

## **Disability History Association Podcast, Episode 1**

Interview with Haley Gienow-McConnell

**Caroline:** Hello and welcome to the Disability History Association Podcast. My name is Caroline Lieffers and it is my pleasure today to welcome our guest, Haley Gienow-McConnell. Haley, thank you so much for agreeing to this interview.

**Haley:** Oh it's my pleasure. And you know it's kind of funny because I definitely grew up as one of those people who, you know, practiced my *Tonight Show* interviews or acceptance speeches for awards, not because I wanted to be famous but just because I wanted people to care about what I had to say. So this is kind of a happy medium.

**Caroline:** Wonderful! Your time has come. So, Haley is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of History at York University in Toronto, Canada, where she was recently granted one of the Disability History Association's travel awards. She used that award to travel to Brock University for a presentation about her dissertation research. So today we're going to be able to chat a little bit more with Haley about this work. So, Haley, I'm going to start with a simple question that rarely has a simple answer, which is, how did you get involved in disability history?

**Haley:** Well, I mean I think the first part of that question too is, you know, how did I get involved in history, and the first is that I survived the kind of lousy high school history curriculum. I had great teachers so that was certainly helpful there. But, you know, I took a chance and majored in history in university, and I knew that it was something that I wanted to pursue long term. But finding a way to personalize it and making it something that would really organically fit in my life came when I started actually dating my now-husband, who is profoundly deaf and was born profoundly deaf. And so even though I don't identify as having a disability myself, disability is interwoven in a very real and meaningful way in my everyday experience, just by obviously, living and having a life with a person who lives with a disability. So initially I got involved more in the Deaf history side of things, again, just by being really interested in learning about my husband's culture and the history of his people and the history of his language. And so it is from a personal side of things, which, you know, can have its—certainly its complications and implications for the kind of research that you do. But that's how I kind of dove into the disability side of things

**Caroline:** That is really interesting. So tell me a little bit more about what you're working on these days.

**Haley:** So these days I've kind of dovetailed away from the pure focus on Deaf history side of things, and I am working on finishing up my dissertation. Fingers crossed this time next year you'll be talking to somebody who has matriculated and has Ph.D. in hand.

**Caroline:** Excellent.

**Haley:** But what my dissertation research focuses on is, incredibly, a disability history of the television series *The Waltons*. So *The Waltons* was a television series that aired from 1972 to 1981 and it aired on CBS. And the series was surprisingly laden with storylines that involved disability.

And what was interesting to me was that, with *The Waltons*, although it was set—although it aired from 1972 to 1981, the setting of the show actually was a large multigenerational family growing up in the backwoods of Virginia during the Great Depression. And so we have two kind of entirely different historical contexts going on: the setting of the show, in which the stories were told in the Great Depression in the rural south, versus the production context of the show, which of course was Hollywood, California throughout the 1970s. So those kind of, the two parallel story timelines that are going on really intrigued me about the television series. But as far as the disability side of things, I mean, that was just pure, sort of, frequency, that so many episodes and plotlines on this television show that otherwise ostensibly wasn't about disability—it was about a family, it was about the growing up experience, it was about economic hardship, and, you know, facing adversity through tough times. Nonetheless disability was foregrounded often on the series, so that kind of piqued my interest there.

**Caroline:** Oh it sounds like there's so much grist for the mill there, right? So, I mean, you've piqued my interest too. Can you tell me a little bit more about how disability is depicted in *The Waltons*? Maybe give some examples? I'm so interested in this.

**Haley:** Yeah, absolutely, so, I mean and that's kind of the response that the research gets a lot. It's kind of one of those things where if you are a fan and former viewer of *The Waltons*, when I say “disability” it's kind of, “OK I see where you're going, but, but give me more,” and if you've never heard of or seen *The Waltons* then, you know, it's really kind of out of left field.

But yeah, in terms of the way disability was depicted, the interesting thing and partly kind of why I dove into this topic, is that from the very first episode that *The Waltons* aired, their premiere episode actually dealt with the Walton family encountering a little deaf girl who was abandoned on their doorstep. And they come to learn and figure out, due to her communication barriers, that she is in fact deaf. And they go about, you know, they bring her to the family physician, they try to determine what the best course of action in mitigating circumstances around a deaf child, what that would be.

