

# A “Cross Media” Model to Deepen Aesthetic, Ethical, and Academic Understanding

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"Life is as tedious as a twice-told tale, / Vexing the dull ear of a drowsy man."

[William Shakespeare's \*The Life and Death of King John\* \(Act 3, scene 4\)](#)

Storytelling is a universally shared human tool, a natural impulse, instinctual across cultures, social classes, and histories. Conceptually, (and ideally) with selective practices and tutoring, we can experience humanistic stories from aesthetic, academic, and ethical perspectives that, when we put them together, help us to use stories to build emotional, intellectual, and empathetic bonds with others as well as within ourselves.

Our claim in this essay is that comparisons of similarities and discrepancies between and among versions of a story can, developmentally speaking, be a good thing when they generate questions unlikely to emerge in a single media version. Contrary, in part then to (the granted “historically bound”) Shakespeare who bemoans the monotony of a twice-told tale, in today’s classrooms, from pre-K through secondary grades, and higher education and elsewhere, a twice-told tale, e.g., one told through two (or more) different media formats, has the potential to cultivate both our empathy and our social understanding.

In primary grade educational settings, stories as academic tools are ubiquitous. In language and literacy programs, they serve as the context for initial reading development as well as later for reading comprehension. In teaching science and math, brief narratives provide frames for understanding abstract concepts and practical applications. In history, civics, and social science, brief narratives become the focus of inquiry and analysis. However, usually traditional methods of using a story in the classroom often focus on one telling — usually in print form and either ignore or subjugate a film (or other media adaptation) to be treated as entertainment primarily or judged on the merit of its adherence to the text depiction of characters and plotline.

With “twice-told” stories, carefully constructed questions can be raised that surface a variety of perspectives, polarities of opinions, and critical analyses that serve as mechanisms for deeper understanding through engaged comparisons by participants beyond the glib or trivial. Twice-told stories also provide the opportunity for more equitable, authentic, and reflective discussions within and among story consumers in contrast to the more commonplace pedagogical technique whereby teachers ask learners to relate something in their own personal experience to the one-telling of a story. Students without a personal connection to the themes/plotline in that story are then at a disadvantage-left with little or nothing to compare

the plot, characters, and themes within the story. Having made these assertions, we also appreciate the challenges educators face introducing stories that address controversial or sensitive topics into their practice. Concerns about the content of stories (recently magnified in current political American “Culture Wars”) and their reinterpretations in new media/art forms make it challenging for educators to select and bring engaging stories to their classrooms.

Just as with all consumers, youth time spent online/viewing media has increased exponentially in recent years, as reported by Common Sense Media<sup>1</sup> (and many others). So have the number of books, graphic novels, or historic events been retold in films, streaming, and other media. Thus, how might educators uncover and seize the educational opportunity in this cultural phenomenon and maximize the benefits of using stories across media in everyday classrooms? What if such different versions of an identified story are shared with, analyzed, and closely compared by learners, along with their teachers, not only to deliver academic knowledge but to spark ethical and aesthetic conversations or debates on important and controversial social topics? Might these high-quality twice-told tales be the better option as educational resources to, for example, promote literacy, teach history, increase knowledge about society, and nourish humanistic values? We contend here that the value of a twice-told tale is realized when students access different perspectives, develop informed opinions and/or gain new knowledge through media comparisons and critical analyses. The operative value behind our analysis is that of open-mindedness. Open-mindedness, in turn, opens our eyes to the uses of different perspectives, as illustrated by the educational advantages of twice-told tales.

### ***1. Making Meaning of a Story through Three Primary Epistemic Lenses***

For instance, when youth meet these stories, twice-told, that is e.g., here by reading them in print and watching them in film, there is an opportunity to facilitate youthful learners’ educational development broadly defined to include aesthetic, academic, and ethical understanding. To that end, we suggest fostering these three “epistemic lenses” for understanding the message(s) of a twice told story—(1) a student’s deep comprehension of the ***academic*** content and skills associated with domains of knowledge and affiliated with or embedded within the twice-told story; (2) a student’s interpretations, comparisons, and judgements of the story’s ***aesthetic*** expressions across media that may serve to engage, inform, illuminate or, alternatively even dis-engage the student as a reader or viewer with regard to the media’s depiction of characters or narrative.; (3) a student’s informed personal and social reflection of the ***ethical*** dilemmas and choices embedded in or associated with the way the story is told, or the way characters develop or not across the story. In so doing, there are potentials for the reader/viewer to position oneself in the larger social and historical context in which the story is located.

