

## The Future of Writing Disability in Fiction

- Stefan Kellhofer (*chair*)
- Nell Pattison
- Ever Dundas

STEFAN	<p>This event is part of the Book Week Scotland 2020 digital festival. Book Week Scotland is a national celebration of all things reading and writing. We hope you enjoy this event.</p> <p>I'm Stefan Kellhofer and I'm a book seller with a special interest in events and working with people with disabilities and encouraging them to read more, write more and generally interact more with the publishing world. Today I am joined by two very talented authors, Nell Pattison and Ever Dundas.</p> <p>Nell Pattison is a crime author and teacher who specialises in deaf education. Her debut novel <i>The Silent House</i> and the sequel <i>Silent Night</i> are out now. Ever Dundas has written several short stories in addition to her debut novel <i>Goblin</i> which won the Saltire First Book Award in 2017. Sadly, Raymond Antrobus was unable to join us today.</p> <p>If you could both tell me a little about yourselves, your writing and what made you choose on this topic please.</p>
NELL	You don't wanna go first?
EVER	You can go first if you like.
NELL	<p>Well, I've been writing for quite a while, just because I love writing. I mean, writing is just something that I've always done in my spare time. I was an English teacher before I was a teacher of the deaf. I've always loved books and words and writing, and I think I first started writing novels in about 2010, but I started writing young adult sci-fi-type novels, but I never really got anywhere with those. I think I had a lot of feedback from agents and publishers that they liked the way I wrote; they just didn't like the stories I was writing.</p> <p>And the most interest I got, actually, was when I'd written a deaf character, and somebody said to me at the time 'why don't you write more about deaf characters when you are kind of heavily involved with the deaf community?' I said, well, I felt, I didn't feel like I felt, sometimes I feel like writers who just write about their own job, I feel a bit like it's cheating. And then, you know, somebody told me that was absolute rubbish. So, I think I went away and I thought for a while and I thought about my own writing and realised that what I read most was crime, and that was when I switched to writing crime. And so, my novels – I should explain – they're <i>The Silent House</i> and <i>Silent Night</i>. They're part of a series that focus on a BSL interpreter called Paige Northwood who works with the police. So, in <i>The Silent House</i> she's brought in when a deaf child is murdered. And they're murdered in the middle of the night, in their own house. The family</p>

	<p>are deaf and so obviously didn't hear anybody coming into the house and, so you've got the shocking nature of the crime connected with the fact that somebody was essentially using their deafness for their own ends. And then in Silent Night she is involved when a student goes missing from a school for the deaf. So I thought about what I wanted to write in terms of crime and I thought about having the deaf community aspect because there are so few novels that actually focus on the deaf as a community and instead of having just one singular deaf character, having a range of deaf characters. And so I wanted to write something that had more of a range of deaf characters as I said, that it is not just one deaf character who exists on their own completely independent of any other relation to deafness or to any sort of community which is, is how some deaf people live and experience their life, but it's not the experience that I had. I should say myself as well, I am hard of hearing myself. It's something – I was born hearing but have lost my hearing through my late 20s and into my 30s and that's something that's an experience that I kinda wanted to investigate a bit more in, in fiction myself as well. So, that's kinda connected.</p>
STEFAN	Thank you. And Ever...
EVER	<p>Well, I'm Ever Dundas and I'm a queer crip writer living in Edinburgh. And I've got M.E. and fibromyalgia and the main symptoms are post-exertional malaise, cognitive pain – sorry, chronic pain – cognitive difficulties and I can have crushing flu-like exhaustion. So, yeah, a whole bundle of fun. And I've kinda, I've been a writer since I was a kid but didn't kind of properly pursue it until around ten years ago when I did an MA in creative writing and that's when I started writing my first novel, Goblin, which came out in 2017 and as you said, won the Saltire First Book Award which was a real boost. That was brilliant.</p> <p>And Goblin is about a little girl living in World War 2 London and she witnesses a pet massacre which, at the time I was researching, was quite a little-known event that happened in London just after war was declared. So, I wanted to write about this as I thought it was an important part of our history. Thankfully it's a bit better known now.</p> <p>There's aspects of disability in Goblin but now with my second novel – HellSans – which I'm in the middle of editing at the moment, disability is very much at its core.</p> <p>And, in this – it's a sci-fi thriller, HellSans, and in this fictional world, HellSans is ubiquitous typeface that everybody uses and it's, the majority of the population when they see this typeface, they experience a kind of bliss. But there's a group of people who are allergic to the typeface and they're called deviants' and they're stigmatised. So, it's basically like a really unsubtle metaphor for capitalism or kinda living as a disabled person in capitalism.</p> <p>And it's kind of – even though the world is completely fictional and, you know, it's a sci-fi set in the fictional future – it's inspired by my own experience. I fell ill with M.E. in my early 20s and with fibromyalgia 10 years ago and I'm 41 just now so I've been ill for a long time.</p>

