

## Disability and the American Girl Brand

### Introduction

[Access notes] My talk today is called “Disability and the American Girl Brand.” How many people here are already familiar with the brand? How many people have actually read the books or owned the dolls?

The origin narrative of American Girl [SLIDE] begins in 1986, when former teacher and textbook writer, Pleasant Rowland, was inspired to create high-quality dolls which, through stories, would connect girls with history in interesting ways (Chuppa-Cornell 107). The brand began by producing just three dolls/characters, [SLIDE] each with their accompanying six book series (written at a fourth to fifth grade reading level) and a collection of text-related accessories for girls and their dolls, all sold by mail-order catalog. Marketed through discourses of education and empowerment, the American Girl brand now produces books (historical fiction, contemporary fiction, self-help, craft and cook books), [SLIDE] dolls and doll accessories, [SLIDE], movies, [SLIDE], girls’ clothing and accessories, [SLIDE] a magazine, [SLIDE] and an interactive website. [SLIDE] AG also operates several flagship brand stores which feature a salon, café, theater, and, of course, plenty of merchandise for purchase. [SLIDE] It is estimated that AG brings in over 400 million dollars per year and that over ninety percent of girls in the United States have heard of brand (Borghini et al. 364; Diamond et al. 118; Schlosser 1).

American Girl was bought by Mattel in 1998, a change which resulted in increased visibility and growth of their contemporary line of books, dolls and accessories. Recently, however, American Girl has re-emphasized the centrality of their historical fiction through re-branding it as the BeForever line. [SLIDE] Launched in August 2014, the American Girl BeForever line is the brand’s attempt

to make historical fiction more marketable to the contemporary “tween” girl market with “all-new, historically accurate outfits and accessories for dolls; new and refreshed fiction books; and an original line of historically inspired clothing for girls” (American Girl "American Girl Unveils Beforever™ Line and Connects a New Generation of Girls to Timeless Stories, Inspiring Characters, and Endless Possibilities!"). This re-packaged line contains the same stories American Girl has been publishing for over thirty years in a revised format which tries to emphasize that girls and the qualities the company associates with them, such as can-do-attitudes, creativity and helpfulness, are “forever.” As I will show, however, this re-branding does little to address the qualms many critics of American Girl have already expressed about the brand’s watering down of history.

Previous scholarship on American Girl has shown how the brand romanticizes and sanitizes history while encouraging consumerism. Scholars have argued that the AG brand depicts a surface-level diversity for what constitutes an American girl while actually promoting a deeply normative, homogenous and exclusive version of this gendered national identity. While many scholars have discussed the role of age, gender, class, and race in various parts of the AG brand, none have discussed disability. In my talk today, I am combining information from two different articles I’ve written on the brand, with some updated information as I continue to be interested in their representations of disability (Schalk "Ablenationalism in American Girlhood"; Schalk "Beforever?: Disability in American Girl Historical Fiction"). I will first discuss at length the role of disability in the historical fiction line, now called the BeForever line, then I will talk about disability in the contemporary fiction and doll accessory lines. Throughout I argue that while overall disability is added to, but not truly integrated within the brand’s representation of diverse American girlhood, American Girl continues to increase and improve their representations of disability.

## BeForever Historical Fiction

Prior to the creation of the BeForever line, American Girl historical fiction texts<sup>1</sup> were sold as a series of six illustrated books. [SLIDE] In the current BeForever line, the stories have been re-packed into two non-illustrated chapter books each containing three of the original stories. [SLIDE] In addition, each current BeForever character also has at least two additional books: a BeForever Journey book featuring a contemporary girl going back in time to meet the historical character in her era in a choose-your-own-adventure style format, [SLIDE] and one BeForever Mysteries book featuring the central American Girl character solving a mystery. [SLIDE] I won't be talking much about the Journey and Mystery books today, but am happy to speak more about them in the Q&A. There have been a total of fifteen historical American Girl characters<sup>2</sup> [SLIDE] whose time periods span from 1764 to 1974 and, at the moment, ten of these characters and their products are currently available in the BeForever line—the others have been archived. Out of the fifteen historical characters produced by AG, Maryellen Larkin, the first historical character released exclusively under the BeForever line in August 2015, could be considered disabled. Before I discuss this new character, I want to first talk about what has come before Maryellen in the American Girl brand in terms of representing disability.