And so that's sort of the first example, and I'll elaborate a little more, but I think kind of the way that I came to *The Waltons* is sort of a funny and interesting story. It wasn't just sort of, “oh, I like retro pop culture, let's do this Waltons thing.” [Caroline laughs.] It was, it was a little bit more organic and natural than that. I was pursuing, I was in the first year of my Ph.D. program. I was commuting back and forth from

Niagara Falls, my hometown, to Toronto, Ontario. And with Toronto traffic it was, you know, two hours each way, so about four hours of commuting a day, full time PhD course load. I was also teaching both at York University as well as my former alma mater for my undergrad and master's degree at Brock University. So I had a lot going on. And I, you know, I would come home, I'd be exhausted, and I would say to my husband, "you know what, why don't we just throw something on the television, chill out," and I said to him, "you know, I want to watch something that's, oh, I don't, kind of, just sweet and mindless, what about something like, let's let's throw on a box set of *The Waltons*." [Caroline laughs] And unfortunately I ended up sort of, you know, roping myself into something far greater than just mindless entertainment, because, you know, we threw on first disc of the first season and there we go—the first episode is about deafness and disability. And so, of course, being, you know, somebody whose former research focused exclusively on deaf history, I thought "oh shoot, I can't, you know, I'm trying to sort of shut off my brain from all this work that's going on, and here work's staring me in the face." But I kind of left it alone. And then, you know, we switch into episode number two, which actually revolves around a traveling carnival troupe that comes to Walton's Mountain, Virginia, where this fictional family is based. And, lo and behold, one of the members of the troupe is a person with dwarfism. So another example of disability right in the first two episodes. [Caroline: Wow.] And so on and on, I couldn't ignore, you know, each time this popped up, and it seemed—these stories seemed to be, you know, richer. There were certain patterns that would emerge in the depiction of disability. At the same time, there were certain novelties that emerged in the depiction of disability, and that's where I thought, you know, surely nobody has looked at this before. And is there a story to tell here? Does it say something larger than just, you know, this is the way *The Waltons*, this particular example, this case study, if you will, dealt with disability on screen, or is there something more to say here? And so you asked, you know, a great question about how disability is depicted generally on *The Waltons*. I mean, the short answer is, it isn't depicted in a general way. It's actually quite a deep, nuanced way.

But the longer answer would be, there are some patterns that emerge, and some of them are, you know, we could point to them—as much of a fan as I am of the art and the cultural format of this television series, you know, I'm, I'm willing to be open and critical to it. And one of the things that I would critique about its depiction of disability is the fact that, for the most part, characters with disabilities on *The Waltons*, they're one-off guest characters. They travel to Walton's Mountain, Virginia, they pass through this little small town, and they have some kind of impact and impression on the Walton family. And whenever the issue surrounding their disability is quote-unquote "resolved"—and that's a whole other thing of course, is this idea of disability having a resolution [Caroline: Of course]—typically they go on their merry way and travel on into other segments of life and we never hear from those characters again. So the fact that disability was depicted often—it was foregrounded in storytelling—was great exposure for people with disabilities. But the idea that people with disabilities could sort of emerge on the scene, have some

kind of moral lesson, and then just fade into obscurity is one of the problematic patterns that we see on the series.

And another thing that comes to bear quite often on *The Waltons* in their depictions of disability is that the Waltons have an encounter with characters with disabilities. And often they seem to have some sort of advice to dispense to these characters. [Caroline: Oh, yes.] In other words, they seem to feel that although they as a family for the most part, who don't identify as having disabilities, that they have, you know, very kind of prescriptive advice about how to manage, cure, resolve, get around, come to terms with, make peace with—what have you, depending on the story line—with the disability. And again it's, you know, it's, it is nuanced because in that sort of learning process for the Waltons about “what is disability?” “What is *this* disability, and how does it impact an individual?” there is sort of this, you know, there's some exposition that I think shows the audience this idea of learning about somebody who is different and learning about what, what the mechanisms by which they navigate their life are like. So, I mean, there is, there is sort of an education for the Waltons but often Waltons also attempt to do educating to the person with the disability, and of course, you know, from a modern perspective we would have trouble with, with that sort of approach to disability. So I would say those are some of the patterns that emerge.

But, on the other hand, what some of the producers and writers on the series did a great job of doing was, well look, this, *The Waltons* is about a multigenerational family. The core of the cast is a grandma and grandpa, their son and his wife, and then the seven children of the son and wife—that's the family that lives in this household. So you see a range of ages and obviously genders within the household, and they're going through different life experiences. And as happens in an organic body, you know, bodies, bodies perform in one way at one stage of life and they perform in another way at another stage of life. And one of the most impacting story lines on *The Waltons* actually revolved around the character of Grandma Esther Walton. She was portrayed by actress Ellen Corby, who actually had a stroke during production of *The Waltons* television series about halfway through the nine years that it was on the air.

