

# Introduction to the Special Issue of JASAL on the Finding Australia's Disabled Authors Symposium 25–27 September 2024

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This special issue follows the Finding Australia's Disabled Authors Symposium, held online in September 2024. It was convened by Amanda Tink and supported by UniSA Creative, University of South Australia (now Adelaide University), and the Association for the Study of Australian Literature (ASAL). The symposium was part of the Australian Research Council Discovery Project of the same name, led by Jessica White.

Though many Australian academic symposia and conferences have focused on other minoritised authors, this was the first to focus on Australian disabled authors. We are proud to have led what we hope will be the first of many such events, and acknowledge and appreciate the indispensable roles of UniSA Creative, ASAL, and the presenters who made the event so stimulating, energising, and informative.

The need for events such as these cannot be overstated. As we wrote in the call for papers, from short-statured Rocca in Katharine Susannah Prichard's *Haxby's Circus* to autistic Don Tillman in Graeme Simsion's *Rosie* series, Australian literature frequently relies on representations of disabled people for narrative intrigue. Yet, regardless of how nuanced such representations may be, they cannot substitute for the experiences of Australian disabled authors who, in contrast, are often marginalised or erased. Through poetry, fiction, and nonfiction, these authors continue to demonstrate the complex reality of impairment and of being disabled in Australia.

The first evening of the symposium was the ASAL Patron's Lecture presented by disabled poet and academic Andy Jackson, later adapted as a Friday Essay in *The Conversation*, titled "'I Know My Ache Is Not Your Pain'—Disabled Writers Imagine a Healthier World." Jackson spoke of writing and inextricable connections: between his personal experience and his academic work, between people with different impairments, and between disabled and nondisabled people. He argued for the significance of collaboration, and the importance of humans, especially writers, committing and attending to this work: "An awareness of where we are situated, a felt sense of relationship with others like and unlike us, a consciousness of the histories and political forces that shape us, a hunch that our woundedness is not separate from the woundedness of the entire biosphere: none of this just happens automatically, though it emerges from a very subtle inner resonance."

Two days of presentations followed Jackson's keynote. As well as the five papers in this special issue, topics included the place of disability in First Nations storytelling; autistic author Donna Williams; the inaccessibility of the publishing process to deafblind authors; experimental design in disability writing; intellectually impaired author Kim Walker; writing and neurodivergence; and writing and mental illness.

Key to the event's success was the prioritisation of access for both attendees and presenters. Access was integral to the operation of the symposium rather than an optional extra.

This meant human-created captions and Auslan interpretation for all sessions. It also meant programming regular breaks, and designing the program around presenter energy levels, support availability, and other access needs.

Consequently, this was not yet another event about us without us. This time disabled people were the majority of presenters and audience members. And those who had put in the effort to understand our experience or were truly interested to learn with us were also welcome.

Similarly, then, the work of this special issue is not simply a matter of adding disability-related sidenotes to authors' biographies. These five papers analyse the interplay of impairment, disablement, and writing in each subject or author's life. Rather than understanding atypical embodiment as personal deficiency, they consider the nuances of personal experience and the significant role that societal structures have in shaping the world of which they are part.

Moreover, these papers question and reshape long-standing ideas of genre and authorship. They are not describing alternative realities that might exist if only there was enough time and money. They are examples of how disabled people have always been creating and adapting for everyone's benefit.

In the first three papers the starting point is the author's own experience of writing as a disabled person. Kate Swaffer lives with a diagnosis of early onset dementia. She is a PhD candidate at Adelaide University, and the author of a memoir and two poetry books. She is also a long-time blogger, and her journey from blogger to autoethnographer is the subject of her paper. She analyses the negative framing of dementia and its impact on those living with the condition, the critical role for autoethnography in academic dementia discourse, and how writing since her diagnosis has assisted herself and her community.

Kate Forsyth is the author of more than fifty books in a range of genres including crime, children's literature and biography. She also has a stutter resulting from a brain injury when she was two years old. In her paper she interweaves a history of stuttering research and societal responses to stuttering with her personal experience as a stutterer and author. She also discusses how her personal experience of impairment and disablement has influenced and enhanced her writing of disabled characters in her novels.

Beau Windon is a neurodivergent author of Wiradjuri heritage and PhD candidate at Melbourne University, winner of the 2025 Daisy Utemorrah award, and a 2025 David Unaipon award finalist. He examines the writing of memoir and the academic analyses of memoir for neurodivergent writers and neurotypical readers. Windon demonstrates his experiences of negotiating the neurotypical conventions that disallow his intrinsic modes of expression, while simultaneously expecting his authentic experience. Some neurotypical readers may find Windon's writing challenging; in doing so, they will experience what it is like for many neurodivergent writers as they navigate neurotypical literary and academic expectations.

In the final two papers, Jessica White and Amanda Tink discuss the twentieth-century authors that each is researching as part of the Finding Australia's Disabled Authors discovery project. White analyses the crime novels of Patricia Carlon. Due to societal prejudices Carlon went to extraordinary lengths to hide her deafness, and these efforts informed her choice of genre, themes, and characters.

Tink examines how the writing career of physically impaired author Alan Marshall was impacted by his most famous book *I Can Jump Puddles*. This fictionalised memoir of Marshall's childhood profoundly influenced Marshall's public image and career in ways that he could not predict and could not change. Nevertheless, this experience solidified his commitment to write the truth of his life as a disabled person, and to advocate for disabled people.

Taken together, these papers demonstrate how disability is inherently creative, generating innovative approaches to the production and reception of Australian literature. Our cover image by award-winning Deaf artist, Chelle Destefano, evokes disability's generative

potential. *My Auslan Movements* began as an experimental work, with Destefano creating visuals of the way hands move in Auslan. She then created shapes from paper, using these to produce a visual language, and transferred them into drawing and print. *My Auslan Movements* features two rows of manipulated pieces of paper, five in the top row and four in the bottom. Some of the pieces appear as though they have been torn from a notebook, with perforated edges—perhaps a nod to the way Deaf people sometimes use whatever paper is close at hand to communicate. The shapes cast shadows, emphasising their three-dimensionality, which also evokes Auslan's spatial qualities. Destefano's paper shapes are a reminder to be open to alternative ways of thinking, being, and writing in our world. We are grateful to Chelle for allowing us to publish this image. We would also like to thank the anonymous peer reviewers, the proofreaders, and especially JASAL co-editors Jessica Gildersleeve and Kate Cantrell, for facilitating this ground-breaking contribution to Australian literary studies.