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<sup>1</sup> I only include in this discussion the main books in the American Girl BeForever historical fiction line. I do not include any short story collections or the stand-alone friend stories which focus on the best friend of one of the central historical characters—both of which are out of print.

<sup>2</sup> In chronological order by era the historical characters are: Kaya (1764; Released in 2002), Felicity (1774; Released in 1991 and archived in 2011), Caroline (1812; Released in 2012 and archived in 2015), Josefina (1824; Released in 1997), Marie Grace and Cécile (1854; Released in 2011 and archived in 2014), Kirsten (1854; Released in 1986 and archived in 2010), Addy (1864; Released in 1993), Samantha (1904; Released in 1986, archived in 2009 and re-released in 2014 with the launching of the BeForever line), Rebecca (1914; Released in 2009), Kit (1934; Released in 2000), Molly (1944; Released in 1986 and archived in 2013), Maryellen (1954; Released in 2015), Melody (1964; released in 2016), and Julie (1974; Released in 2007).

Appearances by disabled characters in American Girl historical fiction are typically brief and part of a plot point which allows the central character to do something heroic, helpful, or selfless. Minor characters with disabilities who appear or are mentioned in the books include for example, Caroline’s grandmother who uses a cane, Addy’s brother Sam who loses his arm in the Civil War, and Rebecca’s cousin who injures his leg and is held at immigration for fear he might be “lame.” There are only two major secondary characters with disabilities in the historical fiction line: Kaya’s adopted sister, Speaking Rain, who is blind and Julie’s friend, Joy, who is deaf. I’ll discuss each of these characters individually before talking about the newest character, Maryellen Larkin.<sup>3</sup>

### *Speaking Rain*

Speaking Rain [SLIDE] is the adopted sister of Kaya, whose stories were first published in 2002. They are Nez Perce girls in 1764. Readers learn in the first two pages of the series that Speaking Rain is blind due to an illness during her infancy and she has been adopted into Kaya’s family after both of her parents passed away. Speaking Rain appears in four of the six original Kaya stories. Initially, she is represented as relatively dependent. In the major dramatic point of the first story, [SLIDE] Speaking Rain accidentally walks over a steep embankment, causing her to fall into a river where she is rescued by Kaya. In the second story, Kaya and Speaking Rain are both kidnapped by raiders [SLIDE] and Speaking Rain is represented as being particularly vulnerable in this situation. After a few days, Kaya decides they must escape, but Speaking Rain insists she would be unable to keep up and tells Kaya to go alone and bring others back to

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<sup>3</sup> Note that my citations—with the exception of the Maryellen books and the Kaya BeForever Journey book—will draw from the original texts in terms of titles and page numbers. Readers using the new version of the texts will find the stories appear verbatim, but with different pagination and chapter/story titles than those that appear in my analysis.

save her. After she leaves Speaking Rain behind, Kaya worries: “how could a blind girl get along without someone to care for her?” (Shaw *Kaya Shows the Way : A Sister Story* 4). In all of these instances, Speaking Rain is depicted as dependent and vulnerable in direct contrast to nondisabled, heroic Kaya.

After being kidnapped in the second story, Speaking Rain is absent from the next two stories, though she is mentioned occasionally. She does not re-appear until story five when Speaking Rain and Kaya are reunited. Here the representation shifts and Speaking Rain is represented as more independent and interdependent. Readers learn that Speaking Rain was abandoned by the kidnappers and though she tried to find her way back to her tribe, she ended up starving, sick and near death in the woods until an elderly woman from a neighboring tribe found her. The woman nursed Speaking Rain back to health and taught her a new language. The two eventually developed an interdependent relationship and, as a result, Speaking Rain has vowed to stay with the woman and not return to Kaya’s family. Kaya tells her grandmother that Speaking Rain has changed, stating: “She seems older. I always looked out for her. Now she doesn’t seem to need my help anymore” (Shaw *Kaya Shows the Way : A Sister Story* 44). Kaya’s grandmother responds, “If she can’t see, she’ll always need some help” (Shaw *Kaya Shows the Way : A Sister Story* 44). This final major appearance of Speaking Rain encourages readers to see her as more of an independent character rather than a mere plot device for Kaya’s character development. However, once Speaking Rain grows in this way, she no longer has a major role in the series so readers get only a glimpse of who she has become after her harrowing experience with the kidnappers.

