Infantilisation and Advocacy in the Writing Career of Alan Marshall

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The most common public image of the Australian disabled author Alan Marshall is the inspirational physically impaired child from *I Can Jump Puddles*. However, Marshall's writing career was significantly more varied and advocacy-driven than is often remembered.

Marshall's writing career was also longer than is often remembered. He was born in 1902 and became a published writer in his early thirties. *I Can Jump Puddles* was published in 1955, in the middle of his four decades as an author. Having already had several books published, including some that detailed his personal experiences as a disabled man, Marshall had no reason to suspect that *I Can Jump Puddles* would irrevocably alter his public image. However, that is what occurred.

From that time on, it would have been easy for Marshall to write texts that amplified the elements of *I Can Jump Puddles* to which his audience had gravitated. However, he aspired to more for them, and for himself. The experience inculcated in him a strengthened determination to reveal the truth of his life, and to use his writing as a vehicle for advocating for disabled people.

This essay explores the impact that *I Can Jump Puddles* had on Marshall's writing career, in four sections. I begin by detailing how Marshall's public image was engulfed by the infantilisation metanarrative of disability. The second and third sections examine the life of Alan in *I Can Jump Puddles*, and Alan Marshall's life, respectively. The fourth section explores how Marshall channeled his advocacy for disabled people through his writing, and how the aftermath of *I Can Jump Puddles* deepened this commitment.

The Infantilisation Metanarrative

> Her hand fell to her lap. Her silk dress clung to her large, curved thighs and fell into a depression where her slightly parted legs offered no support for the material. Her fingers moved slowly, puckering the silk beneath her hand and revealing, as the hem moved over her knee, the warm, coloured flimsiness of her underclothing.
>
> He placed the pencil on the table, reached out his thick hand and let it rest heavily on her lap. (Marshall, *Feet* 2)

This description is from the opening scene of *How Beautiful Are Thy Feet*, Marshall's first book, written in 1937. The erotic tone may seem antithetical to the demure style and subjects usually associated with Marshall's writing. However, Marshall wrote in a range of genres throughout his four-decade career. These included magazine and newspaper articles and columns, travel diaries, fictionalised memoirs, novels, short stories, histories, and children's books.

One reason that Marshall and eroticism are dissociated in the minds of readers is that Frank Cheshire, who published most of Marshall's books, fostered a conception of Marshall as childlike. Perhaps Cheshire himself conceptualised Marshall as such. Recalling when they first met in 1944 to discuss the possible publication of *These Are My People*, the second book that Marshall had written, Cheshire said of Marshall: "He was such a brave little man. I felt this

was something I could do" (qtd. in Marks 222). This comment might suggest that Marshall was a teenager at most, and that Cheshire was many decades older than him. However, Marshall was forty-two, and Cheshire was forty-eight. Cheshire's comment might also suggest that Marshall was an inexperienced author. However, though Marshall had not yet found someone who would publish *How Beautiful Are Thy Feet*, his writing had been published in newspapers and magazines for ten years, and a small collection of his short stories had been published four years earlier.

Nondisabled people often frame disabled adults as children (Shakespeare 295). Similarly, they also often frame disabled children as though their development is permanently arrested (Kafer 53–54). Either way, infantilisation of a disabled person of any age is experienced so frequently by disabled people that it is one form of what is known in literary disability studies as a metanarrative of disability.

Metanarratives of disability are the stories constructed by nondisabled people in both real and representational encounters with disabled people. The nondisabled person allocates the disabled person a past of hopelessness and helplessness, and appoints themselves as the author who will decide the future of the disabled person, as well as their own role in that future. They might choose the narrating role and opine that the disabled person will continue to be hopeless and helpless, or they might choose a pivotal character role, exerting what they define as positive influence on the disabled person's trajectory (Bolt 341).

These metanarratives are insidious because they often combine several stereotypes into a complete story, thus they have an air of both familiarity and finality. For example, in the context of a child, disablement is not only separated from being sexual, but also from being knowledgeable, capable, and employable. Once one believes in the infantilisation metanarrative, then it becomes acceptable to refer to a disabled person of any age as "little," and appropriate to assume that they require the assistance that the nondisabled narrator has chosen to provide.