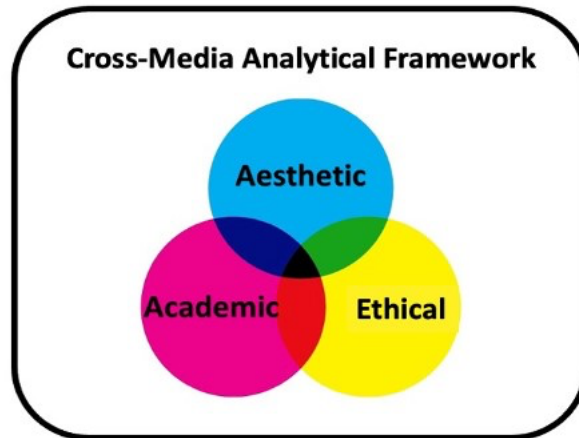
Ultimately, each of these analytic lenses intersects with one another for understanding, comprehending, and reinterpreting humanistic stories. That is, aesthetically, academically, and

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<sup>1</sup> Common Sense Media (2022). *The Common Sense Census: Media Use by Teens and Tweens 2021*

ethically distinct perspectives are related forms of epistemically understanding (Elgin, 2006, 2017) the social world utilizing the conceptual framework portrayed in Figure 1.

Figure 1: The analytical framework comprised of three epistemic lenses to illuminate a story in an educational context.



But what are the criteria by which we select such stories? And with respect to conventional education how, are we going to bring these stories into everyday classrooms, and support teachers in deeply exploring and utilizing the educative moments that a high-quality humanistic story twice-told might promote? These are the questions we address in this paper. We do so through a particularly apt example of a twice-told tale and explaining how we use this story to exemplify the theoretical framework (Section 1), and some exploratory ways one might undertake narrative research (Section 2) to analyze researchable questions generated, e.g., how the story is interpreted across various samples, what kind of impact the story might have on its recipients. Our selected story is *Wonder*. We begin with the aesthetic lens, which invites student engagement through the story’s artistic expression as expressed across media.

*Wonder*, authored by R.J. Palacio, was first published by Knopf in 2012, and released as a film adaptation by Lionsgate in November of 2017. Palacio wrote the story after her own five-year-old became visibly upset upon seeing another child in an ice-cream store whose facial features were so physically distorted from the norm that her own child started to scream in fright and tried to run out the store. It turns out the facial distortions this other child had were due to a genetic disorder, the under-development of the facial bones and tissues that occur in utero. The medical name for this genetic abnormality is *Treacher-Collins* syndrome. It is a rare disorder, often requiring many surgical operations just to keep the child alive. Today, with advances in medical and surgical procedures, many children born with this abnormality can lead a long and productive life, but seldom can the surgery fully repair the child’s facial features so that the child looks “normal.”

*Wonder* tells the fictional story of August Pullman (Auggie), a ten-year-old boy born with this disorder. The story begins with his parents’ decision to send Auggie to a private middle school. Although his parents are aware that being home-schooled may have protected him from

the “flight reactions” of young children like that of Palacio’s own five-year-old, or the “fight response” of older children, i.e., with meanness, aggression, taunting, teasing, etc., the parents conclude that, overall, being friendless is not a good thing for Auggie. It is not good for either his social development or his mental wellbeing.

*And so, with many doubts and fears, but knowing he has the support of a loving family, including his 14-year-old sister, Via, Auggie bravely prepares himself to enroll at the start of the new school year in the fifth grade at a traditional private school in New York City where one might expect, with its small classes, and high ratio of adults to children, that Auggie would be somewhat protected from the cruelty that comes, normatively speaking, of looking so “different.” (NPR Staff, 2012, March 26).*

The book, *Wonder*, now translated into more than 30 languages, is widely read in elementary and middle schools. The film adaptation has been viewed by legions of schoolchildren and adults worldwide, who have also read and loved the book. <sup>2</sup>

### ***The Aesthetic Lens***

There are multiple ways to introduce the story to students, and to begin to understand Auggie’s experiences. To unpack the educational opportunities and ethically rich messages in the *Wonder* story, we start by reflecting on and discussing emotional responses to the book and film then begin to compare the aesthetics of each narrative treatment.

