INTRODUCTION

Dear reader,

When I was younger, I wanted to be the child who flew to Neverland, or a magical creature, or a princess in a tower under the spell of a spindle, or have hair so long and tangled that people could climb up it. But none of those children looked like me. That's because I was born with one hand and for some of my childhood even had an actual hook, so really, I looked far more like a stereotypical pirate than the hero of the story.

Looking back now I realise there just weren't enough books with a disabled protagonist having daring adventures. This is something that needs to change. Everyone deserves to see someone like them in a story or achieving something great. Representation matters, because magical things happen when we see ourselves in books, films or on stage, even if that magical thing is realising that we are all of value. We all have a place in the world and we are enough, just as we are.

There is a whole world of unknown stories with disabled people at the heart, stories that we are yet to celebrate. Stories of grace and resilience, challenges and empowerment, judgement and re-education, and perhaps most importantly, stories of humour and everyday life.

I have gathered some of my favourite ones together in this book.

This is an anthology of tales about disabled artists, athletes, activists, thinkers, writers, performers and dreamers, finding joy, normality and wonder in a world that deems us 'different' (as though it is something bad). In this book I have choose to use what is called identity-first language, which means I say 'disabled person' instead of 'a person with a disability'. Neither is wrong, or offensive, but it is important to remember that people are disabled by society and do not need to be fixed. If there are any words in the book that you're not sure about, there is a glossary at the end to help.

Each person in this book has led or continues to lead a fascinating life, often overcoming misconceptions and prejudice to do so. I hope you will love reading their stories. I hope they will show you that we are all more than just a label, and that whoever you are, disabled or not, there are no limits to your dreams.

We all have the power to shine our own light. Everyone deserves to live in an inclusive and accessible world and feel like they belong. A world that embraces difference rather than tries to hide it, and a world where every person's story is valid.



Big love,

Cerrie Burnell

xxx



BEETHOVEN

1770-1827 — Composer

A long time ago in the modest town of Bonn in Germany, there lived a boy named Ludwig van Beethoven. He was born to a humble family, and music and melodies filled his heart. But as Ludwig grew up, there was a lot of illness in his family.

Ludwig's father had wanted to become a musician himself but never managed to. He saw his son had extraordinary musical talent and made Ludwig practise the piano for hours each day. Ludwig's mother and father both died young, and he was left to look after his younger brothers.

As the head of the family, Ludwig began playing the viola in an orchestra to earn money. He understood music naturally and began composing moving and daring music for the orchestra. As well as composing, he taught music to gifted children.

As his name became known, Ludwig moved to the vibrant city of Vienna, where his fame grew. He composed exquisite scores for ballet, opera and huge, sweeping orchestral symphonies.

He had a wild, unstoppable heart and fell in love many times. But each time, his loves were from very wealthy families. Their parents did not want their children marrying someone as poor as Ludwig.

At 25 Ludwig began to struggle to hear, and after a time he became profoundly deaf. When one of the best piano makers in England sent him a fabulous piano, he could not hear a single note.

Though sometimes this made Ludwig melancholy it did not interrupt his composing. Music was in his soul and it spilled out of him, like stories made from sound. Although he couldn't hear his creations, he knew the notes by heart, and poured all the sadness, regret, courage and joy he had into his scores. When his compositions were performed, Ludwig could feel the vibrations of the music through his whole body.

He wrote a letter to his brothers, explaining his determination not to let his disability stop him. Some of his most famous works were written at a furious pace during the last ten years of his life, when he could not hear at all.

He died at the age of 56 and is regarded as one of the most innovative and important composers of all time. His music lives on and is performed by orchestras all over the world.

GUSTAV KIRCHHOFF

1824-1887 — Physicist

A long time ago in a place called Prussia, which is now part of modern-day Russia, there lived a man called Gustav. His family belonged to an exceptional community of intellectuals and great thinkers, who would stay up late into the night debating the issues that faced the world at that moment.

Gustav found it difficult to walk and used crutches to help him, or sometimes he preferred to use a wheelchair. The thing that people noticed most about him was his extraordinary and unusually brilliant scientific mind.

