

“And then, you start feeling sharp”

The first science fiction character based on a Paralympic athlete

Chiara Montalti, University of Florence &
University of Pisa

Abstract: This essay is focused on discourses surrounding disability within an Italian science fiction novel entitled *BeBlade*, a unique publishing initiative written by Pierdomenico Baccalario (2018). The co-protagonist, in fact, is based on a young, wheelchair-using fencer and Paralympic athlete named Bebe Vio. After introducing the novel with respect to the science fiction genre, I will briefly illustrate the plot, and review how our character of interest is depicted. This article will examine some possible stereotypical representations of disability, employing the works of several disability scholars who deal in SF, such as Michael Bérubé and Kathryn Allan, to assess the novel’s success as a work of disability literature and as a work of young adult science fiction. While stereotypical and problematic representations threaten to emerge through the figure of the “supercrip,” as well as through the broader connotations of gendered representation throughout the text, this analysis aims to make manifest *BeBlade*’s radical potentiality as a disability narrative, particularly for science fiction writers and consumers engaged with disabled identities. The book examines various forms of disability, some typical and some unique to the story in question, with respect to “curing narratives” and to the oftentimes problematic intersections of futurity and disability – as outlined, for example, by Alison Kafer.

Keywords: Bebe Vio, stereotypes, representation, prostheses, future, Italian science fiction

Our metaphors, our tropes, our analogies: all have histories, all have consequences.

—Alison Kafer (2013), *Feminist Queer Crip*

What if we read contemporary science fiction stories as ethnographies of the future?

—Anne Balsamo (2000), *Reading Cyborgs writing Feminism*

In 2018, in Italy, *BeBlade* (by Pierdomenico Baccalario) appeared in print: quite a unique science fiction book – starting from the cover. The drawing shows a girl with short platinum hair, partially protected by a steel armour joint to a fencing foil. The most recognizable feature, however, is the girl’s profound facial scars. The author has apparently based his science fiction adventure on a real person, the Paralympic athlete Beatrice “Bebe” Vio. She achieved many victories in the sport arena, but even those who do not watch fencing or sports in general do know about her. In fact, almost everyone in Italy would realize this without even reading the title. She is very popular on TV and social media—she ironically states, “I’m everywhere now [...], I’m tired of myself” (Sarto, 2018). The aim of this essay is to examine the

representation of a character with disabilities as depicted in this novel—in this case, one based on a real person. Of course, disability rights activists and scholars have always held this topic close to their hearts; they “challenged (and continue to question) the representation of people with disabilities,” in science fiction too (Ott, 2002, p. 31). Our attempt, then, is part of a long history (see for example Allan, 2013; Kessock, 2017; Wälivaara, 2018; Cheyne and Allan, 2019; Kafer, 2013, p. 207, n. 29). However, this analysis does not take account simply of a persona, but also of the real person involved. In order to do so, we will begin by briefly presenting the author and, of course, Bebe Vio—although she is famous in Italy, she does not receive the same media exposure globally. In the second section we will analyse the book more closely, presenting its most important characteristics. In doing so, we are able to contextualize *BeBlade*’s character, and more generally the presence of disability throughout the work. In the third section we will focus on *BeBlade* and her companions, named the Funambulists, and we will learn about them and their disabilities. The book hasn’t been formally translated in English yet, but I have translated the material quoted.¹

“And then you start feeling sharp.” continued

In section four we will analyse the picture that emerges from the book. *BeBlade*'s character will be examined through three lenses: the community she builds in the dangerous world she inhabits, and whether gender and disability stereotypes are reinforced or, instead, challenged. Lastly, we will consider a topic dear to feminist and disability scholar Alison Kafer: futurity (Kafer, 2013). How is disability imagined through the novel? How is disability represented in the future? We will also take into account advancements in prostheses.

Aside from disability scholars and more generally academic essayists, I will also make use of bloggers—both science fiction authors and general users. With regard to pop culture, in fact, I find it very useful to pay attention to the public perspective too, with special attention to minority representations.