Arguably, of the three epistemic lenses, perhaps the aesthetic comparison of *Wonder* in book and film is the most accessible way to prepare students to deeply understand the story’s academic and ethical implications. For example, there’s a pivotal scene during a Halloween party at school, an early “turning point” in the story for which cross media analysis is quite appropriate. Auggie overhears his classmate (and so far, only new friend, Jack Will), confiding to other boys in a closely- knit group that ‘he isn’t really friends with the new-comer, Auggie... the principal of the school forced him to hang out with him’. Jack goes on to say: If I looked like him (Auggie), I think I would kill myself’. He is unaware that Auggie, is within earshot, disguised in his Halloween costume and mask. The scene is short, yet the impact is intense, immediate, and critically important for readers/viewers to emotionally bond with the story, both in print and in film.

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<sup>2</sup> *We have used the story Wonder, as told in book and film, as a case study in our graduate course, Trans-Media Literacy, Humanistic Storytelling, and the Promotion of Social Awareness. Here, the class discusses important social and cultural topics, such as educational stakeholders’ perspectives about a school-bullying situation in an elite private school in United States, or the implications of the variations in meaning and culture in the story as presented in book and film. These discussions are initiated using prompts that compare different narration by which the story is told and encourage our class members to identify their instinctive/intuitive reactions, examine their feelings, question their prior knowledge, consider differing perspectives, and deepen their comprehension.*

The narrators in the book and film each bring nuanced and different emphasis to elements of telling the story in sequence/by chapters and scenes offering a rich basis for comparison. In the book, there is a distinct narrator for each chapter whereas in the film a combination of dialog and narrative voiceovers reveal the feelings and perspectives of characters as the scenes of the story unfold. For example, during the Halloween scene (Table 1.), plot differs across the way it is presented. Suggesting how readers/viewers might come to understand the characters’ feelings and the events surrounding them?

Table 1. Depiction of the Halloween scene as told in the film and book.

<b>Film Script:</b>	<b>Book Text:</b>
<p>Auggie walks into homeroom to find Julian is in a Darth Sidious outfit, he’s talking to two Mummies.</p> <p><i>JULIAN: If I looked like him, I’d put a hood on my face.</i></p> <p><i>MUMMY2 (Jack Will): If I looked like him, I’d kill myself</i></p> <p><i>JULIAN: Then why do you hang out with him, Jack?</i></p> <p>Jack Will looks back to the classroom doorway and turns back to Julian and the other boys.</p> <p><i>MUMMY2 (Jack Will): I don’t know, Tushman asked me to be his welcome buddy</i></p>	<p>I was going to go in and sit at my usual desk, but for some reason. I don’t know why I found myself walking over to a desk near them, and I could hear them talking . . .</p> <p>“I thought about this a lot,” said the second mummy “I really think . . . if I looked like him, seriously, I think that I’d kill myself.”</p> <p>...</p> <p>I knew the voice. I knew I wanted to run out of the class right then and there. But I stood where I was and listened to Jack Will finish what he was saying...</p> <p>“Just ditch him,” said Julian. I don’t know what Jack answered because I walked out of the class without anyone knowing I had been there.</p>
<p><b>Thorne, J., Conrad, S., Chbosky, S. (2017) Wonder, Directed by Stephen Chbosky, Lionsgate</b></p>	<p><b>Palacio, R. J., (2012) Wonder. Random House Children's Books. Kindle Edition.p.25</b></p>

In the film, Auggie is momentarily frozen after entering the classroom as he hears Jack’s chilling declaration, then voices become distant, music becomes subdued, as he trudges down the hallway. Even though we do not see his face behind his mask or hear his internal voice, the cross-cut camera shots, shifts in point of view, and changes in music deliver Auggie’s emotional response. In the book, Auggie’s devastating day is revealed when, after Via narrates her experience of Halloween, she gets him to explain why he unexpectedly left school

on his favorite day of the year. We can easily understand in both renditions that Auggie, the newcomer, is shocked and hurt in this social situation.

How do readers/viewers experience each of these ways of telling the story similarly and differently? Discussions may evolve to address a myriad of questions. What is the impact of the choices made by the *author* to engage readers through vivid but sparse descriptions of characters/settings, the first and third person narratives, and the use of alternating perspectives in chapters to reveal character's feelings/dilemmas and advance the plot of the story? What is the impact of choices made by the *director* to engage viewers through multiple senses using varying camera angles and scene length/pacing, symbolic costumes, evocative settings, character dialog, voiceover narrations, music, sound effects- even silence to reveal the characters and move the story forward?