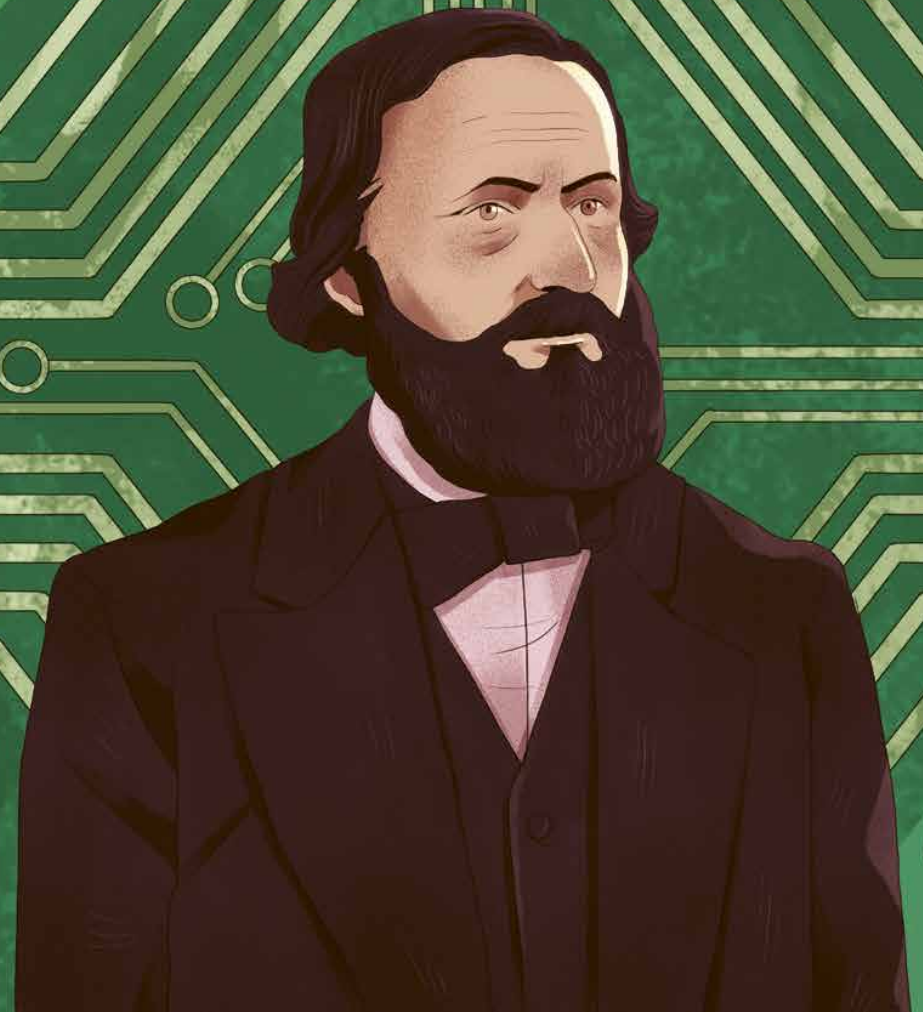
Gustav had a knack for understanding complicated scientific theories. At school he loved physics and maths. He was always reading and learning, and so he found it easy to do well in exams. His family knew he was a hard worker and was destined for great things. But not everything was simple for Gustav – he lived during a time when most places weren't set up for wheelchair users, so it was hard for him to move around.

When he went to university, he made friends with one of his tutors, a man called Franz Neumann. While he studied with Neumann, Gustav began to make miraculous discoveries. He developed circuits, found ways to analyse the Sun and the speed at which light travels, and created what he called 'the three laws of spectroscopy'.

With all this success to his name, Gustav moved to Berlin to further his research. There he fell deeply in love with a woman called Clara, and soon married her.

They had five children and were terribly happy, but sadly Clara died young. After that, Gustav raised his children alone, having to balance this alongside his research. It was difficult, but he managed. After a time, he remarried, and with the extra support of his wife, he was able to work more than before. He travelled and gave lectures and continued to achieve astonishing success, changing quantum physics forever.

His life was lit by the brightness of his discoveries and the study of light. He was famed for his magnificent intellect and extraordinary mind.



HENRI MATISSE

1869-1954 — Artist

Once, long ago in northern France, a grain merchant and his wealthy wife had a baby named Henri. Henri was a bright and studious young man and when he finished school he set off to Paris to study law. But Henri contracted appendicitis and had to come home to recover. To distract him, his mother gave him a set of paints, which would change the course of his life.