1 - The real *BeBlade* and the author

Bebe Vio is a 22-year-old woman widely known for her athletic talent: she is a gold medalist wheelchair fencer who has participated in the Paralympics, World Championships, and European Championships. Affected by a severe meningitis at the age of 11, both of her legs from the knees down and both of her arms up to the forearms were amputated. Yearning to come back to her training, she was able to fence again after surgery, thanks to a particular prosthesis that starts from her shoulder—initially designed by her father (Great Big Story, 2018). Now, she is very popular on TV programmes and social media. She has posed for Anne Geddes in a pro-vaccination campaign and published two inspiring autobiographies (Romano & Vio, 2017; Vio, 2015, 2018). Her parents, along with many other contributors, founded a non-profit organization in 2009, Art4Sport, with the mission of promoting sport as therapy for kids with physical disabilities and encouraging the development of advanced prostheses.²

The author of *BeBlade*, Pierdomenico Baccalario, is a popular young adult novel writer that mostly writes fantasy fiction. His books have been translated in more than 20 languages. Inspired by Vio's sto-

ry, he wrote *BeBlade: Bebe Vio e la sua squadra* (in English: *BeBlade. Bebe Vio and Her Team*). It ended up being a sort of collaboration: he contacted Vio's family and discussed his project with them. Baccalario explains in the acknowledgments:

I'd like to thank two of Bebe Vio's biggest fans, Mirco Zilio and Andrea Artusi, who had the idea of contacting her family and arranging our first meeting. Without the support of Teresa and Ruggero, Bebe's parents, none of this would have been possible. And, of course, thanks to Bebe's extraordinary passion for challenges³ (Baccalario, 2018, p. 394).

We are justified in believing that Vio and her parents contributed to a certain extent (Baccalario 2018, p. 394; Sarto, 2018). In an interview with the weekly newspaper *Donna Moderna*, Vio recalls the book's birth:

Not at first [it wasn't her idea, n.d.A.]. They reached me with the aim of writing a book on my life, but I did it before, so I preferred something different: a choral novel, inspired by the mission of our non-profit association, Art4Sport.⁴

In addition, Vio joined Baccalario many times during the book tour.

Baccalario transposed Vio onto a different, fictional, universe. Even though she's depicted on the cover, and the title directly refers to her, she is not the main character—she appears only in the second half of the novel. Juxtaposition of the fictional Vio (named *BeBlade* or *Bebe*) and the real Vio is not simply implicit: in addition to the subtitle, a short biography of Vio was inserted after Baccalario's own biography. Actually, Vio's biography is significantly longer than the author's, as he seems to prefer to stay in the background and let Vio emerge in every part of the project. To my knowledge, *BeBlade* is the first disabled character in science fiction that is based on a Paralympic athlete.

“And then you start feeling sharp.” continued

2 - BeBlade: a survival story

In terms of literary features, *BeBlade* is part of a well-known book series in Italy, *Il battello a vapore*, written for a young audience from primary school onwards, or ages 11 and above.

Using an Italian publishing context, *BeBlade* represents almost an unicum; disabled fictional characters are very rare indeed, especially in young adult novels. An exception, for example, is *Alice nel paese della Vaporità* (translated, *Alice in Steamland*), a steampunk novel by Francesco Dimitri (2010). Alice loses an arm during the narrative and acquires a disability indeed—this differs from *BeBlade*'s plot in various ways, as we will observe.

BeBlade is not a hard science fiction novel; the level of science and technology is minimal as it appears only in some characters' tools and in *BeBlade*'s prostheses. The story takes place on our Earth, but it is not clear in which country.⁵ In this fictional Earth, the sea has been rising to a frightening extent, submerging the shores and entire areas. “The world,” as a character recalls, “was decaying”⁶ (Baccalario, 2018, p. 52). However, we don't have enough details to define it within a post-apocalyptic framework.⁷ Temporally, it takes place in the future: *The Final Countdown* is recalled as “a prehistoric pop song”⁸ (Baccalario, 2018, p. 32). Some aspects of the society seem to be different from the one we occupy now, but we do not have many specific details. We learn, for example, that voting begins at 15 years of age, almost no one eats meat, and living in space is a plausible option (Baccalario, 2018, pp. 45, 53, 384). However, the most significant change is in the moral realm; there are some people who consider a deadly game I will present below as acceptable.

BeBlade bears a small resemblance to the Hunger Games saga: there is a survival plot, and the characters, in spite of themselves, are involved in some kind of sport or game that is sometimes lethal (Collins, 2011). In a desert area, separated from civilization, Seven Hunters try to catch hundreds of prey, or Hares, who are teenagers. They do not know exactly

where they are; they are in an abandoned city, surrounded by a lagoon—they name it simply “Here” (“Qui”). We also do not know the purpose behind the game. There is a group that enlists and rewards the Hares if they survive, or their families if they lose (and die). Some have chosen to participate knowing all the risks, but some appear to have been taken there against their will (Baccalario, 2018, pp. 163-164). The teenagers sent there decide how to play their game; if they give their weapons away, they become Hares and can live safely in their Nest. If they decide to fight the Hunters, they become Dog Heads and risk their lives daily. The Puppeteers represent the third faction: they were Hares who decided to help the Hunters in exchange for their complete safety. The last group, that we learn about the most, are the Funambulists. They live close to the lagoon, isolated from the others, who call them “the Wonkies” (“Gli Storti”; Baccalario, 2018, pp. 101, 160).

