



# Take Up Thy Bed and Walk: Death, Disability and Cure in Classic Fiction for Girls

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It is well known that authors of classic novels for girls used death or serious illness and injury to punish, tame, or redeem their heroines. If some really good characters (Helen in *Jane Eyre*, Beth in *Little Women*) and some really bad ones (Judy in *Seven Little Australians*) have to die to bring the rest into line, others are 'merely' struck down with paralysis (Katy in *What Katy Did*, Klara in *Heidi*, the eponymous heroine of *Pollyanna*) yet miraculously recover - in defiance of medical science then and, as Lois Keith observes, now. Keith shows us how popular was this motif of disability, how powerful the message of cure through faith and good behaviour and, ultimately, how stigmatising this approach to physical impairment. It is as if it was impossible to depict a disabled person leading a happy, fulfilling life. And still is, as Keith demonstrates in a concluding survey of modern children's fiction featuring characters with disabilities. Children, especially girls, get used to denying part of themselves when they read: otherwise we could never have coped with the succession of books that treated characters like ourselves as marginal, undesirable, 'other', or simply non-existent. Even allowing for the historical and social context, the message of *Little Women* or *What Katy Did* is a depressing one: that girls need to put aside their youthful exuberance and ambition to become subdued, domestic adult women (*Good Wives*). Yet generations of girls have enjoyed these novels, revelling in the positive depictions of lively girlhood. Keith shows us that disabled people too can enjoy these classics, but she also makes it clear that disability is more than a metaphor. The reality for disabled readers is that they have to seek far and wide for any literary role model, let alone a positive one. Accessible but scholarly, good-humoured but challenging, this book offers a fresh and important perspective on children's literature.

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