**Caroline:** Wow.

**Haley:** And once it was discovered that she had a stroke and her mobility and speech were affected as a result of the stroke, it wasn't long before the production staff decided that they wanted to reintegrate the grandma character to the cast, when she was recovered to the extent that she was willing to participate. And they rewrote her character as, you know, “look, hey, she played a grandma in the series, grandmas have strokes, grandmas encounter experiences with disability, so let's maintain the integrity and the authenticity of the show, and grandma's going to come back, and she is going to be a person who's affected with the stroke.” And so though her speech and mobility were limited and different, these were dealt with in a very direct way. And, you know, even considering some of the missteps that the

series took in depicting disability, for the most part both disability activists and just fans of the series really applaud that reintegration of the character, because it was, it was a natural kind of storyline that was authentic to the series—that being just the experiences of a family, and the experience of what, you know, what families go through as they age and grow and change. But at the same time it was obviously, you know, during the 1970s was a big kind of upswell for the disability rights movement. And so from that perspective it also made it a relevant storyline. So not just authentic to the series but relevant to the time and the audiences that were watching the series. So that's, you know, one of my favorite examples of how disability stood out on this particular show.

**Caroline:** Oh that's a really interesting example. So I want to pick up on a few of those threads. I'll try to do it in a somewhat comprehensible order. So the first thing was, you mentioned the word “relevant” or “relevance.” And you were kind enough to let me read the introduction to your dissertation, which I found really interesting, and you actually talk a little bit more about this concept of quote-unquote “relevance programming.” So can you talk a little bit more about what this is and what in particular in American society *The Waltons* was responding to or trying to engage with in the 1970s?

**Haley:** Yeah absolutely. So that's another interesting thing about this particular artifact and, you know, people ask me all the time when I say, “oh I'm doing a disability history of *The Waltons*,” and the first question that comes up is “Why *The Waltons*?” or “Why not another television series?” And I mean, don't even get me started about the questions of “Where's *Little House On The Prairie*?” I'm sure that'll be a whole other book and a whole other thing, but right now, people, it's just *The Waltons*. [Caroline laughs] So it's—what appealed to me about *The Waltons* was this idea that it seemed to have a couple of characteristics going on that made it unique in the 1970s television landscape, the first of which was that it was set in the historical past. Some of the most popular television series that were airing at the time were, you know, audiences are probably familiar with the landmark television series *All in the Family*, which was created and produced by Norman Lear. And he had a number of spinoff series that were, you know, typically referred to as the “Lear comedies.” They all had a certain style and they were set in the time that they were being viewed. They had characters who were from different classes, different races, you know, different gendered backgrounds, and they explored extremely timely issues dealing with race and civil rights and women's rights. And so those were considered to fall in line with what became kind of a buzzword in television, which was “relevance programming”—that the program, yes, was meant to entertain, but it was also meant to reflect certain issues in society. And also that it was meant to, you know, it was a commentary in some ways, politicized. *The Waltons*, by contrast, by being set in the historical past, I mean, certainly they were aware that they were still—there was a need to appeal to audiences in the 1970s, but there was this sort of interesting idea that we can use *The Waltons* as, as kind of a proxy for, for relevance and do it in a way that there's sort of a safe distance where the commentary isn't so pointed. You know, these are issues that have happened in

the past. They're not necessarily currently affecting us, or not affecting us in exactly the same capacity. And so we can talk about them and we have a little bit more flexibility to approach them in a way that is a little bit less loaded, a little less controversial. There's that historical distance, which kind of makes it seem like a safe space to discuss the topics. On the other hand, again, maintaining a relationship where 1970s audiences could relate to—see some of their own struggles reflected in these stories, and see, see things that were relevant and going to continue to affect their lives, also enmeshed in this storytelling.

So what I think emerged is that *The Waltons* was both, you know, out of the past and of its time in a really interesting way, that I think, what I've—you know, been digging into the history of 1970s television—what has actually occurred is something like *The Waltons*, where at the time, you know, some people if they didn't take the time to watch it, or they weren't examining it in kind of a deep way, might have thought it was a little corny and hokey and old fashioned. But what ends up happening I think now, upon reflection, is that it's emerged as more of a timeless artifact, because it was meant to tell sort of this transcendent story—that it could be about a story of families in the 30s and 40s, but it could also appeal to families in the 70s. And in that way, as I said, it had, it has kind of a relevance and a timelessness and a, and a historicity in it all at the same time. If you look at these other programs in the 70s that were quote unquote “relevance programs” they've aged in kind of a different way. I think they're really exemplary historical artifacts in the sense that they are very of the time and so if you want a snapshot, if you want a slice of culture and politics of that time, those are sort of the best series to go to. But for my purposes, since I'm examining a particular issue, disability, it's sort of interesting to have that, that layer—those layers working at once. Because again it's not, you know, “*The Waltons* consciously made a statement about disability in every episode that dealt with disability.” It was this, sort of, like I said, this very natural interweaving of relevant topics that were definitely generating a lot of interest in the 1970s culture. But understanding that these topics have, have ebbs and flows, that they change and morph and they have a natural evolution over time, through families, across generations. And so that's, yeah, that's kind of where I see a lot of the particular value in examining this particular artifact.