	<p>And when I fell ill with fibromyalgia I was working part time and I managed to kind of hang on to my job for a few years, but it was really tough and eventually it was making me ill, so I eventually had to give up my job. And of course, it was then that, I mean I already hated the Tories and was already an anti-capitalist, but, like this really rammed it home, you know. ‘Cos, I fell through the cracks of the capitalist system which a lot of people experience, and I had to, you know, go through the horrendous and humiliating experience that is the tory benefit system. It’s pretty well-documented how bad that is. Although not a lot of people really paid attention, you know, disabled people have been talking about this for a long time but I think now in light of the pandemic a lot of people are suddenly in the same boat and are kinda shocked at how bad the system is – even though we’ve been telling them for a long time.</p> <p>So, yeah, so HellSans is kind of inspired by my own experience and by other disabled people’s experience under tory government and the capitalist system.</p> <p>And I just wanted to add as well, because recently in light of the pandemic I’ve noticed a few people in the literary world saying that because we’re suddenly living in a dystopia that we don’t need any dystopian narratives. So, two problems with this. The first one being, you know, we were already living in dystopia, you know. It’s just now suddenly affecting you. Honestly it is so condescending. It makes me so angry. I mean the tory government were investigated by the UN for human rights’ violations against disabled people. You know were already in a dystopia. So, you know I think that should have been headline news. And it wasn’t. It should’ve been like; a massive scandal and it wasn’t. So, it kind of shows how much our society cares about disabled people.</p> <p>And secondly, I’m all for escapism. We all need escapism, definitely - and definitely at times like this. But it’s not either or – and again we also need utopias that’s great but also, it’s not either or, so don’t bin dystopias, they’re important and we’d be losing important voices if you did that. We need them, so, I just wanted to get that off my chest.</p>
<p>STEFAN</p>	<p>It’s a very good point. I think now more than ever we need, especially if the media isn’t telling the stories of disabled people, it leaves it up to the people who, who have the ability to write and communicate these stories to, to sort of let people know what’s happening. So, I think you’ve made a really strong point there...</p>
<p>NELL</p>	<p>I think, sorry, just what you’ve said about the media there. I think it’s not just that the media aren’t telling the stories, it’s that they’re twisting everything and the, the, the media idea of disabled people as benefit scroungers has been going on for, for so long and I think that’s, that also has a, has a massive part to play and is a massive thing to blame for those, for the people who are fortunate enough not to have experienced disability, or not to have anyone in their lives who’s disabled, who’ve never experienced that. As you’re saying Ever, with the people who are like “oh suddenly we’re in a dystopia” because they’ve never really, it’s never affected their lives before.</p>

	<p>If they, if they have the media telling them that these people “oh yeah, they’re not really disabled – they can get off their arses and get a job” then, do you know a lot of them are gonna believe it. And I think this, this is a major thing that does need addressing.</p>
STEFAN	<p>So the theme for Book Week Scotland is looking at the future, but first I thought we’d sort of look back and see what has writing disabilities in fiction looked like until now. What sort of led us up to this point.</p>
EVER	<p>It’s been terrible. On the whole, I mean, particularly if ableds are writing the narratives which, it does tend to be ableds writing narratives about us, and they always get it wrong, I kind of just wanted to cover a, kind of, what I see as the forming, sort of damaging tropes that mostly ableds kind of write. There’s a lot more tropes that, but that’s kind of the forming tropes and I think the first one is inspiration porn. Basically, that disabled people can kind of overcome their disability through sheer force of will. And again, this is a kind of individualist capitalist narrative that we’re buying into. And it’s a kind of abled fantasy. And just to show as well that, you know, if this is happening in fiction it also has an impact on real life. I think that’s important to emphasise that.</p> <p>And I’ve actually had experience of that myself when a journalist was interviewing me. He was a really nice guy, actually, but I think he just, you know, like a lot of people, buy into these narratives and so he asked me, he said “what are you going to do to overcome chronic illnesses to pursue a writing career?” And I was like well, you know, how, how am I supposed overcome two incurable chronic illnesses like, on my now. How am I supposed to do that? You know, I need a cure – it’s not me that needs to come up with that. It was just baffling. So that’s kind of, you know, everyone’s enthralled in this overcoming narrative, you know. What I do on a day-to-day basis is more managing, managing my illnesses – which isn’t sexy, it, it’s the real narrative. That’s what it is. I’m not overcoming anything.</p> <p>And secondly, you know, why should I have to overcome these illnesses to pursue a writing career? I mean that’s pretty damning. I think the industry should be accessible. I shouldn’t have to overcome my illnesses to be, to be able to be a writer.</p> <p>So I just wanted to emphasise that these fictional narratives have an effect on daily life, that’s naturally important.</p> <p>And the second one is that we’re positioned as burdens who are better off dead. The better off dead narrative is a really strong one and it’s pretty. Again that, that’s played out in real life and we saw that during the pandemic. Nell, I’m sure you noticed like, particularly at the beginning of lockdown there was, there was a lot of people saying horrendous things like “oh you know this isn’t gonna affect us - it’s just gonna kill the elderly and the disabled”.</p>
NELL	<p>Yeah, yeah. Absolutely shocking. yeah.</p>

