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## WE NEED TRUE HOPE

*Jenna Lane*

Hope is a crazy thing. The best kind of hope saves, while the worst destroys. *Miracles from Heaven*, focuses on the journey of a young girl named Annabel with digestive tract paralysis. She is affected mainly in her intestines by a condition called chronic intestinal pseudo obstructions (CIP). Her life shifts from school and friends to feeding tubes, hospitals, surgeries, and traveling to see doctors. Days consist of lying on the couch with a heating pack trying to control the agonizing pain followed by sleepless nights in pain and throwing up. The whirlwind of hospital and doctors culminates in traveling from Texas to Boston to beg the main pediatric motility specialist in the country to help her. During a rare period of time at home in Texas, Anna is outside climbing a tree after a lot of convincing from her older sister when she falls inside the hollow tree unconscious. When she is rescued hours later, she wakes up completely unharmed and healed. Annabell later shares that she talked to God in heaven and he had promised to send her back, but this time healed. The promise holds true as at the end of the movie, Anna is depicted perfectly healthy, as if she never had had CIP (*Miracles from Heaven*). The movie offers the worst kind of hope, the false kind.

Personally, I have been on a journey quite similar to Annabel over the past few years with the main difference being my digestive tract paralysis mainly affects my stomach through a condition called Gastroparesis, instead of my intestines. There is never any decent representation for conditions like ours, so I decided to give such a mainstream movie a chance. For a movie described as a tearjerker, I can assure you I did cry, but not for the reason you would originally think. I was angry. I am still angry. Angry that this is the representation that exists for the general public that otherwise knows nothing about our lives. Angry that a disease that took so much from me is being used to push others' religious agendas. Angry that those around me may believe that I'm only still sick because I'm not worthy of God curing me. There is a lot for me to be angry about, but this was one movie and one condition. This is a widespread issue affecting the disability community and what others think about disabled individuals based on media representation.

Disability representation in the media is sparse, and when disabled characters are featured they typically only appear to be inspirational or objects of scorn or pity. For the general public, the media is the only idea of disability they have, so their view simply involves these three ideas that cause separation between disabled and able-bodied individuals. In Annabel's case she is portrayed in a way that inspires others to connect with her God and

continues the idea that the only way disabled individuals can be happy is if they are completely cured. These ideas are harmful to everyone, especially to individuals like myself, living with digestive tract paralysis. The overall message of the movie is that disabilities need a cure in general and that if you are a strong Christian, God will cure you. While *Miracles from Heaven* does an excellent job of portraying the harsh reality of Intestinal Pseudo Obstructions in the beginning, the idea of using disability to push religious agendas continues to create a negative view of disabled individuals.

Up until Annabell's miraculous cure, the movie is very accurate to the journey that almost everyone with digestive tract paralysis goes on. The numerous misdiagnoses, the family turmoil, the pain of tube placements, the dread of small tasks like showering, and more are very accurate to not only my experience but others I have met along the way. One b-roll scene highlights Annabel looking fearful while stepping on the scale (*Miracles from Heaven* 55:10-55:25). With these conditions, when weight is lost that is when treatment intensifies. If too much weight is lost, feeding tubes, admissions, central lines, tpn, etc. follow, so the fear of losing weight is intense. Even the minute details were dead on and what was inaccurate would only truly be noticed by someone who has lived it. The attention to detail shows an attempt at an accurate representation. This happened because the movie was inspired by a true story meaning things were significantly exaggerated, but the real Christy Beam, Annabel's mom, wrote a book about their experience that was used to ensure the accuracy of the movie along with Anna's involvement ("Miracles from Heaven (2016)").

