

# ∞ READING ROUND ∞

## Life-Changing Literature

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AS AN ANGSTY ADOLESCENT, there was a huge discrepancy between the way I felt about the literature we were made to read at school and the secret books my friends and I passed around the bus. While *Romeo and Juliet* may have struck a chord with the teenage girl's heart, most other texts from the literary canon, by dead white men, weren't exactly speaking to me. My friends and I were more interested in sharing Judy Blume's *Forever*, a story of first love with key 'character', Ralph, being the name of the love interest's penis. That started an obsession with Judy Blume novels, and I soon stumbled across *Deenie*, a story of a girl coming to terms with being diagnosed with scoliosis, having to wear a back brace at school and deal with being different. I read transfixed as Deenie confessed her trials and tribulations of living with curvature of the spine, her emotions and feelings of being 'other', as well as peer reactions to her body as she navigated her self-image and relationships. I, too, was diagnosed with scoliosis as a teen, and it was as though Deenie was speaking directly to me. Up until that point, I had never read a book featuring people with disabilities that I could identify with. The closest I'd got was *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, and that wasn't exactly a character that a teenage girl with body dysmorphic tendencies wanted to identify with. For the first time, I could see represented on the page a person with a physical impairment who wasn't the typical 'villain' or 'victim' that disabled people were so often depicted to be in literature. This changed my life in many ways. If Deenie was cool, that meant it was okay to have scoliosis and not the shameful secret it had once felt like. It affected the relationship I had with my own body and spurred me on to explore other

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writing about disability, and to write my own. Then I was handed a novel on the GCSE syllabus that challenged disability discrimination, *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee, exploring society's response to disability through characters Tom Robinson and Boo Radley. Tom Robinson is discriminated against on the dual grounds of disability and race, and found guilty of a crime he didn't commit, while Boo Radley is a hauntingly absent character, hidden away because his family are ashamed of his disability; people fear the 'neighbourhood bogeyman', yet Boo ends up a hero saving local children's lives. As a writer, my early work centred on disabled protagonists; I was passionate about representing disabled characters in complex and nuanced ways. My first novel, *Marilyn and Me* (published by Cinnamon Press) was narrated by a young woman with a learning disability, and my first Young Adult novel, *Give Me a Sign* (published Flame Books and now out of print), explored a teenage relationship between a Deaf boy and hearing girl. My writing has since moved on but often involves recurring themes of identity, belonging and difference.