Beginning with the aesthetic lens lays the groundwork to be able to scaffold analysis and discussions of the story's *academic* content and *ethical* messages and values, especially on the "what" question— what are the personal, social, and cultural meanings behind the aesthetic choices made by the author of book and director of the film in presenting the story?

### ***The Academic Lens***

The academic lens is the most traditional approach to the use of narratives for learning in elementary grades. When we ask what kind of learning opportunities might promote students' understanding of word meaning and inference, we are looking at the two versions with an *academic eye*, which focuses on a range of core school-based disciplinary content and skills, e.g., academic vocabulary, deep comprehension, and complex reasoning skills. Within the academic realm of knowing, activities might involve vocabulary comprehension and application and rewriting scenes, which focus on the quality of students' writing skills. This provides engaging opportunities for eliciting the nuances of meanings that these work choices represent.

We believe that the transition from once-told to twice-told analyses of stories in the academic domain is a natural evolution in teaching practice, and therefore warrants less detailed demonstration here. We don't mean to dismiss the potential for acquiring domain -specific knowledge or deeper comprehension in language & literacy, history, or the sciences. In fact, the opposite is true. For example, using a piece of historical fiction, we can easily deduce how the close-comparison of a book and film with historical records and other sources can fuel thoughtful and lively debate of fact *versus* fiction and yield expansive and nuanced domain-specific knowledge.

### ***The Ethical Lens***

The ethical lens helps to uncover the implicit and explicit values embedded in the telling and experience of the story from personal and societal perspectives. As the story unfolds, revealing the viewpoints and actions of multiple characters, we begin to construct perceptions of self and others.

For instance, in the Halloween party scene discussed above, we encounter Jack's ethical dilemmas and conflicting personal relationships. The newcomer, Auggie is someone he admires but as Auggie is ostracized by other students, especially peer leader, Julian. There are subtle

indications that socio-economic status plays a role influencing the boys' behavior. Jack is from a lower-middle class income family; his parents work in meaningful but lower paying jobs as teacher and social worker. He attends an elite private school, that his parents could never afford, on scholarship and wants to fit in. At school, Jack is neither the academically gifted student nor a celebrity among his peers. Julian, the ringleader, has no trouble fitting in. He appears to have a privileged life and his wealthy parents are influential donors at the school, accustomed to getting what they want. What does the decision to badmouth Auggie to Julian and his friends mean to Jack? How might he feel about his words and actions under different conditions?

As the reader and viewer, we notice that Jack's feelings and struggles are handled differently in the book and film. In the book, the Halloween scene is described through Auggie's point of view. His narration leaves Jack's feelings unaddressed. Readers come to understand Jack's repentance only after Auggie stops talking to him. In contrast, the film producers use a medium, the close-up camera shot, to convey Jack's feelings after he betrayed Auggie. Jack's unkindness is portrayed in the social context, alluding to the need to belong and the lengths to which someone may go to fit in. Julian and his friends, Auggie's antagonists are complicit, laughing together at Jack's cruel remark: "If I were him (Auggie), I'd kill myself." Jack, then turns his back on the laughing boys with regret visible- and searches for Auggie. The film's soundtrack reinforces the shift in mood from joyful at the outset (with the Monster Mash song playing loudly in the background) to somber as Auggie, the outcast, hears the cruel remarks and trudges away. Laughter echoes in the hallways; the music is muted and indistinct.

Therefore, we begin to understand the ethical impact of *Wonder* for readers/viewers by asking, how do we feel about Jack's personal dilemma and decisions as portrayed in each media? How might Jack's family circumstances influence reader/viewer judgements and moral reasoning about Jack's betrayal of Auggie, the beleaguered protagonist, and his alliance with Julian, the privileged antagonist? The book and film communicate Jack's behavior, ethical struggles, and estrangement from Auggie differently.

Viewers witness Jack's regret and hesitation on screen in the moment. Readers, however, learn much later about Jack's remorse and 'punishment'. First, as readers, we must experience Auggie's anguish through his first-person account of the day. Then several book chapters focus on life through Via's narration then shifts to the viewpoint of Summer (another classmate of Auggie's) and her critical role revealing to Jack the cause of his estrangement from Auggie. How, might these contrasting aesthetic experiences in book and film affect readers'/viewers' perceptions of Jack's character and behavior?