EVER	<p>Terrible. How are we supposed to feel about that? It's like, you know, I'm quite happy being alive thank you. You know. I want to live. It's just that we're seen as expendable.</p> <p>So thirdly, that disabled people as positioned as the villain in the narrative and usually when this happens it's a kind of, it's through a sort of easy, obvious, kind of physical disability – say scars. Or they have a limp or something. And something that's seen to be symbolic of their evilness. And often it's not even a, sort of, big dichotomy of good versus evil but, sometimes, that – say a scar or a whatever – is supposed to symbolise a weakness. And not just physical weakness but character weakness, moral weakness so that's, that's the trope and we still get that.</p> <p>We've had it as recent as the Wonder Woman film where the villain was scarred and the kind of opposite kind of Amazonian hero, you know. So, it's a really old trope and it's still happening.</p>
NELL	<p>There's an element of ugliness in that as well, isn't there? The fact that.</p>
EVER	<p>Oh yes.</p>
NELL	<p>...yeah, the, the disability or, or chronic illness or something like that is something ugly, so they, you don't want to look at, you want to avert your eyes from. And I, I think that's, yeah, that, that plays into that narrative just as much, doesn't it?</p>
EVER	<p>Oh definitely. And I think a lot of people with, like, facial scars and so on must get some horrendous stigma and we really need to do away with that narrative. It's horrible.</p> <p>And finally, the last one I wanted to mention was the saint...or the good disabled. And this is usually when the disabled person is positioned as being made holy by their disability. And either suffering, and they usually have to suffer in silence and be stoic. And that also ties into the better off dead narrative because usually they suffer and then they die.</p> <p>And ableds are left feeling good about themselves because of this inspirational disabled person.</p> <p>So, they're kind the four main – what I think are the four main – ones. But there's a hell of a lot more and there was recently a really great Twitter thread a few months ago. Kind of going through a lot of the major, really bad, harmful tropes. So, after this event airs I'll post it, I'll post it on my Twitter at @everdundas and you can have a look at that. It's a really useful resource of kind of tropes to avoid.</p>
NELL	<p>I think with, when it comes to deafness as well, the biggest trope, is a slightly different one, is the, is the kind of the magic, the magic deaf or – sometimes I've seen it called the magic cripple. Oh yeah. But I think that one, that one quite often gets a, applied to deaf characters that the deaf characters are there to have some sort of special talent. Because they're deaf that means that they can see extra better or they can, they can lip read. This is, this is one that I often mention on, in articles and things my, my real bugbear with deaf characters is when they can lipread a</p>

	<p>conversation from grainy CCTV footage. And you know, I mean lipreading is one of those things that you have to know the language the speaking. You have to know the context. People have to be facing you. They have to, I mean, there are all sorts of things that can make people harder to lipread. I mean, facial piercings, facial hair, the position of people who are speaking and the lighting. All these things make it harder to lipread and yet suddenly, you know, “oh here’s a deaf person we’ve brought into this, to this TV show” just to make them lipread something. And you know, it’s as if “oh they have this magic talent” and that somehow takes away from their deafness and that’s, that’s their only purpose.</p> <p>And I think that, that happens a lot with, with deaf characters and these, and there’s one deaf character that, that always bothered me which is Nick in The Stand by Stephen King who, he has no access to language or communication until he’s – is he something like 12? 13? – and then somebody teaches him to read and write. And then suddenly he can read and write fluently. And that, that takes away from, from the experience of, of deaf people of learning language that, the, the real hard work it is to learn language when your living in a hearing world and whether that is a sign language or whether it is a spoken language, there is a critical period for language learning and if you don’t have access to language until you’re a certain age... There are plenty of studies on feral children and children who have been locked up and things like that who’ve had no access to language until later on in their childhood and they never developed that language. Because they’ve not had that, that aspect and so suddenly it’s just used as a narrative device. Without any, any attention paid to what the actual experience for that person, a person in that situation, would have been. And I think that’s, that, you know, it can be really harmful because it, it gives people a completely skewed view of what it would be like to, to be in that situation. And I think if we really want to be creating greater understanding of disability – and I’m including deafness in that. Now deafness is one thing that obviously some deaf people consider it a cultural difference rather than a disability, but for the purposes of this I will refer to it as, as a disability simply because the majority of us are, are living in a hearing, hearing world.</p> <p>So, anyway, where was I? Lost my thread there. What was I saying?</p>
STEFAN	<p>So, we’re looking at sort of disabilities in fiction, how they’ve been represented.</p>
NELLY	<p>Of course, yeah. So, yeah, so if, you know what we, what we want is to create a greater understanding and, and greater inclusivity of disabilities and so we, in that, you know, they need to be written in a way that helps people to understand more about that person. And I don’t think that, that narratives about disability and about disbarred characters should be purely about their disability because, you know, disabled people are people - they have very rich lives. All people have rich lives, have rich life experiences beyond their disability but also, we need to be able to create that, that understanding amongst people who’ve never had that experience, I think. But it needs to be accurate. It needs to be, em, we</p>