As he painted from bed, Henri discovered a kind of paradise and fell completely in love with art. He decided to become an artist, but this wildly disappointed his father.

Henri rushed back to Paris to learn his new craft. He wanted to perfect every technique – print making, sculpture and collage – but his true love was painting. At first the colours Henri used were muted and calm, but after he befriended an artist called John Russell he was inspired to use riotous, outrageous colours.

He painted everyday things he came across, such as vases of sunflowers, women with hats or the view from his open window. Henri and some friends showed their work in a gallery. They used colours in such an exciting and strange way that people called them the 'wild beasts'.

Henri's friend, the art collector Gertrude Stein, who was a powerhouse of the art world, introduced Henri to an artist called Pablo Picasso. The two became friendly rivals, always challenging each other to be more daring.

Henri lived a life filled with art and parties and fabulous fun. He had a daughter with Caroline, who was a model, and later he married Amelie, with whom he had two sons. They moved to the French Riviera, where they kept doves and had three cats who ate brioche for breakfast.

After a time, Henri became very ill with cancer, and after surgery, he spent most of his time in bed or a wheelchair. This made painting a challenge, so he changed his technique so he could work from bed. He painted big squares of colour and then cut shapes out of them. He arranged them to make superb collages, calling it 'painting with scissors'. He often included cut-outs of his beloved doves in these artworks. His new way of making pictures was revolutionary and all came out of his need to adapt his working practice.

In this time of healing, Henri created some of his best-loved work. He lived a long and fulfilled life, just as colourful as his artistic creations.





Eliza Suggs

1876-1908 — Author

Long ago in the hot Southern United States lived a happy family with four children. Their parents had lived through the time of slavery, and were determined to raise them to be loving and resilient. The youngest was Eliza.

One day, when Eliza was very young, she began crying out in pain. It took her mother all day to discover what was wrong: Eliza had broken a bone. Her family took her straight to the doctor, who helped her to heal, but it wasn't long before more of her bones began to splinter.

Eliza's body was as fragile as china – even walking could cause her to break a bone. Without a wheelchair the only way she could get around was to be pushed in a pram. As she grew older she could not play in the sun – instead she liked to sit by her window and watch the world outside.

No one knew what was causing Eliza's condition, but it was eventually diagnosed as osteomalacia, a disease that weakened her bones and muscles. When she was six, her parents had funeral clothes made for her as they feared she would die very soon.

But Eliza wanted to live and be in control of her life! She wanted to feel the kiss of the sun on her face, the wind in her hair and the splash of rain on her skin. And more than anything she wanted to learn about the world beyond her window.

When her family moved, a teacher gave Eliza a place in her class. But the classroom was up a flight of stairs and impossible for her to reach. Then a family friend gave Eliza a wheelchair, which gave her more freedom and confidence. Each morning her sister pushed her to school. Then, the other children helped her up the stairs, so she could learn and laugh with her friends.

Eliza became highly educated, something that was rare for black women in this time. Her father was a devoted preacher and Eliza and her sister Kate soon began accompanying him, so Eliza could speak about her difficulties and triumphs and how her faith had kept her heart hopeful.

People loved to hear Eliza speak. She was inspired to write down her experiences and published a book telling the story of her life called *Shadows and Sunshine.*

Eliza died at the age of 32, having lived a life rich with travel and literature and having experienced the power that came from telling her truth.

GLOSSARY TERMS

ACHONDROPLASIA An inherited condition that affects bone growth. People with the condition are short in stature, with limbs that are short in proportion to their body length.

ACTIVIST Someone who campaigns to bring about political or social change.

AMERICAN CIVIL LIBERTIES UNION An organisation defending and protecting the constitutional rights of United States citizens.

APPENDICITIS A painful swelling of the appendix, resolved by an operation to remove it. Without treatment, the appendix can burst.

AUTISM A broad-ranging condition affecting people in different ways. A brain divergence that influences the way people see the world and communicate. It comes under the umbrella of neurodiversity.

BLACK HOLE Usually created by the collapse of a massive star, a black hole has a gravitational field so strong that no light or matter can escape it.