As the perspectives of characters are revealed, readers/viewers explore the ethical values embedded in the story through the cross-media comparison. For instance, the social economic status of Jack's family is made explicit in both the book and film in distinct ways. What impact does that have? How might the choices made by the author and film producer be a projection of their own values, convey empathy for the underprivileged or serve as a critique of the power dynamics and inequities perpetuated by social hierarchy based on socio-economic status? How does social bias and peer pressure effect friendships between adolescents from diverse backgrounds and circumstances? Especially for normative purposes, the ethical lens shines a light on developing an open-minded perspective.<sup>3</sup> There's abundant potential for rich and varied

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<sup>3</sup> See *Educator Resource for Wonder*, 2019, (<https://xmedia.gse.harvard.edu/>).

discussions (about these and other themes) that can inspire new insights and introspection and warrant the teacher's careful consideration.

Close comparisons can reveal consequential choices by the storytellers in each media, encourage examination of the meaning behind such choices and represent multiple points of view. Thus, through the enriched experience of twice-told humanistic stories, students may gain new insights and build emotional, intellectual, and empathetic bonds with others.

## ***II. Exploratory Narrative Research: How Audiences and Readers Make Multiple Meanings of a Story***

In an interview with a reporter from the *Berklee Groove*<sup>4</sup>, Palacio is asked: How does the film differ from the book and vice versa, in terms of how the story is told? As the author of the book and a co-scriptwriter of the film, R.J. Palacio, responds:

*“Two ways: I would say the movie tells a couple of stories that aren't in the book. We see more of the parents in the film, where in the book we only see the parents from the kids' point of view, so we only know what their lives are like through the filter of their kids. The parents are central to the story, but are in the background, whereas in the movie, they're central to the story and more complex. The second difference is related to the overarching theme of the book, kindness, and how they beautifully echoed and enhanced that theme through the movie. You leave the movie feeling good, really good, and certainly given the times we're living in now, that's something really great.”* (Murray, 2017)

Due to *Wonder's* worldwide popularity, an abundance of resources and reader/viewer commentary about the story are easily accessible online. We are curious about the story's impact on readers of the book and viewers of the film. Do they connect with the story and receive the messages in the way that R.J. Palacio intended? To make a more thorough case for cross-media analyses using the three epistemic lenses, we can use empirical research methods to study how readers/viewers understand both the book and film.

### ***Exploration 1: Perspectives on the appeal of the “Story” to the book's everyday reviewers***

And so, we have made use of comments (data) from the many digital website platforms that carry book and film reviews written by professional/published reviewers and amateur/general reviewers. We asked research questions about the reviewers' perspectives on the story's *aesthetic* appeal, the perceived struggle(s) of the main characters in the story (Tan et al, 2020), and the story's perceived societal impact. We've used qualitative data and analytic methods to generate new insights as we've undertaken several preliminary analyses. (See Surrain et al<sup>5</sup> for another example of the use of narrative in research. For more recent approaches utilizing narrative in

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<sup>4</sup> The *Berklee Groove* was a students' online newspaper at the Berklee School of Music until 2020.

<sup>5</sup> Surrain, S., Duhaylongsod, L., Selman, R., & Snow, C. (2019). Using narrative thinking in argumentative writing.



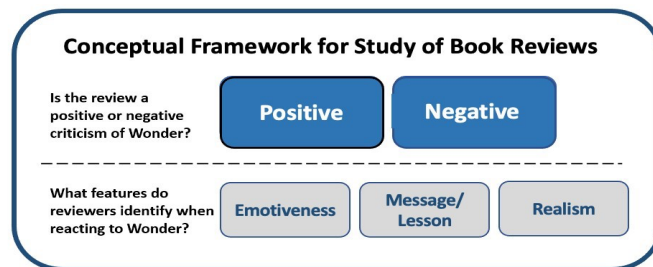
research see also the edited book by Veneziano and Nicolopoulou <sup>6</sup>.) These analyses, given the sources of data available to us, are primarily epistemic clarifications, and not quantitative research analyses targeted to our “cross media” component. Here are two examples of explorations utilizing data generated from book/film reviewers’ commentary.

How do everyday reviewers who post on-line comments about the stories experience and judge the quality of the overall story and its intended message? In essence, how do they judge the quality of the story aesthetically speaking? As *Wonder* has been touted an inspirational book for readers of all ages, we investigated what aspects of the story that reviewers talk about when reacting positively or negatively to the book. The reviews (N=26) we analyzed were drawn from English language online book review platforms i.e., *Amazon* (3), *Goodreads* (10), and *Common Sense Media* (13), including both children’s and adults’ reviews of the book.