	<p>don't want to be giving people false ideas of what it, what it is like to, to be disabled or to be deaf. Does that make sense?</p>
<p>STEFAN</p>	<p>I think that ties into what Ever was saying as well, about, as if there's this magical cure that people just need to try a little harder and, you know, you can miss the window for language acquisition, but if , you know, someone puts a bit of effort in you'll, you'll magically overcome all of your difficulties. And I do agree with you both that it's that idea that it's just effort and it's hugely romanticised in often quite negative ways. I think the one that always sticks with me is being told as a kid that Robert Louis Stevenson wasn't very well, and he wrote his books and I remember seeing a picture of him, sort of lounging by a window writing. And I think if someone was, you know, had a disability in that era, it's very unlikely he was, you know, just basically taking time off to write is that kind of presentation that was given to it.</p> <p>And, yeah, I think it's, it's very problematic in a lot of fiction I've read that it, people with disabilities are presented as so many of the sort of either needlessly negative or needlessly positive ways and it de-humanises people. That sort of leads into my next question of ...are all disabilities represented equally or are there disabilities that we just simply aren't aware of in fiction?</p>
<p>NELL</p>	<p>I think there's, there's probably plenty that we're, that we're not aware of in fiction. I mean, there's, there's, there are probably things that I've, that I'm not aware of myself in my day-to-day life. I suppose you don't know what you don't know. And certainly, disability's under-represented in fiction and has been for a long time and hopefully that's something we're gonna, we're gonna change. I think children's fiction is currently doing better than adult fiction at the moment for representation but you know I still think there, there is a long way to go in making, making these books more accessible and more mainstream to make sure that, that they are read as widely, widely as possible.</p> <p>And I think that some, there are, yeah, there are probably some disabilities I think that, that lend themselves more to narrative fiction in the w-, in historically, because of the tropes. And that's, that is the thing that we need to, that we need to tackle. As you say, deafness is one that, that has been used, you know, people think "oh, what, how can I make this character...oh, I know, I'll make them deaf" or "oh, I know, I make them blind" and something like that I think, you know, making that into a narrative device I think can give people...ooooohhhh...it makes it something, something different but also makes it more interesting. But there are some disabilities that I think people probably haven't read about because they don't find them interesting. And that's what we need to tackle that, that every person's experience should be interesting to other people on some level if you want to have that sort of empathy and inter-connectedness that we've, that we ultimately would in society.</p> <p>So, I think, yeah, there is certainly a, as I say, some disabilities that are better represented and it's, yeah, as I say, you don't know what you don't</p>

	<p>know. I think there's, there is certainly a lot of avenues to, to still be investigated.</p>
EVER	<p>Yeah, I agree. I, I think of able authors just kind of see disability as a sort of narrative device, yeah. It's not healthy. That's not how it should be. We're not a narrative device. And I think the question as well, which we've kind of covered by talking about the tropes is, you know, are they well represented. You know, rather than just "are they represented?", are they "well represented"?</p> <p>And again, that goes back to the tropes, the most damaging tropes.</p>
NELL	<p>I, I read an interesting article recently by Shashana Stern who is a deaf actor in, in the United States about Deaf U which is the Netflix show about Gallaudet University for the deaf in the States and one thing that, that stuck with me is how she was saying why should one representation of a community or a disability be expected to deliver everything about that disability. You know, why can't, because people'd complained saying "oh they didn't show this, they didn't show that" or "that's not my experience of deafness" or they, say, you know, there's...well why should it, why should it be. Nobody looks at the Sopranos and says, you know, "oh, all white men are gangsters" you know "oh why is it.." you know, because there are so many different fictional representations of white men that you don't have..one doesn't have to represent all white men and everyone just knows that automatically. So why does one representation of a disability have to encompass all people with that disability? It doesn't.</p> <p>And people seem to, to lay that, lay that kind of pressure on a writer whose writing about a character with a disability" oh, well, well - you know, that's not this...or it's not that.. to this that or the other" - well, that's because we need another writer to write about that disability from a different angle. And another, and another, and another..we need many different people to cover different aspects of these disabilities in order for people to understand. Well, that's one representation - it doesn't have to mean everything. It doesn't have to bear that entire burden by itself.</p>
STEFAN	<p>You put that really well actually. Also...</p>
NELL	<p>I was paraphrasing some else's article there. I must point out it wasn't entirely mine. My wording but, yeah.</p>
STEFAN	<p>That leads quite well into my next question which you both kinda talked about - it's who should be writing about disability and what do they need to write it well?</p>
EVER	<p>Well, maybe some disabled people won't agree with me on this, but I actually think it's OK for both disabled and abled to write disability. But they just have to do it well. And as I said, they don't fall into the tropes which are just, I'm so tired of them - life is so boring. It's also bad writing,</p>



	you know. I mean, even forgetting the politics of it, it's just bad clichéd writing so don't do it...
NELL	Lazy, it's lazy writing...
EVER	<p>Yeah, it's very lazy. So, yeah, I think both abled and disabled people should write it. And I also need to point out that some disabled people can be ableist themselves either through internal ableism, or directed outwards...or, you know, or, towards people with different disabilities from themselves. So, we need to keep that in mind as well.</p> <p>So disabled people also need to do better. But generally I think obviously disabled people are a bit more canny and, and from their life experience and what they've been through are less likely to be ableist and abled and we haven't had much of a chance yet to really have a voice, so, I think while ables it, it's fine if they write disability. I think we do need to push for, for more kind of disabled voices out there. Definitely.</p>
NELL	<p>Yeah. I completely agree. I think anyone who is a good writer and who is actually going to put the effort into write a character well and write, you know, a rich, deeply nuanced character who, you know, who is disabled, who just happens to be disabled and that is one part of the, the facet of who they are, absolutely. But, I'd, yeah, own voices are really, really important and I think there needs to be more of a push. And I know that there has been a big push in the last few years towards own voices, but I still think it needs a lot more weight behind it. There needs to be a lot more in order to enable disabled writers to, to access the things that they've not been able to access in the past, to actually be able to write their stories. And whether it is their story coming from their own experience or whether it is complete fiction – that doesn't matter. But to be able, you know, to ensure that they are well represented within fiction, within publishing – I think that still needs a lot of work.</p>
EVER	<p>I mean access is the important word, isn't it? I think the publishing industry still isn't very accessible at all. And we need to push for that. In fact, we shouldn't have to even be pushing for it, we should just be doing it, you know. It should be par for the course and as well, like you said, I think to get more own voices as well. You know, as well as having more disabled writers and being accessible for them, I think publishers need to hire disabled staff - like across the board. And particularly, I guess, you know, disabled editors 'cos they'll be able to spot these damaging tropes or spot someone who's doing it well. So, yeah, we need that.</p>
NELL	<p>It kinda comes back to your, your overcoming story that, that somebody expects you to come, overcome your, your illnesses which is, you know, it shouldn't be that way. It should top down, you know, from publishing as you say should be top down – the publisher should be making sure that they are hiring these people, that they are making themselves more accessible. And the same for, do you know, society.</p>