The main character is a girl called Mia. She lives with the Hares for a while, but is very curious to meet a mysterious character that everyone calls “BeBlade”. She has been told that when someone among the Hares is hurt, his or her only chance is being saved by BeBlade.

3 - The Fictional BeBlade

BeBlade is Bebe's warrior name, meant to frighten the Hunters and their supporters. Although she is named BeBlade by strangers and Bebe by her friends, for the sake of clarity in this analysis, we will call the character BeBlade (and Vio when referring to the real person). We read rumours about BeBlade many times before we actually meet her. Apparently, she is the leader of the Funambulists, the kids she takes care of. They are all disabled. Her actions are described in the story below:

She has already saved a lot of them, believe me. People given up for dead by everyone else. Sometimes you can meet one of them in the city: kids without legs [...] or without an arm, who climb better than me though⁹ (Baccalario, 2018, p. 160).

“And then you start feeling sharp.” continued

At this point, Mia asks herself if BeBlade could be a doctor (“she cures them”, or “li cura”, they say); however, the answer is quite surprising (Baccalario, 2018, p. 161). BeBlade is a fencer (Baccalario, 2018, p. 160). What kind of cure does she employ, then? Furthermore, as Mia and the Hares imagine her body; someone supposes she could actually be a robot. The other Hares insist that Mia be “prepared” for her encounter with this disabled individual: “Has anyone already revealed you *how she is*? [...] Something terrible surely happened to her. Her face is full of scars. And... her legs... she walks on two prostheses”¹⁰ (Baccalario, 2018, p. 172, emphasis mine).

So we learn that the fictional BeBlade, unlike the real Vio, uses the well-known cheetah legs that look like “two parentheses, or two bird legs”¹¹ (Baccalario, 2018, p. 223); something that immediately recalls the sport arena. Used by Paralympics runners, these sprinting legs became famous because of Aimee Mullins—as she recalls, she was “the first one in the world” wearing them (Fashion & Physique Symposium, 2018). We can also perceive the closeness with another Paralympic athlete, Oscar Pistorius, named (and also self-named) “Blade Runner” (Pistorius, 2012).

Finally, Mia meets her. BeBlade is not a robot, but a quadruple amputee wearing cheetah legs and prosthetic arms. The disability narrative follows Vio’s real biography; therefore, it is not closely tied to the story. BeBlade remembers that she contracted a disease at a younger age (Baccalario, 2018, p. 290). We never really understand how Beblade’s character ended up in the arena, though. Every Funambulist has a disability as well, but they are all consequences of the battlefield. Most have amputations and, more rarely, blindness and severe burns. However, the Funambulists explain their resilience to Mia: “At the beginning it’s very hard to accept you have lost a piece of yourself. [...] Then, you realise you can earn new pieces”¹² (Baccalario, 2018, p. 202). When Mia shakes BeBlade’s hand, she realizes it is a prosthesis, even if “the fingers moved”¹³ (Baccalario, 2018, p. 208). BeBlade takes them both off, and Mia is able

to see her arms covered in scar tissue. She stares at BeBlade, “halfway between fascinated and horrified.”¹⁴ “They were the best prostheses, a few years ago... Yet they’re high-tech lumps of plastic after all”¹⁵ (Baccalario, 2018, p. 209).

Through the adventures they have together, Mia shows her fascination for the strange community they built. She also better understands the meanings of their nicknames. “Funambulists are wobbling on death. And I walk on blades. [...] We’re Funambulists because there isn’t a safety net below us. We’re the wrong ones, whom no one would ever give a chance”¹⁶ (Baccalario, 2018, pp. 213-214). BeBlade and her Funambulists train Mia; she learns to use swords, foils, and canes and becomes stronger. Her new friends, “cripple or hurt,”¹⁷ meaning that they do not hold back in their training, and fight and exercise quickly (Baccalario, 2018, p. 225). BeBlade in particular attaches different weapons to her prosthetic arm to fight and shows how stable she is on her cheetah legs (Baccalario, 2018, p. 226). “And then”, as Mia finds out after all her training, “you start feeling *sharp*.”¹⁸ (Baccalario, 2018, p. 235). She feels like part of the team: “No matter what happened to us. No matter who we have been. We’re here. Now. We’re blades” (Baccalario, 2018, p. 281).