**Caroline:** That is really interesting, and I think it also—you kind of said this—it gets at sort of how we as a culture use history or how we imagine history, right, for our particular purposes. I mean, I think it says something really interesting in the fact that about 50 million people might tune in to one of these episodes, right, on a given night. So certainly a lot of people in American society are involved this, are thinking about it, and are engaging with it, right? So—is that correct, fifty million? I believe I read that.

**Haley:** It's, yeah, it's, I mean, and this is the thing that, you know, current TV viewers have to keep in mind—that there were three major networks [Caroline: Yeah] that you had an audience share in at the time *The Waltons* aired—ABC, NBC, and CBS, the network that *The Waltons* aired on. So, you know, and the, the competition for

viewers, for eyeballs, was, was fierce, but it was concentrated into these three major networks. And so even if, you know, you were only capturing, you know, a certain segment of the audience, you could be sure that it would be a pretty significant number. Television viewing has continued to be extremely relevant in North American culture, as it was in the 1970s. And in fact it had reached kind of a height so far. Families had televisions in their home really starting, I mean, in the 1940s, but it was still a novelty—it was a luxury item. Throughout the 50s it became the majority of households, but certainly not all households had televisions. And really by the 1970s regardless of, you know, class, neighborhood, background, you could be sure if you walked into a home that there'd be a television set there. So it was, you know, the time that *The Waltons* was on the air was definitely a height of television viewing for audiences, and the fact that they could capture up to a third or more of American audiences at the particular time because of the way that the networks distributed entertainment is extremely significant. [Caroline: Absolutely] So yeah, that's, I'm glad you brought that up because that's another element to this.

You know, when we think about studying history through the lens of culture—is *The Waltons* high art? I don't know, that's up for debate. I mean its, its creator was a man named Earl Hamner. The television series is actually based on the experiences of his family growing up in Virginia during the Great Depression. [Caroline: Oh, interesting.] He published novellas and novels and had a few movies before he actually launched this television series. So, I mean, taking that into account, the background of the series obviously comes from a really natural, authentic place. It is based on lived experience, obviously dramatized for the purposes of television. But, you know, that's, that's sort of where, where this story was born. And so, you know, that's another thing where not just a lot of people were engaged in it, but it is sort of a family history that—whether or not it directly reflects your family experience, the fact that there's an authentic kernel of lived experience there makes it relevant for the study of disability. So, you know, is it, is it an incredibly powerful work of art hanging in a museum by a disability activist? No. [Caroline laughs] Is it, you know, a world-class novel or treatise on, you know, and that's really politically engaged in this thing that was becoming so significant in the 70s? No. But on the other hand, I think its power to influence the culture, to reflect the culture, to access viewers and the culture, was incredibly profound and vast, and that in and of itself, to me, made it really worth study.

**Caroline:** Oh absolutely. So one of the great advantages of working on this kind of relatively recent history is the chance to do interviews, right, and actually chat with people who were directly involved. So did you get a chance to actually interview some of these former writers or cast members of the show?

**Haley:** I absolutely did. And that was really the only way I was going to move ahead with this project, is if I got access. And so the other great thing is not only is it relatively recent, meaning that many people who were involved in the creation of this artifact are still alive, but it's old enough that they're not the Hollywood elite anymore. So I actually got access to them, which was great. [Caroline: Wow, yeah.]

They are so accessible in terms of just approachability, in terms of support for this kind of work. Certainly when you tell somebody, “hey look, you know, this artifact that you had a hand in creating, I think it’s incredibly historically relevant,” obviously you know that, their, their guard goes down, and all of a sudden they think, “well, gee, you know, something that was meaningful to me, that was meaningful to my career, somebody else is seeing it in a new and deeper way. Sure, yeah, let’s talk about it.” And so I did. I had the chance to interview the majority of, in fact, the recurring cast. I had the chance to interview some guest characters, guest actors on the series who portrayed characters with disabilities, some writers and directors. Some of the writers and directors, they, they were more senior when the show was on the air, so a number of them have passed. But those who are still around were just a font of information. They were absolutely incredible to speak with.

And the important thing to me to do oral research for this particular project was not just, you know, to get at those who were most influential in the creation of this artifact, but also to really understand that art, whether it be, you know, a piece of television art or otherwise, it has a creator, and the history of disability onscreen or the historiography of disability on screen, for the most part, is actually concentrated on the images of artifacts themselves. So, watch a movie, listen to the dialogue, see the performances and the nuance of the performance and the plotline that surrounds characters with disabilities and just kind of take it at face value and say, “this depiction was demeaning, it was stigmatizing, it was, you know, it relied on too many tropes, it was, it engaged with actors without disabilities portraying characters who had disabilities.” And of course these are all problematic in their own way.