	<p>The thing with disabilities, the, it can be fluid depending on the environment you're in. If you're surrounded by people who have an accessible and inclusive mindset, you then do the best to make the environment accessible and inclusive. It takes some of the pressure of you to, to overcome the disability or, you know, it makes it easier to manage a disability.</p>
EVER	<p>Yeah, exactly.</p>
NELL	<p>...and you become more enabled by that environment changing. And that shouldn't be the responsibility for the disabled person. It's the. the same with deafness. I mean, Martha's Vineyard in Massachusetts in the 18th century everybody signed because there was a high amount of hereditary deafness and so deafness didn't disable anybody because everybody signed and to the extent when people – there were anecdotal reports of people not knowing who was deaf and who was hearing within their family and set of friends, because everybody signed.</p> <p>And if, you know. If society became a lot more adaptable, a lot more inclusive then it would make things, you know, an awful lot easier for, for disabled people. And I think publishing, there are, there are ways in publishing can do that and make the environment of publishing more accessible, more inclusive and to get a more accessible and inclusive mindset as well.</p> <p>And, and I think – as you say – I think that starts with having the people there who understand it, who, it is their lived experience in order to change that mindset of other people.</p>
STEFAN	<p>I think that's also been, with my experiences, making things visible and inclusive because when I've been signing to deaf family members in public I always that kind of novelty response and it's kind of people see it and it's like they've seen it for the first time. And I don't...I think quiet often people anything by staring or looking and coming over and having a chat but it does make it quite difficult. It makes, I think, in my experience, people with disabilities more self-conscious about being seen in public. And I do think that just the absence of well-written characters with disabilities kind of means that they're the exception and people apply these kinda stories that they know from terribly written books and movies to the sort of lived experience of people with disabilities.</p> <p>I was also going to ask, how do disabilities in fiction tie into representation and inclusion of other minority groups?</p>
EVER	<p>Yeah. Well again it comes back to kinda own voices, I think, because, you know, well everyone can be disabled, you know. It can affect anyone, so that means that it can a crossover with all sorts of different identities. And, say for instance, like a trans disabled person will have a different experience from me, for instance, or a disabled woman of colour'll have different experiences and different outlook and bring something different to fiction.</p>

	So, I think it's really important to, kind of, support and champion all the different voices. And, yeah...
NELL	Yeah, I agree with what you said really, I don't, I don't really have an awful lot to add to that. I mean, as you say it's - if you're marginalise, I think you're marginalised and I think there's, there's a lot of ways that kind of intersectionality in between different marginalised groups. I absolutely think that, that, improving access for, improving access and visibility for, for one marginalised group can then support another marginalised group as long as, as long as people are willing to keep working that way. I think, I think some people might, might kinda have...I think there is, there's an idea that some people like "no, I'm marginalised in this way so therefore I don't care about you" but I don't think - and that's not been my experience personally - I, I think, I think, you know, people are marginalised because of their gender or because of their sexuality I think are, are just as, just as, supportive of people who are marginalised because of their, because of their skin colour or because of their disability I think, I think, tend to kind of support each other and just say "no, can we just accept everybody please". You know.
STEFAN	I was also going to ask as authors who have written on, or have written characters with, disabilities in your work, do you find that publishers have an expectation that when you're writing the future, they expect you to write on this topic? And if you were to, like, pitch something that was about, you know, a, an able person doing kind of, for what it's worth, like a normal, kind of story...if that exists...do you find that that would kind of...they'd expect this experience from you?
EVER	Yeah. There, there is that problem, isn't there of being kind of pigeonholed being seen as "the issues" author maybe. And I think it goes back to bit which Nell was saying, you know, if you have a disabled character they're seen as an "Issues" character rather than they just happened to be disabled. And I think we need more characters who are, who happen to be disabled, you know, where the story maybe isn't particularly about their disability. I'm so sorry, I'm getting slightly distracted...but going back to your question, like, I personally haven't had that yet, but I'm quite early on in my career. Goblin wasn't, well it has aspects of disability - that wasn't at the forefront. HellSans is probably my more, kind of, my disability book. So, I don't know if that would end up with me being pigeon-holed or whatever. I don't know. I don't know if you've had any experience with that Nell?
NELL	I don't, I don't know if I've necessarily been pigeon-holed. I think it's, it has certainly been publicised as my USP - kind of deaf characters and deaf singing characters because it's not, a lot of the deaf characters in fiction you get the, you don't really get many who are signing. And you don't get a wide carry, a wide cast of deaf characters as, as you have in minor roles. And that was, what you were saying about characters who