However, the miraculous cure at the end of the movie overrides the universally true components. Upon research, Annabell did end up in spontaneous remission after her fall into the tree which in the movie she points out by saying "[God] told me I would be fine" (*Miracles from Heaven* 1:25:03-1:25:06). Although this happens very rarely with falls with individuals with neurological diseases, which digestive tract paralysis is. The point is, this is possible. It is rare, but it happens. Whether that has to do with God or not is not the point. The issue is that this movie is the almost sole representation of this condition in the media which only shows the one in a million chance of spontaneous remission. Almost no one else with this condition has the same story as Annabel. Most of us go through grueling treatment after treatment before seeing very gradual improvement. Others will be dependent on tubes and lines for the rest of their lives, which contrary to popular belief is not the end of the world. That is the reality we are up against, but anyone who has watched this movie thinks that a miracle is commonplace, whether that be those around you or worse yourself. True hope to someone with a chronic illness can be life changing, but *Miracles from Heaven* offers nothing other than false hope. A one in a million chance is not something that should

be expected, as the movie suggests. Miracles happen but not everyone can experience one.

The idea of waiting for a cure from God prevents disabled individuals from living their life. In her essay, “When You Are Waiting to Be Healed.” June Eric-Udorie explains that “when you are waiting to be healed, you reject a lasting condition” (56). In other words, rejecting your only reality. She was born with a rare eye deformity, and never accepting it caused her to be “ashamed of who [she] was” (Eric-Udorie 57). Spending years of her life praying to God, asking for healing caused June to feel trapped and reject the perfectly good life she could have had all due to her loved ones telling her “if you *really* believe, if you really pray and cry out, then God will heal you” (Eric-Udorie 54). This is when religion becomes toxic. Accepting a disability is the best way to have a full life in spite of its potential challenges. However, the idea of a miracle, God-given cure prevented June and many others from doing just that. *Miracles from Heaven* is continuing to promote this false hope to desperate people attempting to figure out their reality. It also adds fire to the possibility of miracles happening, causing more people to become trapped like June once was. They reject their reality, and spend years trapped waiting for God to heal them because they feel it's what they are supposed to do. What makes the disability representation in *Miracles from Heaven* even worse, is the systematic lack of quality representation. For starters, looking at *Miracles from Heaven* through the lens of the Fries Test, which is a series of questions that analyze the quality of disability portrayal in film, the movie fails every question (Fries). Annabel is the only disabled character with lines. Her story is used for the benefit of the church and Christianity in general. The whole premise of the movie is God curing her which is the exact opposite of the Fries Test idea of disability not being eradicated in any way (Fries). Annabel and her former disability are simply props in this mainstream portrayal.

Unfortunately, the fact of the matter is, the horrible representation in this film is beating the odds. It has a speaking character with a disability. Disability is the second lowest represented minority in the top 1200 movies from 2007 to 2018, but has the largest difference between the true population and characters in movies. The US Census in 2010 reported 27.2% of Americans live with a disability while only 1.6% of all characters in the top 1200 movies are depicted having one (Smith et. al. 4). Annabel is part of that 1.6%. *Miracles from Heaven* carries none of the ideals that disability scholars need to see to deem a film a valid representation, yet it still gets counted. It emphasizes the true lack of disability representation that movies, like *Miracles from Heaven*, which use disability as a prop in the overall plot are making up the one percent of movies including disabled characters. The general public has no reason to believe that telling a sick teenager to pray for a cure is inappropriate because this is the story the media is feeding them. When this is the only thing shown to the public, disability will always be tied to religion in

their minds. Praying for a cure is not the only answer to disability. As conversations over representation continue, disability needs to be taken into more consideration, so correct representations can shape the public mind to see disability in a better light.

*Miracles from Heaven* is contributing to misconceptions created by the media by utilizing disability as a prop to push religious agendas. While the beginning does an acceptable job of depicting the reality of digestive tract paralysis, the magical cure at the end undermines any understanding the viewer may have gained. This needs to change. Disability does not need to be prayed away, and frankly, religion should not be forced on others. It is completely possible to live life to the fullest with digestive tract paralysis. While it is hard and it is scary, a miracle cure is not the only way to get past the worst of it. Treatments help and you learn to adapt. There is real, true hope in the darkness if you know where to look without waiting and praying to be the one in a million.

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