

# *Ableist Narratives and Diverse Worlds: A Consideration of Context in Children's Literature*

**ABSTRACT:** Children's literature is filled with characters, metaphors, language and allusions that can be connected to disability. In many ways, the way that children's literature approaches disability serves to construct an ableist world for children in which villains and monsters have disabilities and the beautiful protagonists do not. The protagonist might even help a character with a disability distinctly in the charity model fashion. However, the fantasy worlds that children's stories depict, I would argue, offer a diverse world for children to encounter disability and difference, and it is the story teller who often mitigates and provides ableist context. Therefore, it is the duty of educators to concentrate on difference within children's literature and embrace the layers of meaning that children might develop on their own—such as compassion, acceptance or identification with the 'villains' or any character with disabilities.



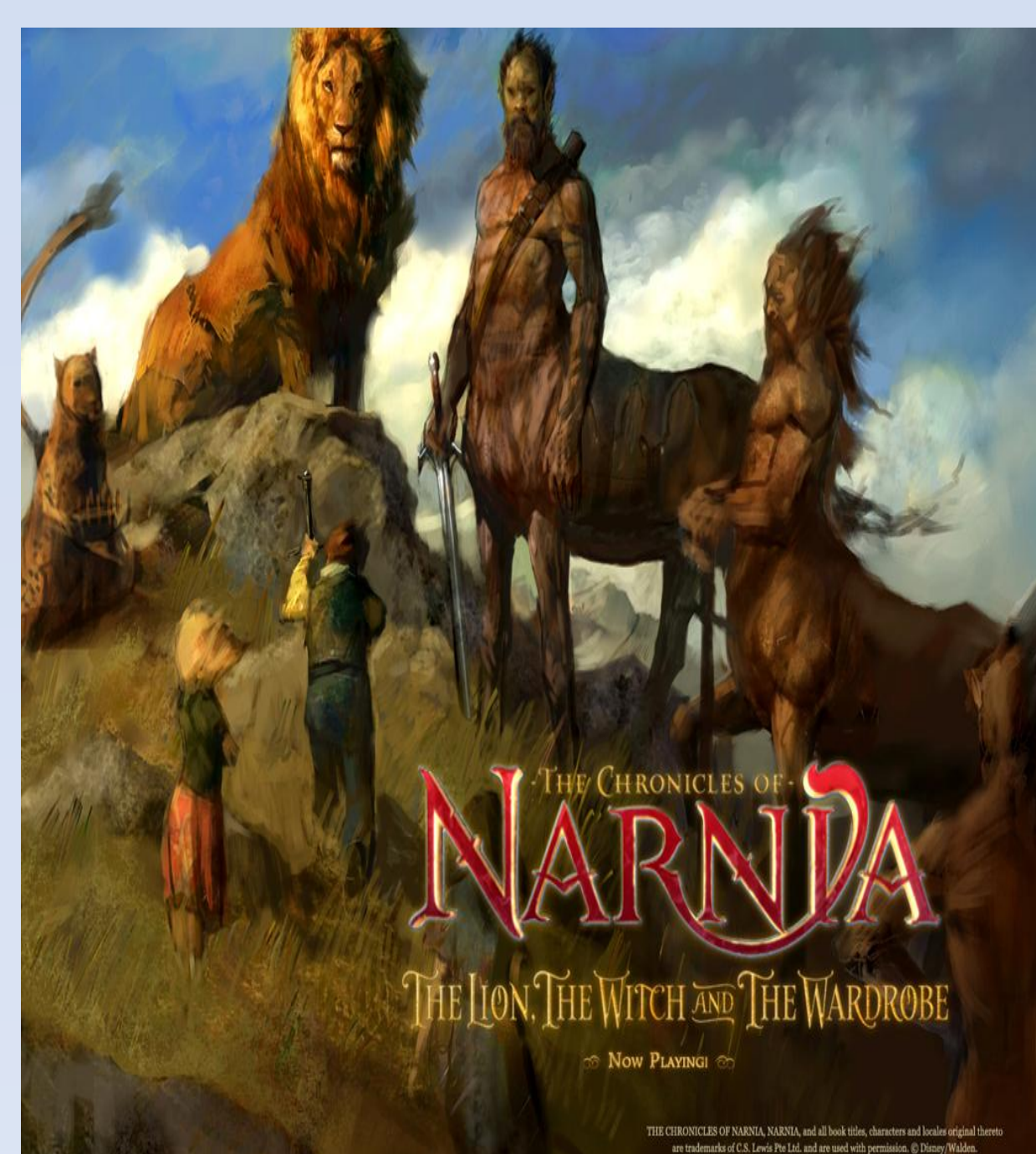
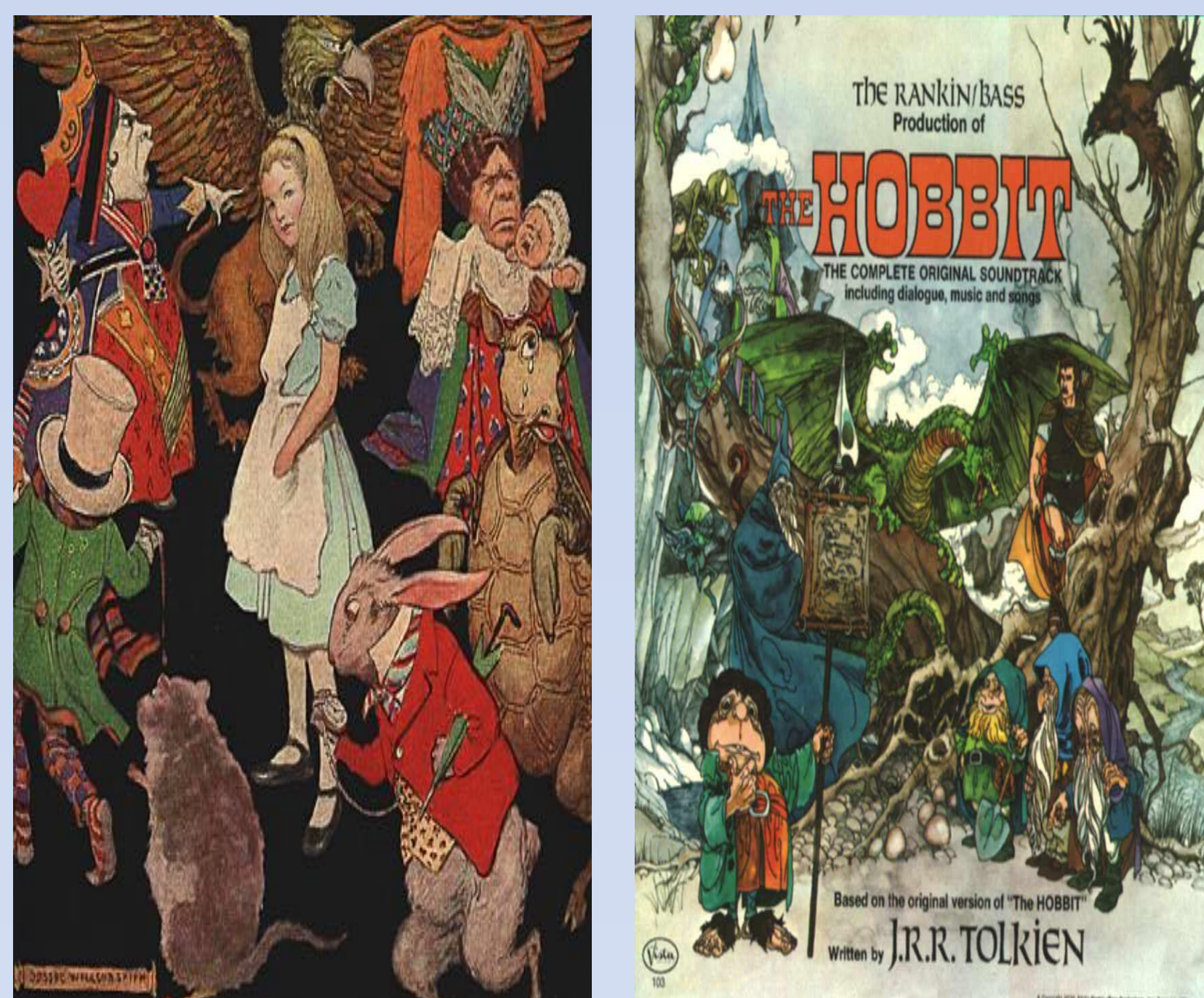
**WORLDS WITH DIFFERENT EMBODIMENTS:** Fairy tales and children's novels often paint pictures of realities that contain many kinds of embodiments, which are treated ambiguously. These worlds might teach children to accept difference.