The representation of Speaking Rain changed significantly in March 2016 when American Girl released a new Kaya Mystery, *The Ghost Wind Stallion*. [SLIDE] In this text, Speaking Rain has a prominent role and often leaves camp to share in Kaya’s adventures. She is extensively more vocal, active, self-aware, and

a mix of interdependent and independent—occasionally driving the events of the plot. In the story, Speaking Rain has a dream about riding a horse and she tells Kaya she desires to ride independently, without being led by someone else on another horse. When a mysterious wild stallion appears near camp, Speaking Rain and Kaya together work to tame him so Speaking Rain can ride him and fulfill her dream. This newest representation of Speaking Rain—written by new author Emma Carlson Berne rather than Janet Beeler Shaw who wrote the original Kaya classic stories—is an important shift in AG’s representation of disability in children’s historical fiction. I will say more on the recent shifts in the brand’s approach to disability when I discuss the contemporary book and doll line.

### *Joy*

The second major secondary character with a disability in the historical series is Joy, [SLIDE] a friend of Julie, who only appears in the last story in the series, which was first published in 2007. Julie and Joy live in San Francisco in 1974. Joy is a nine-year-old deaf girl who recently moved to Julie’s neighborhood. She is integrated into Julie’s fifth grade class and appears regularly throughout the story. She both signs and speaks, sometimes at the same time, and she reads lips reads to communicate. The plot of the story revolves around Julie running for school president with Joy as her running mate. The conflict of the plot occurs when kids at school are making fun of Joy’s disability and Julie worries that she won’t win with Joy as her running mate. Importantly, throughout the text disability stigma and ableism are explicitly engaged.

The first time students are represented mocking Joy is after Julie practices her election speech. [SLIDE] When Julie returns to the gymnasium to get the note cards she left behind she hears one of the popular girls say, “She might have half a chance [of winning] if it weren’t for that deaf girl running with her” (McDonald et al. 28). Joy is too far away to read their lips, but based on Julie’s reaction and

refusal to tell her what the other girls were saying, she figures it out. Joy says, “I know they don’t like me...It’s because I’m deaf, isn’t it?” (McDonald et al. 31). Julie replies, “I know it must be hard not being able to hear. But trust me, some things are better off not being heard” (McDonald et al. 31).

Later, Julie herself unconsciously discriminates against Joy by asking Joy to hold their campaign poster while Julie talks to students at the end of the school day. Joy recognizes this request as dismissive and signs, “*I may be deaf, but I can still speak for myself*” (McDonald et al. 45; original emphasis). When Joy speaks to a few students though, they immediately mock the sound of her voice. After this second instance of Joy being teased, Julie discusses the issue with her sister. While she seems to recognize the problems with how Joy is treated, Julie initially doesn’t know how to combat or stop it. She even briefly considers dropping out of the election entirely.

At the school election debate, Julie is asked why her vice president is qualified and rather than speaking for her, Julie asks Joy to speak for herself. Joy comes on stage and says: “I know I’m different...I know I talk funny. I can’t hear what you hear because I’m deaf. But everybody feels different sometimes. And even though I’m deaf, I promise to listen to you. I hope you’ll give me a chance” (McDonald et al. 57). This positive moment is immediately squashed when Julie and Joy return to their classroom to find the popular girls mimicking Joy’s voice and flailing their hands in mock sign language. Joy runs out of the room devastated. [SLIDE] Here, the narrative, which has previously depicted Joy’s ability to understand and respond to discrimination independently, shifts to representing Joy as utterly exhausted and defeated by this final, very public, bullying. This is the turning point in the story as Julie becomes the one who must do the resisting and fighting. Julie asks the teacher that the girls who made fun of Joy be taught sign language during detention. She stays to teach the girls some

signs and they enjoy it, eventually asking to learn to sign “sorry” to Joy. The girls all go with Julie to Joy’s house to apologize and the next day the popular girls dress in their cheerleading outfits and do a public cheer in support of Julie and Joy’s campaign. The school then votes and they win the election.