Throughout the novel, two Art4Sport goals clearly emerge: the importance of technology and the inspiration engendered by Vio’s story (Baccalario, 2018, p. 290):

When they take your legs away, you must learn to walk again. In order to do that, technology is compulsory. It’s your only ally. A part of you. Only idiots regret what they can no longer do. There’s always something new. A new invention. A new way²⁰ (Baccalario, 2018, p. 289).

The Funambulists are also called “the Association,” which is modeled on Art4Sport youth athletes. After the conclusion of the novel, this juxtaposition is made crystal clear: the statement “The Funambulists, the real ones” is followed by references to the

“And then you start feeling sharp.” continued

real kids from Art4Sport (Baccalario, 2018, p. 396). There is emphasis on the importance of teamwork, which is a character trait demonstrated both by BeBlade and Vio, and not only amongst the disabled characters. BeBlade has a strong bond with Mia and all the other Funambulists, but concurrently pushes the Dog Heads and the Hares to work together against the Hunters. “They divided us, don’t you see?—she said—In gangs and factions, the Straights and the Wonkies. Everyone against everyone. And like this, we’re nothing”²¹ (Baccalario, 2018, p. 259). Vio, too, always stresses the relevance of a network of people, affinity, and bonding; that is both a personal characteristic and, of course, a feature of the Art4Sport association. From a biographical perspective, she explains: “You’re no one, by yourself. When you think you lost everything, you must have someone to live for, to start living again. To me, it was my family, my friends at school and my fencing mates”²² (Sarto, 2018). Vio then adds, talking about the book and the inspiration behind it, “The message is: together we can. BeBlade has a team of friends who come to the Prey’s aid. Me and my family provide prostheses to amputee children”²³ (Sarto, 2018).

4 - Occurrence of stereotypes

The appearance of Vio’s character traits in the fictional BeBlade makes the evaluation of stereotypes different than it would be for a purely fictional character. It is opportune to be tactful, because those of BeBlade’s features that we will examine are possibly inspired by the biography and the character of the real Vio. Normally, we do not judge someone in terms of stereotypical narratives. However, we will consider communal, gender, and disability axes.

It is unusual in science fiction for an entire disabled community to be portrayed. This challenges the more established choice of depicting a single disabled character in a story. In *BeBlade*, the Funambulists develop a strong bond, building a community at first separated from all the other teams. They represent a microcosm within another microcosm. They accept Mia, after a while, but she is the only able-bodied member. Despite her difference, she

feels more attached to them than to the other teams. However, although there is division among the Prey, they join forces as an alliance with common purposes, eventually. It is interesting both in the presence of so many disabled characters and in their leading role of building that alliance—perhaps, a metaphor for our non-fictional Earth.

BeBlade’s role in the Association is similar to Imperator Furiosa’s in *Mad Max: Fury Road*: she is proactive, strong, and also protective in a motherly way (Miller, 2015). According to Alisha Rogersen, female characters in science fiction are often represented stereotypically, individually constructed as an “empowered sex symbol,” as “fragile” and “hyper-feminized” (often in a romantic relationship), or as maternal (Rogersen, n.d.). Even though this last feature is often a stereotypical female trait, gender representation for BeBlade is generally positive. She makes her own choices, motivated by the need to protect her companions and their final victory. The character shaped on Vio is not sexualized and is not engaged in a relationship. In fact, no one is. Whether the absence of romance is due to a mere preference to the young audience, to BeBlade’s disability, or to a combination of all three, has not been determined²⁴ (Whittington-Walsh, 2002; Reeve in Goodley, 2016, p. 101).

The disability themes in this novel are more complex. As we already underlined, in science fiction literature “disability is often central to the plot” (Allan, 2013, p.7). This has led to “a small yet growing field of study” that focuses on intersections between disability studies and science fiction, and analyses the (often stereotypical) representations of disabled characters (Wälivaara, 2018, p. 1037). Regarding these frequent portrayals of people with disabilities, Michael Bérubé describes it as an obsession. This literary genre, then, “turns out to be populated by blind Daredevils, mutant supercrips, and posthuman cyborgs of all kinds” (Bérubé, 2005, p. 568). According to Kathryn Allan, “while SF undoubtedly recuperates stereotypical and biased views of the disabled body, the potential for reading—and imagining—

“And then you start feeling sharp.” continued

alternative human bodies as transformative in the genre is worthy of sustained critical attention” (2013, p. 8).