**Peter Pan:** Captain Hook might be an example of a villain with a disability, but Never Land is a world that includes many kinds of embodiments.

**Alice in Wonderland:** There are many kinds of characters in this book. A key character with a disability would be the Mad Hatter, but the book might be portraying many characters as mad.

**The Hobbit:** There is a vast range of embodiments in this reality, although discrimination does exist insofar as hobbits are considered to be half-ings, or half human.

**Narnia:** This world involves many kinds of embodiments, including hybrids of human beings and other kinds of animals. Aslan as a healer might be problematic from a critical disability perspective, however.



**VILLAINS:** Disability is often used in literature to identify villains. As such, disability might indicate there is something lacking in the character's humanity; that is, disability is understood to be the physical manifestation of the villain's soul.

**Hansel and Gretel:** The children take advantage of the witch's blindness in order to escape.

**Jack and the Beanstalk:** The giant's large size is a device meant to identify him as intimidating and monstrous, and his size is attributed to lack of intelligence, in contrast with Jack's cleverness.

**Rumpelstiltskin:** His small size does not seem to be important to the story but it does flag the antagonist as different.

**BEAUTY AND NORMALIZATION:** Children's literature often depicts characters with embodiments that draw fear or ridicule. Often in these stories, characters take a journey of self-discovery or fall in love with someone who can normalize them; they proceed to become what is generally understood to be beautiful.

**The Ugly Duckling:** The duckling is spurned until he matures into a more socially acceptable embodiment, which is taken to be a happy ending.

**Beauty and the Beast:** The beast had to be tamed by the beauty and in some version undergoes a transformation.

**The Steadfast Tin Soldier:** The one-legged hero falls in love with a ballerina because he believes she too only has one leg. This story is interesting because the soldier understands disability to be beautiful.