The narrative of Joy works in reverse of the narrative of Speaking Rain. Rather than moving from dependency to interdependence, Joy seems to move from active to passive. Joy starts off as central to the plot, insistent about her abilities and resistant to the mocking of others. However, after multiple instances of discrimination and the reduced support of her friend, Joy is unable to continue fighting for herself and this inability becomes the central turning point of Julie’s character development. Julie becomes the hero by figuring out a better use for detention time and changing the minds of the popular girls. As a result, Julie wins the school election, apparently due to the public support of the popular girls she helped in detention, not due to something Joy did as her running mate. Joy’s role in the text, therefore, is primarily to re-center the ability ingenuity, and goodness of Julie more than to demonstrate anything about disability beyond the implicit lesson that making fun of disabled people is wrong.

### *Maryellen*

In August 2015, American Girl introduced Maryellen Larkin, [SLIDE] the first American Girl character to be released exclusively under the BeForever line and the first American Girl main character who could be considered disabled. Maryellen is as a white, blonde, middle-class girl growing up in a family of eight in 1954 and “when she was younger, she had had polio. She was all better now. Really, the only reminder was that one leg was a tiny bit weaker than the other, and her lungs were extra sensitive to cold” (Tripp *Taking Off* 14). Creating a character who had polio was a prime opportunity for American Girl to finally engage more directly and at length with disability in its historical fiction and yet, as is suggested



in this quote by the emphasis on being “all better” with a leg that is only “a tiny bit weaker,” disability is arguably even more avoided and occluded in the Maryellen books than in those that represent *Speaking Rain* and *Joy*. I argue that the representation of Maryellen actually exacerbates the problems I identified with the representation of disability in previous AG historical fiction.

First, the physical and mental effects of polio on Maryellen are discussed only briefly and almost consistently in conjunction with assertions that suggest disability as something to be overcome or overlooked rather than understanding disability as a lived experience and identity. Examples of these type of statements from the first book include: “Sometimes Maryellen worried that Mom babied her because of her leg. But Maryellen never let her leg slow her down” and “Maryellen flushed as she always did when anyone mentioned her polio. She *never* let her weaker leg slow her down” (Tripp *The One and Only* 25, 63). In the BeForever Journey book, *The Sky's the Limit*, Maryellen's polio is mentioned only once in two of the fourteen potential unique storylines readers can choose, meaning that there is a significant chance that readers of this book may never learn about Maryellen's disability at all. In every instance, it is clear that readers are supposed to understand polio and its effects as being behind Maryellen and having only a minor impact on her in the present. While *Speaking Rain* and *Joy*'s narratives generally avoid the trope of overcoming, in nearly every reference to Maryellen's polio, there is an emphasis on how determined Maryellen is to not allow her experience with the disease to strongly affect her or how others perceive her.

Additionally, in book two, *Taking Off*, the first third of the text revolves around the invention of the polio vaccine and Maryellen's shock to find out from her classmate that some people are afraid to be vaccinated. In response, Maryellen decides, rather than having a traditional birthday party, to put on a show fundraiser to encourage people to get vaccinated and raise money for the March of Dimes. At

one point during talking with her friend who refuses to get the vaccine Maryellen, “in horrified disbelief,” exclaims: “Are you kidding?...Finally there’s a shot to protect you from a really terrible disease, a disease that can cripple you or even kill you, and you’re afraid to get it?” (Tripp *Taking Off* 14, 15). Maryellen’s use of the word “cripple” is interesting. While the word now seems slightly outdated and even offensive from a disability studies perspective, for the time period of 1954, the word cripple seems appropriate for Maryellen to use.

