

## Disability Visibility Podcast

Episode 49: Young Adult Literature

Guest: Marieke Nijkamp

Host: Alice Wong

Transcript by [Cheryl Green](#)

For more information: <https://disabilityvisibilityproject.com/podcast/>

### Introduction

[radio static, voices singing with hip-hop beat]

LATEEF MCLEOD: This is the *Disability Visibility Podcast* with your host, Alice Wong.

ALICE WONG: Heyyyyy friend! Welcome to the *Disability Visibility Podcast*, conversations on disability politics, culture, and media. I'm your host Alice Wong. Growing up, I couldn't name too many books that had characters that looked like me. Diverse representation in literature is incredibly important for young people in their formative years, and today's episode is all about Young Adult literature.

My guest is Marieke Nijkamp, editor, author, founder of DiversifyYA, and former Senior Vice President of [We Need Diverse Books](#). Marieke and I talked in 2018 about her second novel, titled *Before I Let Go*, and an anthology she edited, titled *Unbroken: 13 Stories Starring Disabled Teens*. *Unbroken* is notable because there aren't many anthologies comprised of all disabled writers edited by a disabled person. Please note, throughout the interview, we use the term YA, which refers to Young Adult. Are you ready? [electronic beeping] Away we go!!!

ELECTRONIC VOICE: 5, 4, 3, 2, 1

ALICE: So, Marieke, thank you so much for being on my podcast today. I am really honored to have you with me.

MARIEKE: It's such a pleasure to be here.

ALICE: I guess why don't you introduce yourself?

MARIEKE: Yeah, absolutely. So, I'm Marieke. I'm a YA author of, well, these days, novels and comics, which is super exciting, as well as the editor of *Unbroken*, which is an anthology starring 13 stories starring disabled teens, all written by disabled authors.

### What YA (Young Adult) literature is and misinformation people have about it

ALICE: Well, I definitely wanna dig into that more. For a lot of people who have little familiarity, how would you describe this genre?

MARIEKE: Oh, wow. Well, first of all, I'd probably not describe it as a genre so much as a marketing category or an age category because tends to, YA as a category, envelopes all the genres there are. You could write YA fantasy or YA fan fiction or contemporary YA or romance or anything in between. So, it's primarily this age category and this category of books focusing

on teenage protagonists. So, you have some YA that skews younger, but I'd say about 12+ to 14+ books. And it's hard to say what exactly makes YA, but for me, it's YA books are books about like figuring out both your place in the world and figuring out how to interact with the world. The world around you is sort of deciding that you already know who you are while you're still in the midst of it and finding a balance between those two.

[upbeat music break]

ALICE: You know, I think that for a lot of people, there's a lot of snobbery about looking down on YA, and they think that's just for kids. They don't think that it has a wide appeal, or it's not as deep or real as other forms of literature. What do you think is kind of limiting or really misinformed about YA?

MARIEKE: Do you know, the thing that always amuses me about people looking down on YA is it feels like this very similar, like it feels in the same vein as people looking down on romance or on genre literature like science fiction and fantasy in the sense that it's not for middle-aged white men naval gazing. And because it's not that, it's by definition, lesser than or like ridiculously enough. And it always, it amuses me because honestly, some of the most harrowing books I've read were YA books. The most exciting books I've read in recent years were YA books. This entire, the YA community, the Kid Lit community at large has been talking about representation in books and diversity and inclusion in books for many years now. And it shows in, not enough yet by far, but it shows in the books that get published far more so than I see it happen in many other categories or like other genres. So, obviously, it's easy to say it's just for kids, but honestly, there's a lot of exciting stuff happening, so it's worth checking out before you make up your mind.