Pop references, including literary characters, have the capacity to produce original representations of people perceived as not conforming. These references inevitably had (and may still have in the future) a strong impact both on individuals and on the whole society. I believe they can change how people with disabilities—including LGBTQIA members, and many others who are rejected by conservative society—perceive themselves. This visibility, when respectful and without stigmas, can also help in “decoding” their experiences within a non-inclusive society. As Ria Cheyne argues, “narratives circulating in popular culture play a significant role in shaping wider understandings of disability” (Cheyne, 2012, p. 117). Disabled performative artist Petra Koppers, for example, glimpses this opportunity in every visual presence of disability, from movies to theatrical performances. In her opinion, the curiosity produced in these spaces can spread respect and “ethical care” and open up “new opportunities” for disabled people (2006 p. 180).

As noted in many studies, plots involving disabilities often unravel in a similar way. According to Bérubé (2005, p. 570), disability “demands a story”; every disabled character revolves around their own disability. That means, often, a “curing narrative” through cybernetics or technology. Disability then disappears, leaving behind an enhanced character—likely a superhero (Wälivaara, 2018, p. 1046). As observed by Donna Reeve, it is quite rare to find proper representation of “the lived experience of disability and impairment” in science fiction cyborgs (Goodley, 2016, p. 101). “Application of technology,” then, reinforces the widely discussed topic of medicalization within disability’s realm (Allan, 2013, p. 8).

When a disabled character is not “pitiful,” the narrative of the “supercrip” often comes into play, one which “describes people with disabilities as extraordinary.” As Amit Kama neatly highlights, and Josefine Wälivaara separately affirms, the problem with super-

crips—both in the sports arena (as the Paralympics) and in the fictional realm—is the focus on “individual achievements” (Wälivaara, 2018, p.1038). The supercrip narrative stresses personal willpower and empowerment, overlooking social and economic obstacles. If those with a disability simply try hard enough, they will certainly succeed, helped by technological enhancement. In opposition to the “supercrip” stereotype, disability scholars have sometimes avoided popular culture altogether. In Sami Schalk’s words, “To dismiss outright all representations of supercrips as ‘bad’ is to disregard potentially entire genres of popular culture productions, ones which tend to have very large audiences” (cited in Wälivaara, 2018, p. 1038). Perhaps it would be more fertile to “critically engage” with disability stories, even when they include stereotypes, because they reflect “discourses of disability in society” (Wälivaara, 2018, p. 1038).

How does *BeBlade* fit in this framework, with respect to stereotypes and recurrent plots involving disabled characters? Firstly, disabilities are not the core of the plot; on the other hand, they are direct consequences of the perverse game in which characters find themselves. The only exception is *BeBlade*, as we already mentioned; the author, in fact, maintained Vio’s real story, with a suggestion of a disease as the cause of her disability. Unlike *Furiosa* in *Mad Max*, whose amputation is never commented on, some details are eventually revealed in *BeBlade* (McSerf, 2015).

In a merely physical way, *BeBlade* wears prostheses in order to protect herself and her companions in the battlefield. There is nothing new in that, but she also appears without them when she is more comfortable doing things that way. This happens in spite of, for example, Mia’s ambivalent reaction. In this way, she acts in a similar way to her real counterpart; Vio is not afraid to show herself socially without her prosthetic arms. In her relationship with her prostheses, *BeBlade* appears similar to *Furiosa*, who “seems as comfortable without her prosthesis as she does with it” (McSerf, 2015). In addition, *Furiosa*, like *BeBlade*, has neither “superpowers” nor lesser capacities

“And then you start feeling sharp.” continued

compared to able-bodied characters (McSerf, 2015).

The most interesting part, however, is how the acts to “cure”/“care” are intended. As stated in the book, BeBlade is not a doctor. Obviously she administers the few medicines available, but she relies on the same treatment she (and Vio) wanted as a child, and the one Art4Sport fights for: the possibility to play sports, have adequate gyms, obtain useful prostheses, compete, fight without excessive parental protection, lose, and win. Art4Sport’s perspective—and consequently our storyline—relies on an original type of cure, which implies an act of taking charge and care of kids with disabilities that does not depend on the medical realm. As stated in their official site, they believe “in practicing sport as therapy for physical and psychological recovery of children and kids with limb prostheses” (<https://art4sport.org>, emphasis mine). Their aim then is to remove obstacles that disable kids who want to exercise.