	<p>just happen to be disabled. That's what I hope what I'm trying to get at really with having, having a wide range of deaf characters is showing that there are, you know, a...there are just as wide a range of deaf people as there are hearing people. And rather than just having one, one deaf person who, who is representative of all those people.</p> <p>But certainly I think, I do think that there's...I worry it's possible, I've talked to my agent about it you know, I don't, I don't want to become the deaf writer simply because I, you now, there are other things I want to write. I think at the moment I am at the beginning of my career as well. I mean, my first novel came out in March but my publisher works pretty fast and wants me to work pretty fast too so my second novel came out middle of November, my third one's out in April next year so we, you know, we, we're moving, moving quite quickly with these. But I was asked to pitch another novel that had a deaf character but from their point of view which will be different from what I've, I've written already because it is, my novels are from a hearing person's point of view, mostly. But, yeah, I do, I do worry about, about potentially being pigeon-holed but I think that's one of those things that I will address with, I, I have an excellent agent so, you know, that's the sort of thing that if I took it her and said "I am concerned about this, I want to write something else" that I know she would be supportive of that. So I think that's, that's important to know that you've got somebody on your side who would understand that point of view when you say "I don't want this to become my thing" you know, "I don't want this to be my label". Because I would like to write other things in the future, so, you know, it's...we'll just have to, have to see what happens really and I think it's just a question of working against it. But I suppose that comes back to it really shouldn't be necessarily be my responsibility solely to work against it, you know. Hopefully, hopefully there won't be anybody who says no, you must always write, you know, you must always write deaf characters – that's what you do. But, well, I'll see.</p>
STEFAN	<p>One thing I've noticed as a bookseller is obviously when I'm putting books on shelves. I notice that a lot of books that are good at sort of talking about disabilities and people with disabilities tend to be put into genre sections. So, Nell, your books are crime – Ever, your books go into the sci-fi and fantasy section...and I'm sort of looking at the shelves before doing this panel I realise that most of the books that, even poorly written characters with disabilities, like, The Stand, they go into these genre sections as though they're, they can't possibly be a story just in fiction and do you think that that's something that needs to change in future in order to, kind of, change the perception of people with disabilities in fiction?</p>
NELL	<p>I think so. Definitely. I think there's - as you say – kind of, you know, feels like it needs to be just about that. It's difficult to write or speak from my perspective because I am very, I feel very firmly a crime writer because that's... everything I've always written has always had some sort of mystery element to it and even when I was writing, or attempting to write,</p>

	<p>sci-fi there was always a mystery element to it. It was sort of sci-fi crime or, or whatever so... But I do think, you know, the, the aim would be to have, to get to the stage where we don't even have to label something as "oh, this has got, this has got a well-written disabled character in it" because we want that to be the norm. That not, not every book has a disabled character of course, but many books to have well-written disabled characters and to be in all sections, you know. As you, as you say not just, not just in genre ones.</p>
EVER	<p>Yeah. I don't know. I hadn't actually thought about that in terms of genre before. My first novel, Goblin, is actually, I think, more literary fiction. It has fantastical elements in it, but it's written in a way that they're kind of realist as well. I guess, I don't, I'm not really keen on the magical realist label either but I'm with...yeah, this novel is sci-fi. I think just because sci-fi is such a great genre to explore, well, dystopia for a start, but just explore lots of elements by what it means to be human. My third novel is going to be literary fiction again. That will have some disability elements. I explore some mental health with the third one. But yeah. I'm not, I'm not sure – I hadn't really thought about the genre element before.</p>
STEFAN	<p>The other thing I was going to ask as well, talking about books on the shelves – are there any, could you think of a book that you think people should read that is a good portrayal of disabilities in fiction? Is there one that springs to mind? Or is there just not enough out there?</p>
NELL	<p>I read an article on, on good, well written deaf characters in, in fiction recently, actually for crime reads so, I think my favourite writer who's written a deaf character recently is Emma Viskic whose – again I read and write a lot of crimes so, still within the crime genre. She's an Australian writer and her main character is deaf and he's, he's fascinating because he, he became deaf as a young child from meningitis and so, even as an adult, carries a lot of, a lot of anger and having you know, having not dealt with the fact that he lost his hearing and, and, you know, he's a really complex character and I, I really like, I really like the way, the way that he's written. I kind of identify with him in a way because I see some of my own feelings and emotions regarding my own loss of hearing as an adult. So, I think, I think she's, she's written a deaf particularly well and also within the context of an interesting story arc that has nothing to do with his deafness. So, yeah, I...yeah, that's one of my favourites at the moment but other, other disabilities I'm not sure of. It's not something I've read recently. What about you Ever?</p>
EVER	<p>Yeah, there's quite a few. I just wanted to briefly mention Raymond Antrobus who was supposed to be with us today. He doesn't write fiction, his poetry's an obvious on his own experience but I think it's important to highlight it. I read his collection The Perseverance and it is brilliant, and it explores his experience of being a deaf person of colour and also a bit about his relationship with his father and it's just a really brilliant collection. I really loved his subversion of the poem by Ted Hughes called</p>