Marshall's Public Image

Cheshire's image of Marshall was cemented in the minds of many others by the eternally cheerful and courageous physically impaired child protagonist in *I Can Jump Puddles*. *I Can Jump Puddles* is Marshall's fictionalised memoir of his childhood, published by Cheshire in 1955. It relates the story of a boy named Alan who grows up in the early 1900s with his parents and sisters. They live in a fictitious Victorian country town called Turalla, where there are no disabled inhabitants. Poliomyelitis, known then as infantile paralysis, had been increasingly common in Australia since the 1870s, however Alan is the first and only person in Turalla who contracts it. This occurs when he is six, and has just begun attending the local school. He is also the only person with polio in the hospital where he stays for a few months. He returns home to Turalla with his right leg completely paralysed and his left leg partially paralysed. He learns to walk with crutches, attends local schools, and participates in childhood pursuits with his friends. The book ends as Alan solves his quest to ride a horse unassisted, and tells his father that he wants to be an author.

Jack Beasley summarised *I Can Jump Puddles* as an "asexual dreamland," because the picture that it painted of town life was simple and romantic to an unrealistic degree (24). Most of the townspeople lived the same difficult but tolerable life. There was very little sex, prejudice, or cruelty. Acceptance of Alan's impairment by the townspeople was universal, and that allowed him to maintain a positive attitude towards it.

It should of course be noted that, as much as *I Can Jump Puddles* was the book that Cheshire published, it was also the book that Marshall wrote. In other words it was Marshall, not Cheshire, who created the idyllic town of Turalla and its endlessly magnanimous inhabitants. And as its author, Marshall bears responsibility for the text itself.

However, while I do not want to suggest that Marshall had no agency as an author, because he clearly did, the circumstances surrounding the text of *I Can Jump Puddles* are more complex than the single fact of his authorship. Putting aside the influence of Cheshire's editing, while Marshall wrote, he was balancing a number of considerations, and maintaining this balance led to a text with multiple interpretations.

An example of one such event from Marshall's childhood is when he and his best friend Joe find a mare who has become so dehydrated that she cannot move. In *I Can Jump Puddles* Alan writes that when he and Joe fill a bucket with water for the mare, it is so heavy that they have to carry it together. They bring several buckets to her until Alan becomes exhausted and collapses, then Joe sits with them both until Alan recovers (Marshall, *Puddles* 142–44). However, when Marshall reads a draft of this section to his mother, she points out that Marshall's description of the event is not what occurred, that Joe went home after the first two buckets of water, and Marshall carried the others alone. When she asks Marshall why he wrote that Joe was present for the whole event Marshall replies: "Because I wanted to share it with him. I didn't want to take any of the credit away from Joe. Wasn't his fault he had to go and feed the ducks" (qtd. in Marks 253).

Given the example of this inconsequential event, one can then infer the additions and omissions that Marshall made to protect his friends from accusations from other townsfolk or the public. And indeed to also protect himself from similar accusations, or even from just the pain of remembering and then repeatedly discussing with the public how difficult his childhood really was. Perhaps it seemed better to risk the possibility of being understood as too cheerful rather than too bitter or fragile.

In the hope of averting simplistic or literal interpretations of the book, Marshall began with a clarification. In the preface he wrote: "To give a picture of life at that time, I have gone beyond the facts to get at the truth. I have sometimes altered scenes, made composite characters when this was necessary, changed time sequences to help the continuity and introduced dialogue that those who shared my experiences of the horse-days may find confusing" (*Puddles* n.p.).

Similarly, to pre-empt the infantilisation metanarrative, he directly addressed the readers at a number of points during the book. For example, speaking of the damage that the infantilisation narrative enacts on a child he wrote: "The crippled child is not conscious of the handicap implied by his useless legs. They are often inconvenient or annoying but he is confident that they will never prevent him doing what he wants to do or being whatever he wishes to be. If he considers them a handicap it is because he has been told they are" (*Puddles* 80). Also, speaking on the helpfulness of discarding the infantilisation metanarrative, he wrote: "I liked these men because they never pitied me. They gave me confidence. In the world they travelled, being on crutches was not as bad as sleeping out in the rain or walking with your toes on the ground, or longing for a drink you had no money to buy. They saw nothing but the track ahead of them; they saw brighter things ahead of me" (*Puddles* 173).