American Girl, however, does not take this opportunity to make the relationship between disability in the past and present explicit. In “Inside Maryellen’s World,” the historical information section in the back of the book, the text merely states: “Maryellen’s idea to do a polio show for birthday might seem odd today, but in 1954, polio was a big deal. Families feared polio almost as much as the atomic bomb. The disease, which usually struck children, often started like the flu, with fever, aches and weakness, but it could last many months and could *cripple* or even kill the patient” (Tripp *Taking Off* 180; emphasis added). The choice of the word cripple here rather than a more clear and detailed description of the physical effects of polio as potentially disabling, obscures the historical relationship of polio and disability and thus of Maryellen as disabled or not. As a result, while many in disability studies would identify Maryellen as a character with a disability, it seems less likely most children reading the books would identify Maryellen as disabled and fewer still would identify clear connections between disability and ableism in the past to disability and ableism today as readers can do with Joy’s narrative.

### *Implications of the Historical Line*

[SLIDE] There are many implications of these three characters with disabilities in the American Girl historical fiction line. First, all of the texts actively and commendably reject a cure narrative in which an end to disability represents a

happy ending. Additionally, *Speaking Rain* and Joy's narratives also resist the emphasis on overcoming disability through proper positive attitude. While both *Speaking Rain* and Joy are represented as generally upbeat, they do have difficult experiences which they do not overcome purely with positive thinking. In the case of Maryellen, however, overcoming is a subtle, yet present theme since her disability is so consistently downplayed and she works so hard to pass as nondisabled.

A second key aspect of these representations is that *Speaking Rain*, Joy and Maryellen are all presented in isolation; there are no other people with disabilities around them, no community, and no shared experiences of disability or discrimination. Other American Girl character experience issues of race, class, and gender as collective concerns which effect many people; for example, Cécile and her grandfather together experience racism in a candy shop and Rebecca attends a Labor Day union protest after seeing the dangerous working conditions experienced by multiple men in her family. Disability in AG historical fiction, however, remains highly individualized and thus stands apart from the broad, communal way gender, class, and race are represented in the *BeForever* line. The implication is that people with disabilities are not major historical players and disability itself is not a social justice issue which has existed in different ways across time. Whereas Addy and Cécile both experience racism, Kirsten, Kit and Rebecca each deal with poverty, Samantha and Julie encounter sexism and feminist political activism, and Samantha and Rebecca witness the effects of poor working conditions, only Joy in Julie's final story in 1974, allows young readers to begin to understand disability as a marginalized identity category impacted by discrimination in a different historical era. Here, it is clear that while AG attempts to show how gender, race and class have impacted people at different points in history, disability is not considered such a "timeless" concern. In order to more

fully understand the role of disability in the American Girl brand, however, it is also important to compare the representation of disability in the BeForever line with the representation of disability in the AG contemporary fiction and doll accessory lines.

### Contemporary Fiction and Doll Line

American Girl's line of contemporary fictional books, dolls, and accessories was introduced in the early 2000s. The featured characters and texts in the contemporary line are referred to as the American Girl of the Year series [SLIDE] while the dolls and accessories unaffiliated with specific texts are part of the Truly Me collection, formerly called the My American Girl or American Girl of Today line [SLIDE]. I refer to all of these products collectively as the contemporary line. While the historical line was the starting point of the brand and remains its most recognizable aspect, the contemporary book and doll line is updated more regularly and is increasingly expanding. For example, in 2017 AG released a contemporary character book series and doll outside of the Girl of the Year line suggesting that they may begin producing even more contemporary fiction characters which are produced beyond a single year.<sup>4</sup> AG's Girl of the Year line has one to four books per new character with an accompanying doll manufactured for only one year. Of the sixteen American Girls of the Year produced to date,<sup>5</sup> only one, Girl of the Year 2017, Gabriela McBride, is disabled. Prior to the publication of the Gabby books, disability was primarily represented with minor characters, though people with disabilities also appear in the "real life" stories in the back of each book, often

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<sup>4</sup> In 2017 AG also introduced a three novel series about contemporary character Tenney and her friends, including a male friend Logan who became the first American Girl boy doll. Both the Tenney and Logan dolls have unique hand positions which allow them to hold instruments in line with their stories.