In developing the conceptual framework for this study, we implemented two (iterative) readings of the comments, so, as to generate two layers of thematic. The first layer classifies each whole review as primarily **positive** or **negative** evaluation of the story by readers’ attitudes rather than by book rating.<sup>7</sup> The second reading of the comments seeks to classify the reviewers’ primary reasons for their over-arching evaluations. Three major justifications codes emerged separate from the positive or negative label for each full comment at the first reading. Comments were *thematically coded* (tagged) as **Emotiveness** when the reviewer primarily referenced the strong feelings the story engendered, as **“Lessons Learned”** when the reviewer stated the primary importance of the central message, lesson, or takeaway of the story, and as **Realism**, when the reviewer made a comparative comment that located the fictional story in connection to or with the reviewer’s own experiences in the social world.

In general, the codes within the first layer of the conceptual framework capture how the readers/reviewers connected to the book (or film) aesthetically in terms of their positive and negative feelings and attitudes to the story, while the second layer of the framework further described the readers/reviewers’ understanding the story’s emotional effects and ethics, their reflection on the story, and their perception of its’ resemblance to “reality.” (Figure 2)

Figure 2. The “general” conceptual framework for the study of online book reviews.



<sup>6</sup> Veneziano, E., Nicolopoulou, A. (Eds.), *Narrative, Literacy and Other Skills: Studies in intervention*. Philadelphia, PA: Joh Benjamins. <https://www.benjamins.com/catalog/sin.25> <sup>7</sup> Mixed reviews exist as well.

Table 2. Examples for each of the three codes

Code	Emotiveness
Example	“This is one of those special books that touches the heart and leaves a mark there forever. It’s difficult to believe that this is a debut book from this author it is so incredibly well written and developed. There were moments in the book that caused me to laugh, and moments where I cried. The range of emotions this book pulls from the reader is vast.”
Code	Lesson Learned
Example	“The best part of the book for me was the overall message it sends to its readers, be kind always, no excuses. “This book really inspires me to be brave, kind and love. most important love urself (sic).”
Code	Realism
Positive Example	“This book is almost like a case study in what would happen if you put a deformed child in a school with other children, would they accept him or reject him? Almost every character behaved how the reader thought they would, and every scenario in the book completely realistic and believable.”
Negative Example	<i>It was too sweet, too nice, too unreal. because Auggie's story is supposed to feel real, not like he lives in a magic castle and has just defeated a dark wizard. It was too perfect to believe in.</i>

Most reviewers responded positively to the story in print. Within the “Positive” reviews on *Wonder*, commenters tended to discuss the story’s “Realism” regarding the story’s aesthetic structure. For example:

*“the story Wonder, the novel, is told from different characters’ POV (point of view). I like that because it gives a more realistic rendering of the story.”*

Although there were both positive and negative reviews addressing each of the three themes, a far greater percentage of negatively coded comments were voiced under the theme “Realism.” Often, when the “Realism” theme was invoked to justify a negative review, the commenters mostly criticized the book because the characters were not seen as realistic or the story (plot) was “sugarcoating” the reality, for instance, the following somewhat mixed review basically focused on the story’s negative aspects:

*“I feel a bit like a cold-hearted snob for giving this book two stars” before acknowledging that the book is “an uplifting story definitely worth being told (and read)” It was too sweet, too nice, too unreal. because Auggie’s story is supposed to feel real, not like he lives in a magic castle and has just defeated a dark wizard. It was too perfect to believe in.”*

*Exploration into the Ethics: According to professional reviewers, perspectives on the lessons that might be learned by “The Society”.*

R. J. Palacio tells us that by writing this story she set out to make a difference in our society.

*“It seems like a chance for me to do over that one unfortunate situation... There’s a certain act of atonement here, and the fact that maybe I’m helping this little girl, without her knowing, in some way because of Wonder... that is pretty special for me” (NPR, 2012).*

The theme of atonement is carried forward from both behind and through the story. Behind the story, R. J. Palacio atoned for her son’s reaction to the girl’s face in an ice-cream store and so was motivated to create the story to support, among others, children who suffer from craniofacial deformation. In the arc of the story proper, Auggie’s friend, Jack Will atones for things he said about Auggie behind his back when he decides to defend Auggie against Julian and embrace their friendship.