However, despite Marshall's efforts, the ubiquity of the infantilisation metanarrative meant that from the publication of *I Can Jump Puddles* onwards his image was dominated by Alan from the book. This occurred even though Marshall was already well-known to readers. When *I Can Jump Puddles* was published in 1955 he had a regular column in two newspapers: "Alan Marshall's Casebook" in *The Argus*, and "Yarns on the Sliprails" in *The Australasian Post*. Moreover, by that time he had been an author of short stories and books for more than twenty years. *These Are My People* (1944), his first published book, was a best-seller, as Cheshire described: "We had the orders written down in the book and unless you were on the top of the list you couldn't get it straight away. This was the only book I can recall for which we had a customers' list. It was very exciting. . . . Walter Harrap, the son of George Harrap,

was in Australia at the time and I talked him into buying the sheets of the book for England. It was the first book we sold to England" (qtd. in Marks 223).

Over the next twenty years Marshall tried to lessen the Australian public's fixation on Alan from *I Can Jump Puddles*, with little success. His attempts to do so included writing two fictionalised memoirs of his adulthood—*This Is the Grass* and *In Mine Own Heart*. However, in revealing that the child in *I Can Jump Puddles* had become an adult these books challenged the metanarrative that the public treasured. And the books went further by articulating in detail that Marshall grew up to be a capable adult who desired both sex and employment, and who understood his impairment and was comfortable with it, and with other disabled people. Moreover, these books also detailed some of the prejudice to which he was subjected as an adult. Marshall's nuanced stories of disablement were not of interest to the Australian public. They were not of much interest to critics either, who were still positive, though less so, towards *This Is the Grass*, but not towards *In Mine Own Heart*.

Marshall also tried to divert attention away from his life altogether during this period by writing in genres other than fictional memoir. First was *The Gay Provider*, which recounted the history of Sydney Myer and the Myer store as an institution in Bourke Street, Melbourne. Next was *Pioneers and Painters*, which was a hundred-year history of the Eltham shire, where Marshall was based for much of his adult life. In between them were two books for children, and a book titled *Aboriginal Myths*, written with Streten Bozic. All were well-received, but none were popular.

Finally, in 1974, Marshall was determined to write the book that would explicitly confront the contrasts between the childhood depicted in *I Can Jump Puddles* and his own. The result was the short story collection *Hammers over the Anvil*. It contextualised *I Can Jump Puddles* with the sex, violence, and prejudice that was the reality of town life when Marshall was growing up (Beasley, 25). It also included several townsfolk who were disabled.

When *Hammers over the Anvil* was complete Marshall sent it to Cheshire, but Cheshire would not publish it. Ignoring his own significant role in the development of Marshall's image, he claimed that it was "something you have built with your own hands" (McLaren 87). Then, assuming that Marshall valued the current version of his public image as much as Cheshire did, Cheshire asked: "Do you think you should destroy the image?" (McLaren 87). In answer Marshall sent the book to Thomas Nelson instead, who published it the following year.

Marshall's Life

Cheshire capitalised on the prejudice to which Marshall had been subjected since he acquired his impairment. This prejudice began immediately. When Marshall was staying in hospital after he contracted polio the hospital staff and other patients declared: "He'll never walk" (Marshall, *Puddles* 16). With this phrase there is often a broader implication of incapability; to say that someone will not walk again is conflated in the minds of nondisabled people with the loss of any and all skills (Titchkosky 96). Effectively they were predicting that Marshall would not participate in or contribute to society. They made negative assumptions about how Marshall's entire life would be, though he was only six years old.

Many children would understandably automatically believe such pronouncements because they had been made by adults. It was fortunate that Marshall already had the experience to know better, and therefore believed that he would walk again. More importantly to Marshall he knew that he would have a career as an author and "write a book like *The Coral Island*" (Marshall, *Puddles* 16).