<sup>5</sup> The Girl of the Year characters have been Lindsey (2001), Kailey (2003), Marisol (2005), Jess (2006), Nicki (2007), Mia (2008), Chrissa (2009), Lanie (2010), Kanani (2011), McKenna (2012), Saige (2013), Isabella (2014), Grace (2015), Lea (2016), Gabriella (2017).

as the objects of charity or volunteer work. Overall, minor characters with disabilities are nonetheless far more frequent in the contemporary books. In the Nicki books, for example, the main character and her mother are training a service dog, so people with a variety of disabilities are mentioned on multiple occasions.

The most prominent secondary disabled character in the contemporary books is Josie Myers from the 2012 Girl of the Year McKenna books. [SLIDE] Josie is an older student who is asked to tutor McKenna. She is a white, blonde, female wheelchair user who is smart, musically talented, friendly and outgoing. She helps McKenna improve her reading skills and in the process the two become friends. Josie is represented as quite aware of nondisabled people's discomfort with people with disabilities, but she is never depicted as experiencing any explicit discrimination or even encountering inaccessible spaces. Again, ableism is not critiqued, but rather avoided, particularly via the way McKenna's discomfort upon first meeting Josie [SLIDE] is naturalized as a "normal" reaction to disability as others in the text, including McKenna's best friend, Toulane, are also mentioned or depicted as being initially uncomfortable around people with disabilities.

Like *Speaking Rain*, Josie is central to the text, yet her character still primarily operates as a vehicle for McKenna's character development. [SLIDE] McKenna literally learns from Josie through tutoring and she also learns to be more accepting of and comfortable with people with disabilities through their relationship. The fundamental role of Josie as a tool for facilitating McKenna's learning and growth is made explicit in the AG Spring 2012 E-Newsletter which claims that the inclusion of Josie is intended to emphasize an "issue important to moms and girls: appreciating those who are different from you" (American Girl "Spring 2012"). This statement demonstrates how disabled characters in American Girl fiction are often devices to demonstrate or encourage the growth, kindness and

admirability of the main American Girl character and the assumed nondisabled AG readers as well.

[SLIDE] In 2017, AG released Girl of the Year Gabriela McBride, a black girl with a stutter who likes dance and spoken word poetry. Notably, a stutter is a non-physically-apparent disability. From a capitalist perspective, the brand is unlikely to ever produce a main character whose body or face must be produced differently than other dolls or who must come with additional accessories which would alter their pricing consistency across the dolls. That said, the representation of this first disabled main character is impressive. There are three books about Gabriela, in the first she saves her local community center by organizing a flash mob and doing a local news interview that convinces local government to fund safety renovations to the space. In the second book, she runs for sixth grade ambassador on the platform of getting rid of her middle school's sixth grade initiation tradition which basically just entails older students hazing and teasing new students. The third book, she performs in a poetry slam with her friends and works to figure out how to balance her friendships, school work and extra-curriculars.

In each of these texts Gabby is represented as stuttering more frequently in emotional situations, such as giving a speech or meeting new people. The focus of the stories is never exclusively on her stutter, though in book two she is teased by classmates for it and she briefly desires to get rid of it. Instead, Gabby's disability is integrated into the representation as another aspect of her life. Her dance teacher informs Gabby that she herself has dyslexia and while it makes reading difficult, she is still an incredible dancer. Although the scene is brief, it's important that Gabby is shown connecting with another person with a disability rather than in isolation like many other previous disabled AG characters.

While Gabby attends speech therapy in books one and two, and mentions using techniques from speech therapy in book three, there is not a focus on getting rid of her stutter. Instead, her speech therapist helps her with techniques for lessening instances of stuttering, such as slowing down, taking breaths, and speaking through no matter how it sounds. The speech therapist also encourages Gabby to accept her stutter as a unique part of who she is, insisting that it likely will never go away completely. Gabby is a self-advocate, teaching people around her to not complete sentences or speak for her, but to allow her time to “find her words.” There is no cure narrative, instead Gabby learns that she can be a leader who creates change not despite her stutter or magically because of it, just simply with it—one aspect of many in her identity. In the final book in the series, Gabby performs at a regional youth slam. She performs a solo with a little stuttering at the beginning, but none by half-way through. The focus of her solo poem is on finding her passion for poetry, something which is built over the course of the other texts.

