

Review: "Other" Fish in the Sea: "Finding Nemo" as an Epic Representation of Disability

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Article:

The animated feature "Finding Nemo" swept the box office last summer, and audiences of all ages and critics alike were overwhelmed by how a seemingly simple story had made such a splash. Recently having a second life on DVD, the film has become the most financially successful film of 2003 and the largest grossing animated feature of all time, outshining Disney/Pixar's previous hits *Toy Story I* and *II* and *Monsters, Inc.*, as well as its competing summer blockbusters. "Finding Nemo" surfaced as a characteristic Disney epic adventure and heart-warming coming of age tale with resplendent twists. The plot follows a young clown fish, Nemo (Alexander Gould), who is separated from his father, Marlin (Albert Brooks), by the human intervention of a scuba diver and held captive in the office fish tank of a Sydney, Australia dentist (Bill Hunter). Nemo is rescued through the joint efforts of exotic, yet familiarly goofy, ironically down-to-earth, and cleverly caricatured populations of marine creatures. Seagulls, pelicans, turtles, manta rays, jellyfish, squid, starfish, sharks, whales, lobsters, other curious crustaceans, and a glorious array of tropical fish in all configurations and designs animate the film's lavish oceanic world. The creatures are not only strikingly heterogeneous in appearance, but also have international accents or dialects and personas that convey a variety of social styles. This cast of characters, their tongue-in-cheek, witty dialogue, and appropriately colorful depictions add to the appeal and smash success of the film, as vivid and illusionistic artistry positions the viewer as a visually awed undersea explorer.

I, too, was reeled in by the tempo, humor, and visual splendor of the film, as one who appreciates and studies visual culture. Further, as a disability studies-minded viewer, I saw far more beneath the spectacular surface. In "Finding Nemo", I discovered sunken treasure—a multifaceted representation of disability. The protagonist, Nemo, displays a small, or "deformed," fin that is a congenital result of a fatal attack on his mother and sibling eggs—a corporeal characteristic that the story surrounds, yet does not drown in. In an aquatic natural world where species maintain characteristic, standardized appearances, Nemo is marked as visually and socially different, yet hardly inadequate. He explains that he has a "lucky" fin when questioned by his classmates, who then offer their own explanations of distinctive physical quirks: a squid confesses to having a lazy tentacle, a seahorse boasts of his "H2O intolerance." Nemo's peers accept him, even admire his self-confident attitude and plucky spirit, because in this diverse "school" of fish, everybody's different. Considering such characteristics as "disabilities" may seem absurd; however, this makes a valid parallel point about many physical differences and their assumed consequences.

There is suggestion in the film that Nemo may not be able to swim as well as other fish, particularly by his father, but no evidence supports this, or at least Nemo swims well enough with his own adapted methods to get where he needs and wants to go. In true to life fashion, Nemo continually negotiates and battles restrictive assumptions about him based on his impaired fin, to both positive and negative results. Disabled people are commonly underestimated, often most painfully by those who should have the most faith in us, who love us, and know us best, exemplified by Marlin's loving, but potentially damaging overprotection of his son. Marlin smothers Nemo, sequesters him near their home, attempts to speak for him, and fears others' condemnation to the point that he avoids social interaction. Marlin enacts his son's social exclusion, continually embarrasses and

frustrates the willful Nemo, and causes rifts in their relationship. To defiantly establish his independence, Nemo enters into the drastically deeper section of the sea surrounding his community termed the "drop off," where he is captured. His disability plays a role in his fate, yet not because he is inherently deficient or vulnerable, and that same disability enables his return home, for his marking identifies him for those who search—it makes him memorable. Disability becomes part of Nemo's personal history and social identity, visually marking him as a survivor.