And that’s not to say that *The Waltons* in their depiction of disability wasn’t guilty of some of these transgressions against what disability activists would consider the most, sort of, meaningful, authentic portrayals of disability. But knowing that there were people behind these images, it was really important to me to speak to those people behind the images. Because, you know, and maybe I’m naively optimistic about humanity, especially, especially in these times maybe I shouldn’t be so optimistic [Caroline laughs], but I am. And my assumption was always, watching these images, even if they were problematic or stigmatizing, I never assumed they were born of a place where a writer sat down at their typewriter and said, “you know what, I am just not a fan of people with disabilities and I want to put some kind of artifact out there that stigmatizes them and that puts out, you know, the false impression to American audiences about what it’s like to have a disability and who people with disabilities are.” That was certainly never my assumption about where these images and ideas came from. And so I thought it was really important to talk to the people who had a hand in creating them, and just say, “do you remember this particular episode? Do you remember the impetus behind writing the script for this? Or when the director gave you instructions about how to portray a character with a disability, even though you yourself didn’t have a disability, where did they find that information? How did they know how to guide and direct performance with



disability? How did you feel about embodying somebody who had a disability when you never lived with that disability?" et cetera et cetera.

**Caroline:** Yeah.

**Haley:** And the value in doing that was really to see that, you know, disability, like any other experience is historically based, in that it's, it's not transcendent. I mean the experience of disability, the fact that disability exists is transcendent, but the way disability is lived and engaged and perceived in a particular culture obviously is very grounded in historical context. And so some of the things that I heard, even though, you know, I would watch a particular episode—a really great example is the mother of the, of the brood, the matriarch of the Walton family, there's an episode where her character contracts polio, and she actually lives with temporary paralysis as a result of having polio. And so the episode shows her kind of coming to terms with the fact that her mobility has changed, that her relationship to her family has changed, by virtue of this compromised mobility. And at the end of the episode the way it all comes to be reconciled is that the mother has been going through different therapies, medical treatments, physical therapy, and she's not making any headway. And all of a sudden you see this very emotional moment where mother's lying in bed, she's in the dead of sleep, and she hears her youngest daughter calling out from a nightmare from, from elsewhere in the household, and wakes up from a dead sleep and without thinking just automatically engages the muscles that have been afflicted by polio and gets up and starts to walk to comfort her daughter. And so my first impression of this is, "oh goodness, this is very problematic," because it obviously gives the false impression that with will [Caroline: Yes] a disability can be quote unquote "overcome." And that's not an impression that you want to give to audiences.

But what was interesting is when I interviewed the actress who portrayed Olivia Walton, named Michael Learned—absolutely fabulous woman, such a treat to know and speak with her—she told me, you know what, my father actually had polio when he was young boy. And he went through all the same procedures to try to, you know, overcome the, the effects of polio. And he was overthinking it and so frustrated that once his muscles had recovered to a point that they could be engaged—and of course, this is only for people who, for whom the experience of polio was not as limiting as others, where that recovery was going to be possible—she said that he one night woke up with a desperate urge to pee and just had to bolt to the bathroom without thinking. And that, in that case, that was—and she said, you know, it could have been urban legend, I don't know the extent to which that was true. But for my father, that was part of his polio story. [Caroline: Interesting] That is how he remembered being able to go from, you know, muscles are afflicted, and the experience of polio is waning, and now the muscles are ready to be engaged again. But that mental obstacle of "how do I get my body to connect with the muscles again" came from an urgent need to go to the bathroom. [Caroline laughs]

And so the fact that that kind of story came in, she actually advised the writers to change the ending. The original ending, in fact, was far worse. What the writers wanted to have the character of Olivia Walton do was on, on a Sunday morning to be pushed in her wheelchair up to the top of Walton's Mountain with her family, with the Hallelujah Chorus playing in the background, looking out over the beautiful vista that is Walton's Mountain with the support of her family, and she would sort of rise like a phoenix from her wheelchair, just being inspired by the scene and by nature, and sort of by the godliness and holiness of nature all around her on this Sunday morning. That was how the writers had originally envisioned her recovery. And so she—and she's a very salty woman—said, you know, well, you've got to be effing kidding me. [Caroline laughs] She thought that was a ridiculous way to deal with disability. And so you can even see that although we might perceive the new ending with a mother hearing her child calling out for her in a time of need, and the mother being able to just suddenly summon the courage and the strength to be able to stand up after experiencing polio—one, it was something that seemed a little bit more palatable than the original ending the writers had conceived. And two, it was again, how authentic it is. You know, even Michael Learned, the actress herself, questioned when her father told her this tale. But the point is, it was from a lived disability experience. It was, there was some kernel of truth to that experience. So that's where it was really important to me, because hearing stories like that, again we go from this idea of, oh boy, here are people who were creating this artifact, they're giving this totally wrong impression of disability. They are creating these stories that are perhaps unrealistic for people living with disabilities. They create this impression that people with disabilities, with this will, should just overcome. But there's more to it, there's more to these stories. And the value of doing oral interviews gives me access to, not just the image that itself may be problematic, but the history and context behind it which actually goes, "OK, now we have something more going on here."