Lastly, the character of BeBlade is certainly not pitiful, but rather close to the opposite: the supercrip. Yet, also considering the risks of this stereotype, this particular narrative reflects Vio’s real person, her involvement with sports in particular. However, as P. David Howe (2011) explains very clearly, her high-profile media exposure could possibly be determined precisely by her “cyborgification” in the Paralympics arena; that is, the focus on athletes whose performances are based on technological aids such as wheelchair or prostheses.

5 - Imagining futures with disability

As stated in *Feminist Queer Crip* by Alison Kafer, it is important to consider the intersections between

temporal issues and disability. The topic can be divided in two main approaches. Firstly, when “disability” experience enters the popular imagination, the concept of “future” seems to disappear: “disability is what ends one’s future” (Kafer, 2013, p. 33). Kafer explains the second approach:

If disability is conceptualized as a terrible

unending tragedy, then any future that includes disability can only be a future to avoid. A better future, in other words, is one that excludes disability and disabled bodies; indeed, it is the very absence of disability that signals this better future (2013, p. 3).

It is a popular opinion, then, that a “disability-free future” is desirable—and she challenges precisely this assumption in her essay (Kafer, 2013, p. 3). This kind of future can be achieved both with prenatal interventions and in “curative terms.”

How is science fiction related to the future, or lack of future, of disability? There are profound intersections to be explored. As Kafer highlights, “Science fiction is full of ‘imagined futures,’ and disabled characters are common in such novels (even if they aren’t referred to as ‘disabled’ within the narratives themselves)” (2013, p. 20). This absence of the term disabled, in fact, is true about BeBlade too; people with disabilities are usually depicted as cyborgs, and never named “disabled”. It is a term from the real universe that doesn’t enter in the fictional universe. As Katherine Ott, an historian of prosthetics clarifies: “cyborgs are divorced from disability” (2002, p. 21); that requires a change of status, both linguistically and regarding the frequently mentioned curing narrative. Moreover, Sharon L. Snyder and David Mitchell highlight how pop culture consumers often fail to perceive disabled characters; in fact, they “tend to filter a multitude of disability” and “screen them out of [their] minds” (Mitchell & Snyder, 2000, p. 51). In our case, even though the term is absent, it is impossible to miss disability.

However, returning to the main issue, when science fiction writers imagine futures, they often include people with disabilities—but they are rarely left uncured. “Futurity,” as Kafer asserts, “has often been framed in curative terms” (2013, p. 28). It is important, then, that these “SF scenarios” are able to include original, different paths [...]: establishing [their] strong and positive presence” could ensure them a “collective, and ideally better, future” (Allan, 2013, p. 8).

“And then you start feeling sharp.” continued

Regarding this issue, it is interesting to consider Marieke Nijkamp’s claims. Nijkamp is a writer and edited *Unbroken*, an anthology of thirteen stories starring disabled teenagers written by disabled authors (Nijkamp, 2018b). S/he proposes some advice to other writers on how to deal with disabled characters, and recalls what it is like to read books in which s/he cannot find proper representation²⁵:

As Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop wrote in 1990: “Books are sometimes windows, offering views of worlds that may be real or imagined, familiar or strange. [...] When lighting conditions are just right, however, a window can also be a mirror. [...] Reading, then, becomes a means of self-affirmation, and readers often seek their mirrors in books.” I grew up reading science fiction and I found no mirrors. Imagine what that feels like (Nijkamp, 2018a).

When this happens in novels soaked in “bright and infinite tomorrows,” as science fiction is, it is even more hurtful. In order to make a “disability representation future-proof” (Nijkamp, 2018a), the most important steps are to know the issues the disabled community faces, and to acknowledge that not everyone is looking to be cured. S/he concludes the memorandum this way:

The nondisabled future is fed by the common idea that technology will be a panacea that will eradicate impairments and, presumably, normalize brains. [...] Consider the thousand ways in which the most technologically advanced societies will still include disabled people (Nijkamp, 2018a, emphasis mine).

As we recounted, *BeBlade* is set in an arguably distant future. We are not able to make assumptions about its “actual” society outside the area in which characters are trapped, hence our conclusions concern only the microcosm living with specific dynamics due to the game. First of all, people with disabilities are actually imagined to exist in the future; as we

said, that is pretty common in science fiction. This may be obvious for the Funambulists, it is but it is important to note the difference for *BeBlade*; she got a disease outside the arena, but her disabled body was not erased.²⁶ Technology is not used for cyborgification.