	<p>Deaf School. It's an absolute brilliant subversion, I love it. And also, if you to Raymond's Instagram there's a really great performance of his poem Two Guns in the Sky for Daniel Harris. I've watched it several times and it's really powerful. So yeah, I'm a bit of a Raymond Antrobus fan geek here. He's great. So, check him out.</p> <p>So, in terms of fiction, I recently read A Kind of Spark by Elle McNicol and that's about a young girl who's autistic and she's campaigning for a memorial for witches who were, or women who were accused of being witches in her village who were, who were murdered in her village so she wants a memorial to them. And also explores her relationship with her family and her experience of school and being bullied for being different. So that's brilliant.</p> <p>Also wanted to mention, I know this isn't novels, but I wanted to mention Bird of Paradise – Bird of Paradise – theatre production company. The artistic director is Robert Softley Gale and he writes for them as well and he's brilliant. He recently, you know, speaking of subversion of disability tropes and subversion and satire and interrogation of these tropes he, he did a play called My Left/Right Foot the musical. It was a real smash hit at the Fringe I think a couple of years ago and it's a brilliant subversion obviously of the My Left Foot film and it's just really funny as well. Really entertaining. And Robert is just brilliant.</p> <p>I've seen a few of his plays and I also really loved how they have the BSL interpreter not kind of off to the side but actually as a core part of the play itself. That was really beautiful to see. So, I just hope, you know, obviously during the pandemic lots of theatre companies are really struggling so I hope they, kind of, make it through. I just wanted to highlight them. They're brilliant.</p>
STEFAN	<p>Yeah. I was also going to ask you both how we can encourage people with disabilities to read more? In my experience of the deaf community, reading isn't necessarily a popular activity. That's just my, based on my own, sort of, experience and I think it is tied into a lot of difficulties deaf people have had with how they have been taught language, the lack of understanding that BSL exists as a separate language with its own syntax and structure compared to British English or American English. And how do you think we can encourage people with disabilities to pick up a book and get reading?</p>
NELL	<p>Well, I think a lot of it comes through education. And through access to books and reading in childhood. I think if you, if you make sure that a child has access to a lot of books and has a positive experience of books and reading then it's more likely to carry on into adulthood. And that's something that, that schools can do and should do. I mean, there are, there are lots of programmes to make sure we're getting books into homes as well. I mean there's things like the Imagination Library for, which is Dolly Parton's thing...I know I get those books every month for my son – but not every area in, in the UK signs up to that, so not everybody gets it. I don't know how much of Scotland signs up to that actually.</p>

	<p>Things like that and just making sure that we have a wide variety of representation in children's books so that children who are disabled see themselves in books. And I think that's really important, that's really important for their development, I think, and their self-esteem as a person, but also for their interest in books 'cos I think if they never see themselves represented in books then they will start to think that books aren't for them.</p> <p>And I think that's, that would be, you know, that would be such a shame if they think that books, books can't, books can't be something that could be interested in because it just doesn't relate to them, so I think that, that's a really important thing.</p> <p>I mean for adults it is, again, it's making sure there's the representation there. Making sure that they, you know, that they can see themselves in fiction. It's, it's, you know, what is that for the, puts people off if it is a language barrier, then that's something to, to consider. Again, it's an education thing, you know. How can we support people to enjoy reading when they're in adulthood? What, what can we put in place within the community, within families to, to help people to enjoy it? You know that's, it's a big societal question that I can't solve, much as I would love to. I don't think I can solve it myself and it goes back a little bit to, to Ever's very well, very well worded lambasting of our current government.</p> <p>It's, yeah, there are an awful lot of facets, I think, to, to encouraging people to read and I think it has to. Yeah, there's, there's an awful lot of societal change that, that would, that would help.</p>
EVER	Yeah. I agree with Nell. I don't really have anything to that.
STEFAN	I think, I had a question about how well the UK, and Scotland specifically, are doing to represent disabilities in fiction but I kinda feel like, Ever, you covered that beautifully at the start. Where fundamentally there is just so much that needs to be done so I'm going to take the opportunity to change that question a little bit and just ask - how is the UK doing in comparison to other countries? Have you seen any particular places doing better or worse? Or is it just feel like across the world there's just not enough being done?
EVER	That's actually a really good question which I hadn't thought about before. And I actually don't know. I would really love to know a bit more about what the publishing industry is like in different countries for disabled people. So, if anybody watching this has any advice or info Tweet me - that would great. I'd love to know. I don't know if you know much Nell?
NELL	I don't, no. I think as well, part of it is because English is the only language I can read so, unless something is translated into English it's, you know, makes it more, it means I, I can't, I can't read it. So, I, I don't know really. I, yeah, that's something I don't know even with other English language publishing, like in America or Australia. I, I don't know but it is a really interest..., I would, again I would like to know...it's a really interesting question.