**Caroline:** Absolutely. This is really fascinating. We could go on for hours, but I want to pick up on some of what you've been saying about relevance programming and about *The Waltons* as a product of a particular culture, right, and bring this into the present day. So earlier I kind of offhandedly described *The Waltons* as a product of quote unquote "our culture." But I'm now wondering, after hearing you describe this, about the extent to which our culture today is like or unlike what was going on in the 70s in terms of representations of disability on TV and maybe even film. So, I mean, I'm thinking of shows like *Speechless*, *Switched at Birth*, *Atypical*, that kind of thing, which are currently depicting autistic, deaf, or disabled characters. So do you notice similarities or differences from *The Waltons*? Has anything changed? Have certain things stayed the same?

**Haley:** Yeah, that's a great question. I think another reason that I was so eager to engage with this source is because I was, I'm a bit of a baby. So, I was born in 1986, five years after *The Waltons* went off the air, so I didn't grow up with *The Waltons*. I grew up with other examples of disability on television. And watching *The Waltons*, it kind of occurred to me, you know, the, at least, the sort of emotional undercurrent,

the feel good sense, the inspirational sense, a sense of overcoming that was associated with disability storylines on *The Waltons*—that seemed fairly consistent with what my growing-up experience, my TV viewership experience was throughout the 80s and the 90s. So in terms of that framing of disability, where, again, and this is where you can, you can see that it's probably worth uncovering how did these stories come to be told. Because although the way disabilities are portrayed often are unwittingly stigmatizing or problematic, for the most part, you can see that there's this sense, and you can use the musical cues, and the acting cues, and the tear-jerking moments, as a cue that you're supposed to be responding to this in a kind, thoughtful, loving way, right? So this isn't, you know, blatant discrimination that is, that is born of hatred or mistrust of people with disabilities. It's just an ignorance and a disconnect between, maybe, people who don't have disabilities who are writing these stories or acting these stories, versus actual lived experience of disability.

So, but I digress, so yeah, in terms of have things, have things changed? Unfortunately in many cases they have not. And in the sense of, I pointed to some of those tropes, that characters with disabilities usually—it was the case with *The Waltons* and the case with a lot of other current examples of disability onscreen—they're not necessarily major characters. If they're recurring characters, typically their storylines focus exclusively on the fact that they have a disability. [Caroline: Yeah] And, look, disability is extremely informative to the lived experience, and people with disabilities typically will tell you, “there aren't a lot of avenues in my life which aren't in some way informed by the fact that I have a disability. At the same time, I have a job, I have friends, I have family, I have children, I have, you know, interests and hobbies. I have all these things, that even though my disability may come into play with how I engage these things, this is—I'm a holistic person.” And so that's absent from a lot of disability storylines—other than, I would commend both the television series *Speechless* and the television series *Switched at Birth*. And shout out to Lizzy Weiss—she is one of the creators of *Switched at Birth* and I actually had the chance to interview her for my dissertation, just to kind of have that, you know, that change versus continuity arc of, this is an example of disability on television that is meaningful and different, so let's talk about how your show came to be made and what disability means to you.

So if I could give some examples from the television series *Switched at Birth* that demarcate it from past examples which were problematic and even still, certain other examples—*Switched at Birth* is a television series that focuses, that has a lot of deaf characters on the television show. All of the deaf characters that are portrayed on the series were portrayed by actors who themselves are deaf or hard of hearing. So in that sense they are, they have embodied lived experience with disability, which obviously lends a certain authenticity to the performance. They also, the characters engage with their disability in various ways, so it wasn't this kind of, you know, broad-brush depiction of what it means to be deaf. Some of the characters were oral and were able to speak and lipread; other characters relied exclusively on sign language; some of the characters were deafened later in life; others were born deaf.

Some came from families with a history of genetic deafness, others didn't. So in that way it gave audiences a chance to see that there is this spectrum of what it means to have a disability, of what it means to have a particular disability like deafness. They also hired consultants for the series—ASL consultants to ensure that the way that language was being depicted on the show was accurate, that it was respectful, that it reflected different groups within the Deaf community. So if it's an older signer versus a younger signer, if it's an affluent signer versus a signer that comes from a different background, there will be different nuances in the signing styles. So all these things, when you see the layers building on, that you realize, yes, disability is a facet of identity, but so is gender, so is socio-economics, so is race, so is, you know, region in, in the United States. All these things come into play.

