie comes from the way the people around Xavier act in his presence. They treat him as the friend, teacher, and leader that he is. In the beginning of the film, Scott’s brother, Alex visits Xavier’s school to enroll his brother. When he reconnects with Xavier, he goes right in for a bro hug and a handshake. To people who aren’t part of the disability community, this might not seem significant, but I actually consider this to be a hugely important moment. People with disabilities, especially disabilities that are in some way visible, are very often left out of these types of familiar interactions. It’s not uncommon for people in a business setting to go around the room and shake hands with everyone except for the employee who uses a wheelchair. There is something about the lack of familiarity or comfort with disability that makes non-disabled people often feel uncertain or uncomfortable with touching a disabled person in the same way that they touch their other peers. On the other hand, there are many occasions in which disabled folks are treated like furniture and moved bodily by non-disabled people without consent. Having a moment like this interaction between Alex and Xavier in a superhero movie is hugely important because it shows how the disabled character, Xavier is capable of maintaining close relationships and that he can be included in the same displays of affection as everyone else. In the real world, sometimes these displays may need to be modified to ensure that the person can participate, but this is just something for you to keep in mind.

One final example of inclusion that I want to bring up in this section takes place in X-Men: Apocalypse. In this scene, Jean Grey experiences a nightmare-like vision of what is to come later in the movie. She has trouble controlling her power during her vision and wakes the other students in the mansion. She and Xavier have a conversation about how she fears her power and her concerns about causing unintentional harm. But this isn’t what stands out to me. When Xavier is trying to assuage her fears and help her learn how to work with her power rather than against it, he transfers from his wheelchair to the edge of the bed so that he can comfort her. Guess why that is so significant! Because TV paraplegia often assumes that wheelchair users can’t transfer themselves. And while some wheelchair users do need assistance transferring to and from their wheelchair and they should be represented, there are also many who don’t and they should be represented as well. This short moment in an otherwise big-action superhero movie gave us a tiny example of the diversity in the experiences of wheelchair users.

You’re Not Broken

There are times when Xavier’s character does ring true for me as someone who lives by the motto, “You’re not broken.” I’m writing this script during July, which is Disability Pride Month here in the United States. During this month, we celebrate the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act which was a huge step forward in legal protections for people with disabilities. Disability Pride can mean different things to different people. Some people can look at their disability and say, “This is how I was meant to be and I am my best self by living in my disabled skin.” Others can feel the pain of having a body or a brain that doesn’t work the way they might wish it did but can take pride in themselves and who they are regardless. We live in a world that pushes shame on people with disabilities, so finding a way to be proud of who you are whether that is because of or in spite of your disability or chronic illness or simply because you recognize your own value as a human person even when other people don’t is an important part of accepting yourself and fighting back against ableism in society.

The X-Men with all of their physical and mental differences from other humans can be a metaphor for disability and the trials that people with disabilities encounter. When Xavier pulls a young Jean Grey aside like he does in Dark Phoenix, and tells her, “You’re not broken,” we as an audience hear that coming from a man with a disability and that phrase has more power because of it. That doesn’t mean people with disabilities and chronic illnesses don’t struggle. There are a lot of days that I feel really broken, but when I hear a character like Xavier speak a line like that, I hear him saying that I am a sum of all of my parts, not just the parts that are hurting, and that I am valuable exactly as I am.

I feel like this conversation about Xavier and the X-Men could go on all day, but this seems like a good stopping point. If you want to hear more thoughts about this character’s place in disability representation in a future video, let me know in the comments. Thank you so much for listening to me go on and on about this topic. I’ve been saving up these thoughts for a really long time and I’m excited to share them through this platform. If there are other Marvel superheroes with disabilities that you want me to do a video on, let me know. I’ve got a list started, but I can prioritize characters that you might have an interest in.

You can find my sources linked in the description below. Other things you can find in the description include the link to read the script from this video, the link to the Underground Bookshelf website and the link to my new book. You can also find the link to the Underground Bookshelf patreon if you would like to support this project. You can be a Patron for $3 a month and patrons get an extra short story every month as a thank you. You can also support the project by picking up apparel from the merch store. The link for that is in the description as well. Of course, you can support this project for free by liking and subscribing, by following Underground Bookshelf on social media, reading the stories and using the resources on the website, watching our videos or by submitting your own short stories to be included in our collection.

Before signing off, my question for the comments is: What is your favorite Marvel character and why?

Thanks again, I’ll see you next time and remember, wherever you are, when you’re here in the Underground Bookshelf space, YOU BELONG.

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