A separate thought needs to be outlined regarding the prostheses. Similar to our present prostheses—cheetah legs and possibly bionic plastic arms—the presence of these same devices in the narrative make us assume that progress has not been made in this field in that future. A future without advancement in every medical and technological field is hardly conceivable: the advance of technology is usually halted only in post-apocalyptic novels, when a large-scale event blows every comfort away. In our case, we do not know exactly how much the world has changed, but it seems that technology works well outside the arena. In fact, *BeBlade* received some prostheses, even though, as we said, they are not the ones we would imagine populating our future. We can simply suppose Baccalario wanted to make the real and fictional “Bebes” similar.

But if we want to dig a little deeper in the framework that emerges from the novel, we could propose two hypothetical interpretations. Prostheses are available, but not everyone chooses to wear them – disregarding the exceptions made by non-disabled people, and any framework of compulsory able-bodiedness. There also could be a second interpretation, more attached to our present: the Funambulists represent everyone—in particular kids—who *cannot afford* a prosthesis, or a technological aid. That is precisely one of the projects Art4Sport is striving for. Whichever is the case, *BeBlade*’s picture of disability in the future turns out to be uncommon.

6 - Conclusion

If we rely on Mitchell and Snyder’s words (they refer to Americans in particular), we should acknowledge that we often “learn perspectives on disability from books and films more than from policies or personal interactions” (2008, p. 166). Hence, its represent-

“And then you start feeling sharp.” continued

-ation has great importance. On the other hand, “representation inevitably spawns discontent” (Mitchell & Snyder, 2008, p. 40). Every consumer of a product—whether it be books, video games, or movies—tends to decode a character or an experience through a larger framework, in order to draw wider conclusions about the society in which they live. Therefore, those characters live in fiction but continue to have consequences, such as having to “live” in real society. In addition, if there is general consent among disabled people on negative representations, the positive ones are “fraught with difficulty” (Mitchell & Snyder, 2008, p. 20). In Mitchell and Snyder’s words, “The effort to represent is inevitably fraught with politics. The question of disability’s service to ‘negative’ portrayals is profoundly complex” (Mitchell & Snyder, 2008, pp. 40-41).

We have assessed the handling of stereotypes and ambivalent representations, within the context of this complexity. Disability, we stated, usually “demands a story”; in *BeBlade* it’s rarely explained, and rather simply lived. The novel skips the pitiful narrative and, regarding *BeBlade*’s character, treats her more as a supercrip. We have, then, examined the second term of the “kill or cure” logic, that often “infuses popular film and television plots that introduce disabled characters” (Mitchell & Snyder, 2008, p. 164). As we highlighted, the “cure” topic turns, for once, on a non-medical procedure: *BeBlade* mainly administers care, training, and empowerment, rather than prostheses and drugs. We have not examined the “evil cripple” stereotype, because it is inconsistent with the novel under examination (Mitchell & Snyder, 2008, pp. 17-21).

In conclusion we argue that—given all possible negative representations—*BeBlade* offers up a “disability counternarrative.” It might represent Allan’s demanded (and already mentioned) “original, different path,” presenting the effort to “expand options for depicting disability experiences” (Mitchell & Snyder, 2008, p. 164). It is also important to underline the target audience; young readers do not frequently encounter characters with disabilities.²⁷ To sum it

up, the novel offers a picture coloured by a strong disabled community, an empowered young girl who knows how to fight, and a future in which all of them exist and matter. In addition, it offers that girl’s voice, finely watercolored within the ink spilled by the author. From real Earth to fictional Earth and back, we are getting you loud and clear, Bebe.