Furthermore on shows like *Switched at Birth* and *Speechless*, what they do with these characters with disability is they, first of all, make them, you know, they give them starring roles in the television series. So that very much, instead having it be, sort of, that, you know, that dramatic subplot or that, that really overemotional storyline that you bring in around sweeps week to really grip audiences—they're there all the time, living and interacting with other characters. But they also give these characters other things to do. So how does this character deal with, you know, struggling with a poor grade in a class, or on the dating scene, or how do they deal with economics, looking for a job? So things where, again, disability certainly would enrich, affect, influence those other types of experiences. But it's, "I'm a human. Here's the human experience. Oh, and sometimes disability inserts itself," rather than having disability being the guiding principle behind all of those depictions. So that's, I think, the biggest boon to disability storytelling that has started to occur in, in certain television shows.

In other shows that I want to point out, like *Breaking Bad* for example, the main character's son has a disability as well. And it's totally incidental to the plot point, which is another great way to incorporate disability, is to say, you know what, we're not even really going to talk that much about disability. We're just going to acknowledge that families have people with disabilities in them, or some families have two parents, some families have a single parent, some families, and on and on, I mean, we could go on and on about how these things are starting to enrich our television culture. But that's another great way, is, you know, you can, you can do heavy commentary on disability, which is really informative for audiences who are ignorant to it, or you can do, you know, kind of have an absence of commentary about disability and just say, "hey, just a person living their life as a member of a family, or as the member of a college campus, or as the member of a workforce."

And I, again, I see those as being sort of the trademarks of moving in the right direction. You did mention one of the newest television series to depict disability, which is Netflix's television series, *Atypical*. I personally haven't engaged the series yet so I can't comment too in-depth on it. One of the reasons that I've chosen not to support and engage the series is because, I rely of course, you know, I'm not a person who identifies as having a disability. I rely on the testimony of people within

my network who do have disabilities, and in particular those who live with autism and find themselves somewhere on the spectrum. And generally their feedback has been negative because, one, the creators of the series chose not to employ an actor with autism to fulfill that role. So there's sort of a lack of authenticity there and a lack of opportunity. Look, people with disabilities are discriminated against in many avenues, one of which being, you know, the workforce, is one of the biggest areas in which people with disabilities are excluded, stigmatized, discriminated against. So, I mean, there's a great workforce of people with autism out there. And to give a job where they are in fact uniquely qualified to somebody who doesn't live with autism, I, you know, if I can get a little political here, I am, you know, not on board with that particular choice. And I've heard again from those who have autism and had engaged with the series that it actually does rely on certain tropes about the autistic experience—that it is, you know, has kind of that, sort of, savant “Rain Man”-type quality, which is a little bit outdated in portrayals of autism. And that the series uses disability—again, and since I haven't engaged with the series I say this with a word of caution, that what I've heard reflected to me may not be accurate—but that, that the experience of autism is meant to be the thing around which the entertainment is centered, right? The entertainment value of a television series should come from so many other things, other than using a disability as a high point of drama or a high point of comedy, in its particular sense. That's what my autistic colleagues have reflected to me seems to be problematic about the series. So I think that gives you kind of a nice idea of—there are examples that have made great strides, and there are examples which have rested on the laurels of, you know, former depictions of disability in television. So that, you know, the short answer is, it's both. It's—there have been strides that the disability community has reflected as being very positive. And there are some, you know, there's, there's work to be done, certainly.

**Caroline:** Absolutely, absolutely, thank you that was really interesting. I'm going to end with one last question for the people out there who may be interested in disability history or may even be disability historians themselves. I want to ask you, what role do you think history and historians can play in disability activism and disability rights today?

**Haley:** Well it's, it's a tricky one actually and I'm glad that you asked the question, I mean, especially for myself. Look, I'm a historian of disability; I'm not a person with a disability, and so it's always been this kind of uneasy relationship for me about where do I fit in to this story and how can I engage with this material that I find extremely significant, extremely inspiring, without inserting myself in an incorrect way to, sort of, the politics of it and the history of it. And I have moved away from my original research, focused kind of on deaf culture. But there came a certain point where there were enough deaf scholars in the field engaged in the subject and able to tell their own history that I didn't feel that there was a whole lot that I could add to, to the discussion. In certain instances where I see that there may be a methodological change that would further capitalize on deaf history and culture, I am, of course, willing to insert myself as a historian and as a professional who studies history, about how we can tell those stories in a richer, more complex, and

more valuable way. But as far as being the keeper of that history it's, it's uneasy, it's not my own history. On the other hand, I have family members with disabilities—my husband being a prime example. I'm also cognizant of the fact that at any time I could become a person who lives with a disability through an illness, through an accident, through just, you know, like I said earlier in, in our chat. Bodies are made of organic material that, that changes and morphs over time, that, due to aging, due to very natural things that occur in life—you know disability isn't, it's not a static experience, and it's an experience that people can, you know, be born with, come to have later in life, it can come and go, it can be intermittent. So, you know, I am conscious of the fact that I don't have a disability yet, but I may one day.