Marshall was certain of this because of the career of writer Frank Radcliffe. Radcliffe (also known as Frank Smith) was a close friend of the Marshall family. He wrote for a number of publications including *The Bulletin*, and spent hours reading to the Marshall children with Alan curled up at his feet. Marshall was enchanted by Frank's skills in both writing and reciting

stories, and this motivated him to become an avid reader and writer like Radcliffe. As Radcliffe was physically impaired and used a wheelchair, Marshall knew that acquiring polio need not alter his own ambition to write (Marshall, *Grass* 108).

Another example of the prejudice that Marshall experienced as a disabled person occurred when he attended a party as an adult. Before Marshall had entered the house where the party was taking place, a man standing on the veranda near the front door whom Marshall did not know said to him: "I reckon if I was like you and couldn't get a girl, I'd cut me bloody throat" (qtd. in Marks 150). The man did not know Marshall, nor did he know whether Marshall was in fact able to "get a girl" or not. He simply looked at Marshall and made his assumption. The idea that disabled people are asexual either by their own choice or because nobody is interested in having sex with them is, as I mentioned earlier, a common trope of the infantilisation metanarrative (Morris 20). His comment is perhaps best responded to with Marshall's sister's complaint: "I'm sick and tired of putting up with Alan Marshall's women!" (Beasley 40).

Marshall also frequently experienced prejudice when trying to obtain employment. An example is when he and his friend Dooley, who also walked with crutches as the result of polio, approached the boss of *The Melbourne Herald* for a job. He responded: "You're mad to be thinking of newspaper work, both of you. You should be going to one of these places to learn how to make baskets" (Harding 108).

Similarly, *This Is the Grass* begins by discussing the frequent prejudice that Marshall encountered as a disabled person when applying for a job as an accountant. For example, one interviewer begins: "It is very difficult for me to be frank in a case like this," as if his prejudice against Marshall was Marshall's fault. He then continues: "But I know you would be a person who appreciates both frankness and honesty," as if Marshall should be grateful for the impending rejection. Though Marshall is acutely aware of what will follow he reacts with a stoic "Yes." Consequently, the man admits his prejudice aloud. What follows is an exchange where the man continually shifts the blame to Marshall, each time with more force as Marshall calmly refutes his excuses:

> "Being crippled, of course, is the trouble. . . . The work here involves carrying heavy account books from the strong-room to the desks."
> "I can carry ledgers."
> "Yes, yes . . . That's all right. But there are stairs."
> "I can climb stairs."
> "You don't understand. The work here demands a strong, healthy body in those I employ. I'm sorry." (Marshall, *Grass* 7)

Marshall does not only write with honesty about what other people say to him, he is equally honest about his own reactions. On this occasion he could have pretended that the employer's prejudice against him had no effect. Instead he reveals the toll that so many similar exchanges have taken on him. He wrote: "I could usually face these men, observe them almost in a detached way fumbling for the right phrases, but I hung my head before this man" (Marshall, *Grass* 9). Marshall's career is evidence of the inaccuracy of the employer's prejudice. He became a popular reporter and columnist, as well as the author of thirteen books. Similarly, Dooley held several reporting jobs in Australia and then America.

Marshall's Principles as a Disabled Writer

Despite this frequent infantilisation, Marshall developed his writing career through and beyond it. I argue that he was able to do so because of his commitment to three principles that were important to him as a disabled writer.

The first principle that was important to Marshall as a disabled writer was to write from a disabled perspective. He believed that it was critical to have "a resolve to form my own conclusions, make my own judgments and write from my own experience" (Marshall, Grass 87). By this he meant that his impairment was as integral to his personality as his love of nature and his desire to write, and he would not pretend that any of these were insignificant.

Moreover, he believed that the experience of impairment enriched his writing. As he further explained on another occasion: "It's not the crutches that bring the rich and wonderful life, it's the type of mind that you're forced to cultivate because of crutches. You become an observer. You become an onlooker and therefore, being able to watch people—and you become more compassionate and you understand people more" (qtd. in Koval).

The second principle that was important to Marshall as a disabled writer was to advocate for disabled people through his writing. To Marshall this meant refusing to write the stories that editors and publishers said that the public wanted, in favour of stories that were often labelled as controversial. His first book-length attempt at this was *How Beautiful Are Thy Feet*, the novel quoted at the beginning of this paper. He finished writing it in 1937 and sent it to every publisher in Australia. All of them, including Cheshire, refused to publish it. Allegedly this was because of the sexual content (Marks 150). It seems likely, however, that the bigger problem was that one of the characters frequently involved in the sexual content was a disabled man.