And also, if it were just for kids, isn't, getting kids to read is a pretty cool goal to have. So, I'm pretty excited that there are books that speak to, with children's literature and middle grade, that speak to children's experiences. And I'm just as excited, and it's so, so necessary that there are books that speak to teenage experiences and show teenage readers that hey, reading is for you, and we see you in these books we write. And please feel challenged to go start a conversation. Start a dialogue with these books, or just enjoy the fact that they're here and have this escape because the world is pretty rough sometimes. So, both from a quality aspect, I don't get that argument, but also from the pure sense of having books for teens is actually a great thing.

[upbeat music break]

ALICE: Yeah. And I also think there's underlining a lot of the snobbery is this sense of like, a lot of YA, the language is so accessible, you know? It's not some 800-page tome that like you need a PhD to understand.

MARIEKE: Yeah, no. Absolutely. And it's as important to have a broad scope of literature, and that's the thing that bothers me most about arguments like, "It's not proper literature," or it's lesser than or it's simplified. Different people read in different ways, and teens are going to have different, they're going to demand different things from the books they read, on average, than middle-age men or people in their late 80s. It's good that there's something for everyone here, and that doesn't make anything that's other than long run-on sentences, it doesn't mean that everything else is by definition worse. It just means that it fits in a different, under a different label. And why can't we have different things and appreciate them all for what they are as opposed to holding them all up to the same very white, very cishetero, generally Western

European standard and call that literature? And everything else that isn't, that doesn't adhere to that is by definition weird or wrong or like lesser?

[upbeat music break]

### The idea for the first YA anthology featuring disabled writers

ALICE: You know, 2018 has been a huge year for you. Earlier in January, you published your second novel, *Before I Let Go*, and this past September, another book came out that you edited, an anthology titled *Unbroken: 13 Stories Starring Disabled Teens*. How did the idea for a book first come about?

MARIEKE: I think it sort of came up in conversation, like, wouldn't it be cool to have this kind of collection of disabled stories? And I was in the very lucky position that my first book had just hit *The New York Times* bestseller list, so I felt like that was a really good moment to be like, hey! I have this new idea for a book. Let's see what happens! And it was just, it was honestly, just a bit like wish fulfillment for me as a disabled author, as someone who would've loved something like this as a teen. I wanted to have a.... I'd been part of this whole discussion about representation and inclusion in fiction for quite a few years at that point, and obviously, it's incredibly important to talk about it. And there's a lot of stuff that we and I did behind the scenes. But there's also that point of I just want to turn this whole discussion into a book, basically. I want to, all these ideas I had about representation, especially about disability fiction, I knew I wanted to do something with it, and I knew I had a lot of disabled author friends whose writings I loved and whose writings I was sure other people would love too.

ALICE: Yeah. And correct me if I'm wrong, but is this the first YA anthology to feature disabled stories by disabled writers?

MARIEKE: Yep. Yeah. I'm quite sure. There's been a few, like there've been a few stories in other anthologies, but those were singular stories in broader anthologies. And there's been anthologies that focused on mental health specifically. There's been a few diversity-specific anthologies like *Kaleidoscope*, which came out a few years ago, which is absolutely amazing. But I'm quite sure, pretty sure this is the first YA anthology to do exactly this and to have this broad scope of disabled stories across the genres from all disabled authors.

ALICE: I think so too. I think especially a YA anthology with all disabled writers and centered on disabled characters, teenage disabled characters much less, and also really importantly, edited by you, a disabled person. And I think there's been a lot of, I think, pretty well-known YA novels with disabled characters, but invariably, they're not written by actual disabled people. So, I think this is really notable and one thing that just really excited me when I first heard about *Unbroken*. So, if it is the first one, as we both kinda suspect that it is, why do you think it's taken this long for a book like *Unbroken* to happen?

MARIEKE: It was like...I think a major part of it is just the way agency has been taken away from disabled people over many years. We've always considered it normal that non-disabled people would write disabled people's stories. We've always sort of considered that just the way it was because there's such a long history of denying disabled people their own voice and their own agency. I don't think until disabled people started speaking up about it—and we have been speaking up about it for a long time—at some point, that speaking up gets some clout. And in this case, I think that happened because of those broader diversity discussions and discussions about how to make sure representation and inclusion are done respectfully and correctly. And obviously too, in the context of own voices discussions, like how do we enable people to tell

their own stories as opposed to taking seats from the table and just pushing everyone out and leaving those stories to dominant narrative?