The addition of the Gabby character to the contemporary line challenges my previous work’s arguments about the marginal and utilitarian role of disabled characters. Gabby is not meant to inspire or teach any more or less so than any other Girl of the Year character—after all, AG bills itself as an educational and empowering company for girls. In the back of the books, the authors, Teresa Harris for books one and two and Varian Johnson for book three, thank a specific speech therapist who was consulted in writing the books. It seems evident that AG is hearing the years of feedback about lack of disability representation and attempting to do more and do better than they have before. This is further reflected in the increase in disability doll accessories produced by the brand.

In addition to the fictional books and their associated dolls and accessories in the American Girl of the Year series, AG also offers customizable “Truly Me” dolls. [SLIDE] These dolls come with a range of hair colors and textures, skin

colors, eye colors and shapes, and nose shapes, in certain predetermined combinations, to allow girls to choose a doll “just like you.” To facilitate this doll-self for girls with disabilities, American Girl also offers a number of disability-related doll accessories including [SLIDE] a wheelchair (available since 1996), underarm crutches (available since 2008), a service dog, allergy-free lunch bag with EpiPen, hearing aids, and the option to have a doll without hair (all available since 2012, though the allergy-free lunch was discontinued in 2017), a diabetes care kit and forearm crutches (available since 2016) (Jevens). With these accessories, American Girl represents disability as an important aspect of contemporary girls’ identities. [SLIDE: Explain AG Sami and pass her around]

On the American Girl website the wheelchair, the underarm crutches, forearm crutches, and diabetes care kit are listed under “Doll Care Products.” In particular, the underarm crutches [SLIDE] are sold as part of the “Feel-Better Kit for Dolls” which includes crutches, arm and leg casts, cast stickers, bandage and ice pack while the wheelchair [SLIDE] is visually more similar to the push wheelchairs found in hospitals than the lightweight, sleek and foldable chairs used by many young wheelchair users today—including Josie in the McKenna books. The packaging and design of both of these products imply that they are intended to primarily represent temporary impairments and injuries—something the brand seemed to try to partially correct when they released the forearm crutches. In the first few years they were produced, the options for dolls without hair and doll hearing aids could only be found by going to the “Doll Hospital” section of the website and had to be ordered via phone or in store. [SLIDE] Here the disability options which alter the physical doll are categorized as hospital needs similar to dolls who have limbs which need to be reattached or torsos that need to be repaired. For a long time, dolls without hair and dolls with hearing aids were not pictured anywhere on the American Girl website except for on the Doll Hospital



page, however, in July 2017, the homepage header featured several changing images, two of which featured disabled dolls, two white (one without hair and one in a wheelchair) and one black with a service dog [SLIDE]. The catalog and website also now show dolls without hair as options in the Truly Me section alongside the other dolls. In the past year or so, therefore, the brand has begun moving disabled dolls away from the margins of their catalog and website more and more.

The professed purpose of the contemporary My American Girl line is to let girls create dolls just like them, down to the matching outfits available for purchase. On their corporate website under “Product Diversity,” [SLIDE] the page displays the images of all their currently available dolls and reads, in part, “American Girl is proud to feature one of the most inclusive and diverse selections of dolls today...American Girl's wide range of dolls—featuring light, medium, and dark skin tones, as well as a variety of face molds, eye colors, hair styles and textures, plus hundreds of accessories and stories—helps girls highlight their individuality and special style” (American Girl "Product Diversity"). On the bottom half of the “Product Diversity” page, after mention of offering different physical features and accessories, there is an additional section that prominently features their disability related products without ever using the term disability [SLIDE]. The heading for this section reads “More ways to embrace what makes your girl one of a kind” and states:

American Girl's commitment to diversity and inclusion extends even further, starting with our selection of dolls without hair. These dolls—customized by hand by specially trained experts—are a perfect companion for girls who may be dealing with permanent or temporary hair loss.