STEFAN	<p>It's, yeah, it's something I was just thinking about when we were talking there that, yeah, I wonder if there's anywhere that does it well. Because I can't think of any books, I've read that, that you know, are a gold standard in terms of things written more than about ten years ago.</p>
EVER	<p>Well, I mean, the thing is, it's possible things could be going well in other countries but it's just, the thing is with disabilities that it's stigmatised the world over, you know. You experience this discrimination everywhere. So, I'm not entirely hopeful, but you never know. So yeah, I'd love to know about different experiences across the world. Definitely.</p>
STEFAN	<p>So, my, I think I've got time for one more question which is relevant to what we're doing just now. It's a...current events with covid-19 pandemic happening have led to a growing number of events being broadcast online such this one. Is this helpful or do you think this is more exclusionary to disabled people? Like where do you think this sits as a change that we'll be seeing in the world of literary publishing?</p>
EVER	<p>Well I think on the whole it's helpful but obviously there's going to be some people who don't have access to computers and don't have online access and they will very much be excluded. And I think we need to change this idea that we have that these things are luxuries. And I think the pandemic has shown us that it's actually a necessity and I don't think it's some socialist out there in utopia that we can provide that to everybody. And again, it's something the Tories would hate... but it's something that we should be providing. But apart from that I think generally, yes - I mean I've heard from so many disabled people saying that they've been able to access events online, take part in events online that they couldn't before. And sometimes you know, I'm friends with a lot of other kind of chronically ill people as well, I mean they can do an event – like do an event like this – and they can do it their bed if they needed to. And, you know even for me this is slightly easier 'cos I don't have to travel anywhere which is quite exhausting. Although having said that, I need to point out that this is still work, you know. This is still a lot of effort and this is still exhausting, and I think a lot of people will also have Zoom fatigue. So that's a very real thing. But I think it really has opened up the world to a lot of people and I have to point out as well like disabled people have asked, been asking for this kind of access for a long time and we're always just get “oh no, that's not possible” and now we've seen with the pandemic it most definitely is possible. You know. And it was done easily and quickly. So, I think, you know, this is an event about the future, so I think going into the future, we don't want to go back to “normal” 'cos normal sucked, you know. And we don't want to lose what we've gained so I think we need to go forwards with better access and maybe have things like hybrid events and things. So, we don't need, we don't want to lose what we've gained here. Definitely.</p>



<p>NELL</p>	<p>Yeah, I agree there has been an awful lot more accessibility in, in many ways because, as you say, if people couldn't afford to travel to events or to pay tickets , you know, for tickets for events that, that, you know, have become free online then, you know, that, that aspect has been taken away. There's, there's timing, there's personal circumstances, there's all sorts of reasons why people might not be able to attend in person at events but they can then watch things that are broadcast online because, you know, often whilst they might be broadcast at a specific time you can usually then watch them back. It means that captions can be added, it means that sign language can be added, you know, to make things more accessible. Even for live events Most thinks like Zoom and Microsoft Teams and Google Meet have closed captions options so whilst they're not perfect – no automated live captioning is, is ever going to be perfect – they at least help. They do make a difference. So I think, absolutely – it has, it has increased accessibility an awful lot but, as you say Ever, I think this has really highlighted how ignored disabled people have been, when they've been asking for the adaptations, these, you know, and really, I mean the, the equality act of 2010 talks about readable adjustments and there are all these things that people have said weren't reasonable before and now suddenly they are. That needs, I mean, I feel like a full public enquiry needs to happen into that because it was always a reasonable adjustment, it's just that people couldn't be bothered to put the effort in. You know people who, people with disabilities who wanted the capacity to work from home more, or to work more flexible hours, and it's not just people with disabilities, it's people with young families or people who are carers who , who want more flexibility in life, who want to be able to do things virtually, if possible, rather than in person. And, you know, I think it has really highlighted how ignored so many marginalised voices have been when they've just been asking for small adaptations that would make their life easier. I t would make it easier for them to do their job. Well, You know, because if you're not having to have, you know, an hour's commute to and event or to a meeting that might completely exhaust you or might leave you in pain, or might mean you have to pay for an extra hour of child care, you know.</p> <p>Then it's just.. all of these things that, these people, are then gonna perform better in their job and, or if somebody's, there's a lot of cases with studying with universities as well where, where students who haven't been able to access on-campus learning have asked for virtual learning they've been told “no, no, no we can't do it – we don't do it that way. We can't do it that way” and then suddenly we can.</p> <p>So actually, you've just been excluding those from education. And that should, that should not happen. We should not be in a position in 2020 in a developed country where we are excluding people from education because they have a disability - because they can't travel - because they have a young family - because they have to work – as well as... We shouldn't be doing that. And I think that, that is something that has really become starkly obvious and, as you say Ever, we can't go back to how it was. It would be an absolute travesty if we did that. We need to really</p>

	wake up and think why. Why are we making people do things the way they were always done? Just because they're the way they were always done. That's not a good enough reason. It's not a good enough reason.
STEFAN	Well, yeah. Thank you so much Nell, thank you so much Ever. I really appreciate you both being on this panel. I'm just gonna say that this Book Week Scotland event has been brought to you by Scottish Book Trust. Scottish Book Trust wants everyone living in Scotland to have equal access to books because better access to books means better life chances. You can help by gifting a book to a family who is struggling this Christmas. If you enjoyed this event please consider sharing your love of reading with others by making you donation to Scottish Book Trust Christmas Appeal at <a href="http://scottishbooktrust.com">scottishbooktrust.com</a> Thank you both so much. Thank you for watching.
EVER	Thanks, so much for having us and Nell, it was a pleasure to talk to you.
NELL	Thank you. Yes, I agree. It was been, it's been brilliant. Absolutely – and I think we could carry on this conversation for another two hours if we, if we had the capacity to.