It wasn't until 12 years later, when Marshall was an established journalist and had three other books published, that someone was willing to publish *How Beautiful Are Thy Feet*. That someone was Frank Campbell, who was not a publisher but a friend who noticed the manuscript when he visited Marshall at his home. After reading it he felt so passionately about it that he established a publishing house in order that the book would be available to the public. Unfortunately, in his enthusiasm he had not considered that after printing the book, he needed to market it, and consequently it did not sell (Marks 235–36).

Even then, in 1949, *How Beautiful Are Thy Feet* was still ground-breaking in Australian literature for overtly linking disability and sex. As a disabled man, it was important to Marshall to write about disability and sex. And it was particularly important to him to write about them in Australia, which he once described as "a country where the idea of cripples making love is looked upon with distaste" (qtd. in Marks 302).

This principle of advocating for disabled people through his writing and the previous principle of writing from a disabled perspective overlap to a certain extent. However, the difference between them is that Marshall's advocacy drew more heavily on the experiences of other disabled people, whereas writing from a disabled perspective was an undertaking to write personally as well as politically.

The third principle that was important to Marshall as a disabled writer was that his disabled characters were based on reality rather than stereotypes. In particular this meant that they were comfortable with themselves and each other as disabled people. In other words, they were not preoccupied with a desire to be nondisabled.

A formal version of this principle is now referred to as the Fries Test. The Fries Test is named for its inventor, disabled author and academic Kenny Fries. It is modelled on the Bechdel test for the representation of women in movies. When reading a book ask yourself: "Does a work have more than one disabled character? Do the disabled characters have their own narrative purpose other than the education and profit of a nondisabled character? Is the character's disability not eradicated either by curing or killing?"

Much of Marshall's writing passes the Fries Test. One excellent example is from his first published book *These Are My People* (1944). Marshall is searching for two of his horses that are missing, and he accepts a ride in a wagon driven by a man who is also disabled.

Marshall tells the man about his missing horses, and this is their conversation, beginning with the man's reply:

> "You being on crutches, should always tie 'em up."
> "Good Lord!" I exclaimed. "Now you're talking like a chap who doesn't understand being crippled."
> He laughed softly to himself.
> "Yair, that's how they all talk, ain't it? 'Look out,' they say, 'you'll hurt yourself.' A fat lot of hurtin' you get from being crippled. All the hurtin' I've had I got from bein' too careful." (Marshall, *People* 16)

They are not having this conversation for the benefit of nondisabled readers. And they are not longing to be nondisabled. They are simply enjoying the bond they share. Connections with other disabled people were extremely important to Marshall. One of these connections was with his friend Dooley, the journalist whom I mentioned earlier. Late in his life Marshall said of Dooley:

> I could talk all day about that fellow; we always kept in touch and he's always looking me up. . . . Really when we were young we had hilarious stories about adventures with crutches and girls' reactions, and so on. So I've got a very special bond with him.
>
> He's one of the best talkers I know; he's got enough charm for twenty men—and women have always loved him, wherever he's been.
>
> Not so long ago, when he was going away, he looked back in the doorway and he said, "Look, Alan, I've often meant to ask you—if you had your time over again and you had the choice, crutches or no crutches, which would you choose?" And do you know, we found we agreed. He said to me, "Haven't we had a bloody marvellous life so far—and it's not over yet." (qtd. in Harding 109)

From when *I Can Jump Puddles* was published in 1955, twenty years into Marshall's writing career, the infantilisation metanarrative of disability became a significant negative influence on his public image. Marshall did all that he could to counter this metanarrative before it took hold, yet it appealed to his publisher and the public. From then on, *I can Jump Puddles* became the book that introduced readers to a version of Marshall that had only ever partly existed, and that had since become an adult.

Nevertheless, the infantilisation of Marshall's public image strengthened his determination to write nuanced accounts of his personal experiences. This determination was heavily influenced by his commitment to the disabled community, and exemplified by three principles underlying his work: writing from a disabled perspective; advocating for the disabled community through his writing; and writing disabled characters based on reality rather than stereotypes.

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