So, I feel like that probably triggered this particular change too, in the sense that people are more cognizant of hey, if we have this discussion about like for example, trans people writing their own stories or creators of color writing their own stories, should we not also have that awareness for disabled characters and disabled [audio cuts out]? And I think up until that point, it was just considered normal that we didn't have a voice. And I feel like a major part of that too is that people just never assumed that a big part of the audience would be disabled too. There's just this assumption of like we don't read books, we don't write books, so if books about us exist, they are targeted towards others, and therefore should also be written by others.

ALICE: Yeah. I mean, it's a sign that your first novel was #1 on *The New York Times* bestseller's list. And I think for a long time, a lot of publishers and editors just presumed that disabled writers and their stories wouldn't appeal to a mass audience. And I think that's, again, really underestimates what audiences are like and what they're looking for.

MARIEKE: Yeah, absolutely. I feel like they'll need, for as much as our stories were a part of the common narrative, they were only ever stories about either tragedy or inspiration because that's something that they, people probably felt like non-disabled people could somehow relate to, or obviously, be inspired by. Because that's, I guess, easier than seeing us as human or something?! Yeah.

ALICE: I mean, it sounds weird, but I think that's really the truth, right? I mean, if it gets down to it, we still have a long way to go. I think about ableism and how steeped it is in every sphere of life that we still almost are still at that stage where we have to still be proud and visible and show that we're human. And it's still kind of unfair that we have to do that. But I think that's what, for literature and culture is so important, is that by reflecting ourselves, we are giving a much more deeper understanding of the disabled experience.

MARIEKE: Yeah, absolutely. And I think a major part of it too is that obviously, ableism is—for so many of us too—is so internalized that it's not something that most people are immediately aware of. The world at large is, for many of us, still so inaccessible that a lot of non-disabled people will not necessarily, or at least consciously be, like share any experience with disabled people. They probably won't recognize that. So, it feels like there's this large divide between us at times, where it kinda feels like we're just shouting across the void and waving our hands and be like, "Hey, we're here. Can you hear us?"

And at the same time—and I've told this story before—I speak a lot about autism, for example. I'm physically disabled. I'm also autistic. And it's bewildering to me to have discussions with specifically parents of autistic children who will happily tell me that both their children and also I have no emotions to speak of because that's what they're almost programmed to believe. And that's that internalized ableism that they've never had any reason to question or to really sort of get to the core of why am I thinking that? Or how did this happen? [chuckling] How did these thoughts happen? And I think that that's still a big part of why this discussion is difficult to have. Because at times, it feels like we're speaking two different languages.

[bouncy electronica music break]

## Choosing the book's title and the contributing authors

ALICE: And hence the title of your anthology is like it's *Unbroken*, and it speaks to just the deeply entrenched ideas about disability. How did you go about selecting the 13 contributors that are featured in *Unbroken*?

MARIEKE: Well, actually, a funny story about the title: we went back and forth on the title like 15 times before we settled on this, and I'm really glad we did because it definitely—like you said—it definitely gets that idea across. It was a lot of figuring out getting that nuance right, and also getting even the nuance of the subtitle, like “13 Stories Starring Disabled Teens. We had long discussions about whether or not it should be “disabled teens” or “teens with disabilities” because, as I'm sure you well know too, that's a pretty fraught topic, and people have strong feelings about that. So, in the end, I decided we would go for “disabled teens” because most of my—I identify as disabled. I do not identify as someone with disability—and that holds true for most people I know. So, I felt like that was a good decision, at least for this particular book. But it's been interesting to see that that's led to some discussion too.