BULIMIA An eating disorder and mental health condition. Someone with bulimia repeats the behaviour of eating a large amount of food in a short space of time (binge eating), and then trying to get rid of the food (purging) by making themselves sick, taking medicine to make them go to the toilet, fasting, or doing extreme and excessive exercise.

CANCER A condition where cells grow and multiply uncontrollably. The cancerous cells can damage and destroy healthy cells, tissue and organs.

CHEMOTHERAPY A medical treatment for cancer that aims to kill off fast-growing cancerous cells, but that also has an impact on healthy cells.

CHOREOGRAPHER Someone who creates dance routines.

CHRONIC Something that continues for a long time, or comes back regularly.

CISGENDER Someone whose gender identity is aligned with the sex that they were assigned at birth.

CLINICAL DEPRESSION An ongoing period of low mood, and a lack of interest in usual activities, that lasts for most of the day and continues for more than two weeks.

COMPOSER A person who writes pieces of music.

CROHN'S DISEASE A condition where part of the digestive system is inflamed and painful, leading to abdominal pain, diarrhoea and tiredness.

DIABETIC RETINOPATHY A complication of diabetes that can lead to blindness. The high blood-sugar levels that can occur with diabetes can damage the blood vessels in the eye.

EPILEPSY A condition that affects the brain, leading to seizures. These are bursts of electrical activity that affect how the brain works for a short time.

FIBROMYALGIA A long-term condition involving pain spread through various parts of the body and extreme tiredness.

GOVERNESS Someone employed to teach children at their home.

IDENTITY Who someone is and how they think about themselves. The qualities, beliefs and characteristics that make someone who they are.

IDENTITY-FIRST LANGUAGE Placing someone's disability first in a phrase. Some (but not all) people prefer this as they consider their disability an important part of who they are.

INCUBATOR A rigid container which keeps the temperature and environment stable for a baby.

JOURNALIST Someone who puts together information as stories either in written form or to be broadcast on radio or television.

LEG CALLIPER A brace that provides support to the leg and can be used to hold it in a certain position.

ME/CHRONIC FATIGUE SYNDROME A condition that causes extreme tiredness, but can also have other effects such as headaches, muscle and joint pain and dizziness and nausea.

MIGRAINE An intense, throbbing headache. Often includes a sensitivity to light and sounds, and feeling sick.

MOTOR NEURONE DISEASE A condition where messages from the brain stop reaching the muscles.

NEUROTYPICAL Meaning neurologically typical, and expressing how society generally expects people's brains to function. The opposite is neurodiverse, which is a term used to describe brains that are wired in a different way from this, such as those of people with autism, ADHD or dyslexia, among others.

OSTEOGENESIS IMPERFECTA A condition that affects the bones, causing them to break easily. The severity of the condition varies and can lead to short stature, breathing problems and hearing loss.

OSTEOMALACIA A condition where someone's bones don't form the hard coating needed to keep them strong. The bones remain soft, which can make them more likely to bend or crack. This can be very painful.

POLIO An infection that in some cases affects the nerves in the spine and brain, causing paralysis in the legs. This usually wears off, but can have long-term effects.

PREACHER A person who delivers a religious sermon, often as their job.

PROSTHETIC A manufactured body part, such as a leg, hand or arm, that is used to replace a part that is considered missing.

RACISM The belief that some races are better than others and treating a person or people differently based on their race.

REHABILITATION A programme or various therapies to help someone recover from injury or illness.

SEIZURE Bursts of electrical activity that affect how the brain works for a short time. These can cause convulsions and usually happen to someone with epilepsy.

SLAVERY A situation where people are owned by others, or held under their complete control, with no ability to leave. They are forced to obey and treated as objects that can be bought, sold and exploited.

SONIFICATION Uses data in a standardised way to create sound signals that convey information.

SPEECH THERAPY Supporting those with speech and language challenges to communicate effectively through speech. It can include physical exercises to improve the muscles used in speech as well as improving clarity.

SPINA BIFIDA A condition where the bones of the spine do not completely close around the spinal cord of a baby during pregnancy.

STEREOTYPE A generalised assumption about a person or a group of people based on limited knowledge or understanding.

TRANSGENDER Someone whose gender identity differs from the gender they were assigned at birth.

VENTILATOR A machine that helps someone to breathe, or that breathes for them.

To my family for their unwavering support ~ L.B.



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