Notes

- ¹ I have translated every quote from Italian sources.
- ² See Associazione Onlus Art4Sport: <http://www.art4sport.org/>.
- ³ “Desidero ringraziare i due primi fan di Bebe Vio, Mirco Zilio e Andrea Artusi, che ebbero l’idea di contattare la sua famiglia per organizzare il nostro primo incontro. Senza l’aiuto e l’appoggio di Teresa e Ruggero, i genitori di Bebe, tutto questo non sarebbe stato possibile. E naturalmente grazie alla passione straripante di Bebe per le sfide” (original text). Zilio, Artusi and Baccalario are all members of a storytelling agency (named Book on a Tree).
- ⁴ “All’inizio no. Mi hanno cercata per scrivere un libro sulla mia vita, ma siccome l’avevo già fatto io, ho voluto una cosa diversa: un romanzo corale, ispirato alla missione della nostra associazione, Art4Sport” (original text). In Italian, with “romanzo corale” we mean a story with a lot of voices, with multiple points of view.
- ⁵ Maybe somewhere in a Russian-speaking country. See Baccalario, 2018, p. 336.
- ⁶ “Il mondo stava marcendo” (original text).
- ⁷ Although disabled characters are frequently a strong presence in science fiction, post-apocalyptic novels are almost always an exception as characters with disabilities are often left behind to die. See for example Kessock, 2017.
- ⁸ “...una canzone pop di quelle preistoriche” (original text).
- ⁹ “Ne ha salvati già tanti, credimi. Gente che gli altri avevano dato per spacciata. Ogni tanto se ne

“And then you start feeling sharp.” continued

incontra uno in città: ragazzini senza le gambe [...] o senza un braccio, che però si arrampicano meglio di me” (original text).

¹⁰ “Qualcuno ti ha già detto com’è? [...] Le deve essere successo qualcosa di orribile. Ha il volto coperto di cicatrici. E... le gambe... Cammina su due protesi” (original text).

¹¹ “Simili a due parentesi, due zampe d’uccello” (original text).

¹² “All’inizio è molto difficile abituarsi all’idea di aver perso un pezzo di sé. [...] Poi ti accorgi che puoi guadagnarne altri che nemmeno sapevi di avere” (original text).

¹³ “Le dita si muovevano” (original text).

¹⁴ “A metà tra l’affascinato e l’inorridito” (original text).

¹⁵ “Erano le migliori protesi esistenti, qualche anno fa. Ma sono pur sempre pezzi di plastica altamente sofisticati” (original text).

¹⁶ “Funamboli stanno in equilibrio sulla morte. E io, sulle lame, ci cammino. [...] Siamo Funamboli perché non c’è rete, sotto di noi. Siamo quelli sbagliati, quelli a cui nessuno avrebbe dato una possibilità” (original text).

¹⁷ “Storpi o feriti” (original text).

¹⁸ “E allora cominci a sentirti affilato” (original text).

¹⁹ “Non importa cosa ci è successo. Non importa chi siamo stati. Siamo qui. Ora. Siamo lame” (original text).

²⁰ “E poi, quando ti tolgono le gambe, devi imparare a camminare di nuovo. In questo, la tecnologia è indispensabile. È il tuo unico alleato. Una parte di te. Solo gli idioti rimpiangono quello che non possono più fare. C’è sempre qualcosa di nuovo. Una nuova invenzione. Un nuovo modo” (original text).

²¹ “Ci hanno divisi, non capisci? – disse. – In bande e fazioni, i dritti e gli storti. Messi gli uni contro gli altri. E così facendo, non siamo niente” (original text).

²² “Da sola non sei nessuno. Quando credi di avere perso tutto, per ricominciare a vivere devi avere qualcuno per cui lottare. Per me sono stati la famiglia, poi gli amici di scuola e i compagni di scherma” (original text).

²³ “Il messaggio è: insieme si può. BeBlade ha una squadra di amici che va in soccorso delle Prede. Io e la mia famiglia forniamo ai bambini amputati le protesi” (original text).

²⁴ On disabled character asexuality, see Whittington-Walsh, 2002 and Reeve, 2016. Whittington-Walsh, in particular, argues that disabled male characters are more frequently portrayed as asexual than disabled female ones.

²⁵ Nijkamp identifies as genderqueer and does not have a pronoun preference. I choose the ‘s/he’ pronoun purely on personal preference, because I find ‘they’ less proper (see <http://www.mariekenijkamp.com/musings/faq/>).

²⁶ This erasure happens, for example, in *The ship who sang* (McCaffrey, 1969). See Kafer’s critical analysis (2013, p. 112). It occurs even more frequently in disabled characters living in the outer space, where they are often treated medically and merged with technology; as the writer Larry Niven summarized it, “space leaves no cripples” (1965, emphasis mine). For a further analysis of both novels, see Cherney, 1999. He also takes account of the problematic intersections between cyborg theory and disability experience, in particular regarding the cochlear implant.

²⁷ For further insights, see Disability in Kid Lit project, dedicated to discuss “the portrayal of disability in middle grade and young adult literature”: <http://disabilityinkidlit.com/>.

“And then you start feeling sharp.” continued

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“And then you start feeling sharp.” continued

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