In addition to dolls without hair, American Girl offers several other specialized items, such as hearing aids, a service-dog set, eyeglasses, and a

wheelchair. American Girl is proud that these and numerous other accessories help a girl create a doll that's as unique as she is—and we will continue to create new products in this important area so that every girl can see herself reflected in her doll. (American Girl "Product Diversity")

The images around this text are of their various disability accessories I've already discussed, though they also include glasses and orthodontic headgear. On the one hand, the various doll disability options and accessories conceivably allow some girls with certain disabilities to see themselves represented in the line and to create dolls which look like them—dolls which are free from the specific narratives of the texts that could actually limit imaginative play. On the other hand though, the style of these products, their relatively marginalized (though improving) position on the American Girl website and especially the lack of the word disability, reveals the delicate balance the brand is trying to enact. American Girl seeks a safe form of diversity, one that offends as few people as possible while appealing and selling to the widest range of girls possible.

Additionally, there is not a single historically-inspired doll or doll accessory from the BeForever line which represents disability. Although American Girl at one point sold some "best friend" dolls and books in the historical fiction line, even if the brand had attempted to create "best friend" dolls and accessories for Speaking Rain and Joy, like Girl of the Year Gabriela, their disabilities are generally non-apparent ones in terms of both the body and accessories, as Joy does not use hearing aids and Speaking Rain is simply described as having "cloudy eyes" (Shaw *Meet Kaya : An American Girl* 18). Similarly, since Maryellen's polio made her one leg "weaker" and her lungs sensitive, so her doll's body is the same as the others. This lack of disability in the BeForever line as a whole encourages girls to only imagine and play with disabled dolls as representations of the present, not the past.

## Conclusion

So to briefly conclude, [SLIDE] in the AG brand, disability is an issue which does not cross historical boundaries in the same way as gender, race, and class. Molly Brookfield argues: “By creating a version of American history that celebrates the supposed universalism of American girlhood, AG simplifies the complexity and diversity that makes the American experience endlessly confounding and exciting. Furthermore, if a girl does not see her cultural identity or physical attributes featured in the AG paradigm, she is left feeling isolated” (70). This potential for feeling left out of and isolated by the American Girl BeForever line is certainly quite possible for girls with disabilities. However, I argue that, though the impact on disabled girls is obviously significant, understanding the changing role, treatment and valuation of different bodyminds throughout American history is important for disabled and nondisabled children alike. Maud Lavin notes that the Addy series, released in 1993, did a rare thing in depicting slavery for a wide audience and for making an African-American doll that is popular with both black and white children (81). I argue that a more explicitly disabled BeForever character can have similar appeal and educational value for all young AG readers and consumers. The brand has, however, made incredible strides in improving their contemporary representations of disability, as exhibited by the Gabby character and the increased presence of disability accessories in their catalog and images of disabled dolls on their website. I believe it is possible for the brand to make similar improvements in terms of their representation of disability in history as well as in the present.

In my talk today I have provided a close look at the representation of disability throughout the American Girl collection from Speaking Rain, Joy and Maryellen in the re-branded BeForever historical fiction line to Josie Meyers,

Gabriela McBride, and the many disability doll accessories in the contemporary line. My analysis of these texts and products reveals that disability in the brand is generally represented as a contemporary and individual issue that is only included in very specific, safe ways within the profitable neoliberal diversity of American Girl. I argue that this conflicted representation across the brand sends a mixed message that seeks diversity and empowerment while still maintaining much exclusion and stereotype. As someone who grew up with the brand, I recognize the value of representing girls, especially girls from marginalized groups, in history. As a scholar, I can also appreciate the need for visibility in the media generally and the particular importance of disability doll accessories which exist in almost no other major American toy brand. Nonetheless, on the back of every book, American Girl claims to “take pride and care in helping girls become their very best today, so they’ll grow up to be the women who make a difference tomorrow.” I believe it is vitally important to remain critical and attentive to the ways this influential brand represents disability as a contemporary individual identity in ways that are often apolitical while nonetheless still being heads above all other major brands in terms of the quantity and quality of disability representation for children. With that contradictory thought, I will close my talk. I welcome your comments and questions. Thank you.

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