"Finding Nemo" proves to be an unconventional, transgressive representation of disability. In conventional narrative, disability becomes the sole characteristic of one-dimensional characters that most often require physical change, repair, or elimination in order for the narrative to maintain a supposedly preferable state of social and psychic order, or "normality." Such narratives tend to fall into generic categories that typecast disabled characters as misfortunate tragedies or sentimental, largely patronized heroes. Conversely, "Finding Nemo" paints disability as a flavorful ingredient in cultural diversity—both remarkable, yet necessarily everyday, perhaps even disguised in the tides of life. Indeed, to the mainstream audience, "Finding Nemo" isn't "about" disability at all, because physical difference isn't a glaring spectacle in the film that signals danger or elicits pity, as viewers may be more used to witnessing. Further, disability is presented as a socially constructed character quality, rather than a state of the body to which value judgments are assigned. The fact that the role of disability floats past the mainstream audience and most critics of "Finding Nemo" without notice perhaps attests on a metanarrative level to how disability may afford a privileged viewing perspective, such that "seeing" disability occurs more immediately for a disability-aware audience who identify with the characters and discover deeper layers of meaning in the film.

In addition to Nemo, various eccentric aquatic bodies and personalities flow in and out of the screen in harmonies of difference, many of which may be considered disabilities. Many of the characters' humorous idiosyncrasies could be called "abnormalities." Dory (Ellen DeGeneres), a lively blue tang who becomes Marlin's sidekick on the quest for Nemo's rescue, has chronic short-term memory loss. The "reason" for this is not revealed, as the film unconventionally does not medicalize or otherwise attribute a cause for disability. Dory's chronic condition causes pitfalls, yet she can also read written English and speak whale, and due to her openly sociable personality and penchant for adventure, Dory initiates communication with many other species that results in progress for the journey. Dory assumes agency in the plot, can remember through adaptive problem solving when it is vitally crucial, and displays her "abnormality" as comical charm. Further, she professes an overall consciousness for the film that life is inevitably a series of obstacles, as well as opportunities for adventure, and that one must, as Dory joyfully expresses in her repeated slogan, "keep on swimming." In addition, she and Marlin meet sea turtles that are more than 150 years old, but hardly suffer from their age—they ironically speak in the tongue of youthful beach bums, referring to Marlin as "dude" as they lead the duo to Sydney. Marlin proves emotionally disabled by the traumatic loss of his wife and chronic anxiety; vegetarian-aspiring sharks undergo a 5-step program; and in the Sydney fish tank, Nemo meets a very motley, some might call neurotically ill, group, including Gurgle (Austin Pendleton), a royal gamma obsessed with germ-free cleanliness and Deb (Vicki Lewis), a white humbug damsel fish who routinely misrecognizes herself in reflection from the tank wall as an imaginary twin sister, Flo. Their leader fish, Gill (Willem Dafoe), like Nemo, came from the sea, longs to return, and is physically distinguished—marked by scars. Also like Nemo, this trademark signifies wisdom, "street" smarts, and rites of passage. All of the remarkable, "abnormal," even freakish characters in "Finding Nemo" swim with and against the undertow, and neither "overcome" their so-called physical and intellectual "problems," nor prevail "in spite of" them, as conventional narrative and stereotypes would prescribe. And in graphic illustration, they far exceed even two dimensions.

However, these aspects are greatly overlooked in the film, perhaps poignantly asserting the film's largely unprecedented progressiveness. After all, more classic animated fairytales have been known for their dubious, and sometimes publicly criticized sexist and ethnocentric biases. The princesses are stolen property, properly saved and wed, while evil characters are laden with non-Western, non-white stereotypes. Further, malice is often embodied in physically "deformed," and otherwise visually "abnormal" characters, marked, like Nemo, by displayable difference and often specifically placed on display to provide a counter-example to "normal." By

contrast, "Finding Nemo" brings elements of social and cultural diversity to life in educational marine biology lessons of visually distinguishable, sometimes competing, yet non-hierarchical species. One would have a difficult time differentiating which kinds of bodies are on display in this splendid spectacle, and to what significance. "Finding Nemo's" success may have to do with its refreshing nature and escape from the typical good versus evil dichotomies in favor of flavorful cultural relativism. "Other" fish populate the sea. Nemo's disability, visually defined by his unique fin, affects, yet does not dictate his daily life, and initiates moments of joy and self-discovery. "Finding Nemo" becomes an act of rescue, maturation, and acceptance of self and others for all the characters. Marlin learns to trust Nemo and his self-defined abilities, as prescriptive stereotypes of disability are tested and disproved and the protagonist's triumph is enabled.