And so your question about, well, how can historians and activists of disability use disability history to kind of reflect on and make progress in, in the field of disability rights and activism. I think what is most valuable is to look at the history and consider not just the stories, and not just how, you know, very, sort of obvious benchmarks of how has legislation changed, how have cultural depictions of disability change, how has accessibility changed, but think about how did people with disabilities exist within their own societies, exist within their own families, within their own communities, and imagine. I don't think as historians it's our job to say, “this was more positive,” “this was more rights-based,” “this was more x, y, or z.” I think that's more for disability activists to kind of reflect on and tell us what it is that they want and need. I think in mining the history though, we can see that there are certain high points in disability stories that you might not expect.

And if I can go on a bit of a tangent here, when I explored the history of Deafness I focused a lot on the history of Deafness and the experience of Deaf people in residential schools for the Deaf in the early 19th century. And it would be easy, I think, in its popular perception to say that, if we look at the continuum of history, the closer to our present that we get, the more “progress” quote-unquote we see for people with disabilities or any marginalized group. But we forget ways that, you know, technology and time can actually negatively affect certain marginalized groups. So people who were deaf in the 19th century, well, how did they communicate with, with people who were not deaf and with each other? Letter writing. And letter writing was accessible to anybody who was literate. And it was not exclusive to the Deaf community. There weren't telephones in the early 19th century, so Deaf people weren't excluded through that, from that communication technology; they in fact communicated very much like their hearing peers. You know, certain jobs that were popular during that time, particularly if you move later into the 19th century through heavy periods of industrialization, factory workers would often complain about noise and there would be health and safety concerns for hearing individuals who would work at noisy factories with noisy equipment. Deaf people were often privileged in the hiring process because this was a unique forum, which, you know, their deafness actually made them more capable and better able to withstand certain conditions of the job. So we see certain, you know, factors of history, technology, lifestyle that may have a greater or lesser impact on disability.

And when we consider that and we see how certain disabilities at certain times have been more or less stigmatized, I think it really helps us to understand that disability needn't be stigmatized at all. That, in fact, in certain histories, certain cultures, and in certain societies, the perception of disability has been and will be very different. And in doing so I think it's easier to approach the topic with people, with, you know, stakeholders in the community, but with people who are ignorant of disability and who are intimidated by approaching the subject. You know, I'm thinking in particular of business people who are worrying about their bottom line. I'm thinking of people who, gosh, even just in social relationships who might never consider the, the idea of having a romantic relationship with a partner with disability. Once they start to see that disability is actually kind of grounded, it is an organic thing, it is something that is of the body, it is a lived experience that, you know, can, can actually have, people with disabilities can refer themselves as being impaired, as having an impairment. But what that—and when we refer to impairment we don't mean it in a way that is disrespectful, but meaning that there is some kind of limitation by a certain organic part of the body to that person with disability. But once we see that, yes, there are somatic symptoms of disability, things that reside in the body, but then we also understand the extent to which those disabilities impact or don't impact the individual are very historically contingent—I think that will be really, you know, help to build bridges and break down barriers, to kind of say, “Ah I get it. OK people have, have always lived with disability, but the way that they have encountered it and reacted to it has changed.” And so the fact that it has changed means that it can continue to change, hopefully in ways that people with disabilities will lead the way with change, and will point the direction.

I would also like to make a comment to say that because disability and any other marginalized experience is so historically contingent, that we can't ever rest on our laurels and say, “Ah, that issue of disability has been addressed and let's kind of wash our hands of it and say that it's been resolved,” because the fact of the matter is that people living with disabilities right now in 2017 might prefer that their disabilities be approached, or thought of, or conceived of in a certain way. But 50 years hence, you know, we have to, we always have to go back to the source. People with disabilities may, may choose to engage with their disability in a different way, yet again, whether it's because of technology, whether it's because of some kind of cultural shift. And so because of that we have to constantly—even though we review the history—you know, go to the present source and, and just ask, say, “hey, tell me about your story, tell me about how you engage your disability, tell me about how you'd like me to engage your disability,” is a really significant thing.

**Caroline:** I think to some extent rights and equality are always kind of a moving target. So I really appreciate what you're saying there, yeah.

**Haley:** Yeah, absolutely, that's a great way to put it.

**Caroline:** Yeah. You know, Haley, it has been absolutely fascinating to chat with you. And I just want to thank you so much for joining us for the podcast today and for your time. It was great talking to you.

**Haley:** Oh, it was an absolute pleasure. Thank you so much.

**Caroline:** Thank you.