There were definitely points where I didn't necessarily really, I didn't, like at first, didn't quite know what I was getting into. And there were a lot of things, like I'm a very structural worker. I love having structures, and I love having spreadsheets for everything and making sure I know what's happening at any given point in time. And suddenly, when that means you're, when that's writing a book by yourself, that means that all those different moving pieces are kind of all under your control. And suddenly, you're working on this book with 12 other writers and a fantastic editor and a fantastic publishing house and support system. And it became like three-dimensional chess in a way, but in a really great way because the authors were all amazing, and they had fantastic story ideas right from the start. And they're like, there were different ways in which I worked with different people. There were authors who appreciated my reading their first drafts and giving feedback early on. There were authors who sent in very polished drafts of their stories that only required so much work. There were definitely stories that we brainstormed a lot on things like the right ending, the right title. And it was really cool to have these different sets of moving pieces and have this entire, honestly, felt like a community too, this entire group of people around me who were all very conscious of wanting to do the anthology justice. I couldn't have asked for a better group of authors to work on this.

And obviously, I had some ideas of what I wanted the anthology to be like when I reached out to people. I knew I wanted to include as many different voices as possible, to have a good sense of stories that reflected mental illness and mental health and stories that reflected physical disabilities, neurodiversity, obviously, authors who reflected those sub-sections of disability too. And it's, I wanted to be aware of well, making sure that the anthology wasn't all white, which would've been horrible. I wanted to make sure that it wasn't, that there were queer and trans stories represented too, just, like I said, just to get that sense of diversity within the disability community too. Because it obviously affects all of us. And I had some vague notions of this is sort of what I want it to be, but to go from there and to see story ideas roll in, and then at some point, see stories roll in and see it all shape up to be this fantastic collection, has just surpassed everything I could've hoped for.

[bouncy electronica music break]

## Reader response

ALICE: Now that *Unbroken* has been out in the world for about two months, what's been the response so far from readers, your fans, people in the YA community? What's it been like, the feedback you've heard?

MARIEKE: It's been really good. What I love most about the response so far is that, on a very regular basis, I'll have people come up to me, whether it's in person or via email or tweets or whatever, and just tell me, "I wish this book had been there when I was a disabled teen." And that kind of...it almost breaks my heart to hear that because no one should grow up without seeing themselves reflected, believing that they could be heroes of stories too. But at the same time, it's really cool to know that this is making a difference. And the other side of that is also having disabled teens come up to me and say the exact same thing, like, "This means so much to me because I can see myself in this. And I haven't been able to see myself in stories up until this point." So, that, above all, has been one of the greatest joys of working on this. And just seeing different readers' response to different stories, which occasionally means reading the author I already know I love, and I just want to consume more of what they're writing. And occasionally also, it means like discovering new authors. And that this really cool balance too.

Obviously, going in, I already knew all of the 12 authors I worked with were absolutely amazing. And it's just weirdly like I almost feel like there's this proud book parent, like it's weirdly gratifying to be like, yes. You now see what I already knew. Or you just confirmed, this book just confirmed what you already knew too. And those are some of my favorite types of reactions to it.

ALICE: Mmhmm. Yeah, exactly. I think the dedication you wrote, I think, really says it all, and I'm just gonna read it. You wrote in the dedication page, "To every disabled reader, dreamer, storyteller, we can be heroes. This one's for us."

Well, Marieke, thank you so much. I just really, really enjoyed our time, and just thank you so much for being on my podcast. And just like *Unbroken*, this podcast? This is for us.

## Wrap-up

[hip hop]

♪ How far will they go  
Oh yeah, yeah.... ♪

ALICE: This podcast is a production of the *Disability Visibility Project*, an online community dedicated to creating, sharing, and amplifying disability media and culture. All episodes, including text transcripts, are available at [DisabilityVisibilityProject.com/Podcast](https://DisabilityVisibilityProject.com/Podcast).

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Thanks for listening, and see you on the Internets! Bye!!!