### ***Exploration 2: Perspectives on the Impact of a Story on Attitudes and Intended Behaviors of Children or Adults***

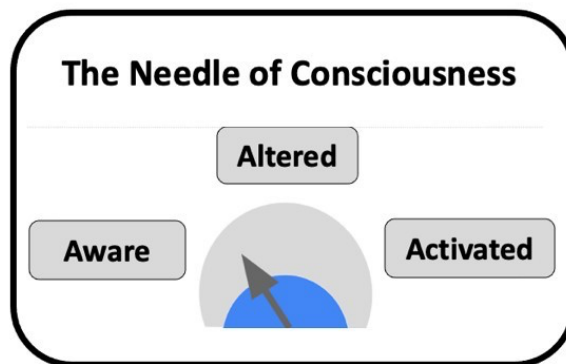
If within these real-life and fictional stories, people and story characters are motivated by their own context and experiences, can storytelling be used as a tool to significantly alter the attitudes and intended behaviors of children or adults. (Cameron & Rutland, 2006)? Can it serve to prevent psychological trauma such as the kind that might affect Auggie? The hard evidence in response to questions such as these is sparse. We asked—what were not just the lessons but also the actions these reviewers could take? <sup>7</sup>

We approached these questions by beginning with a search for the views espoused by professional reviewers on what kinds of influence the story might have. For this sample, we chose professional reviews and opinion editorials (N = 26) published through online outlets with high viewership (Klein, A. 2017). Many readers look to these outlets and their reviewing staff to be informed by what they think, and therefore these reviews may carry more “cultural weight” than the opinions of laypersons. Interestingly, when the research question focuses on the reviewers’ *ethical response* to the book or movie, the picture becomes not only much more complex but also much more polarizing.

Considering the ways that themes emerged from the reviews sampled and our interest in the *variety* in which the tale was “twice-told,” we used reviews of both the book and the film to address the following research question: Can we reliably infer from these reviews how we, as a society, treat and discuss a protagonist who has a visible difference that marks that person negatively, that stigmatizes him or herself?

Such a question is more about our culture than about each of us as individuals. Nevertheless, by using similar qualitative analytic methods as for our first study, we found that regardless of the media reviewed (movie or novel), the ethical *impact* of the story on individual reviewers could be classified into three levels of “engaged consciousness”: *gains in informational awareness; changes in personal development*, as in altered social or self-awareness, and/or *behaviorally activated social conscience*. These are organized in relation to one another as the conceptual framework in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Conceptual framework for the study of professional book/film reviews.



- **AWARE-** Acts of Awareness as Increased Knowledge expressed: These are comments that mentioned what the story brings to readers throughout their full reviews, for example, the awareness of the main character’s physical condition and his lived (although fictional) experiences. Facts about craniofacial differences, i.e., terminology, bullying, and the experience of being bullied are emphasized in the review.

*“The hero, known as Auggie, is such a marvelous (sic) character. He’s smart, funny, and courageous. What marks him out is a terrible facial abnormality, caused by a mutant gene, which has resulted in him having 27 operations.”*

- **ALTERED-** Acts of Altered Consciousness expressed: These reviewer comments gave the impression that either the reviewers had reported selves being changed, or they perceived a change in the way individuals who might read the book would most likely treat another person or group. One example was provided from a review that quoted a father, who noted:

*“other children were reacting differently to my daughter, who has a speech impediment and I believed it was due to her class reading Wonder. I began to realize that Auggie notes the way people react upon first seeing his face. They look away, or stare, or smile extra big. Toddlers sometimes cry in fear and confusion. Auggie hates this, steeling himself for any situation (like the first day in his new school) where there will be lots of people who have never seen him before. But underneath his pain and exasperation is a trace of empathy. He understands that a face so unusual will attract attention, that people will wonder why he looks the way he does.”*

- **ACTIVATED-** Acts of Activated Social Conscience expressed: These reviewers’ comments appeared to insist upon a call to action at the societal or public level. For example:

*“Society needs to change and reading Wonder is a first step, more teachers should become involved in Palacio’s anti-bullying campaign.”*

*“In Wonder, Auggie needs to be used as a prop to teach those around him about acceptance and compassion. The official movie description deems him “the most unlikely of heroes.” But what is he a hero for, exactly? For living with a disfigured face? For not getting angry when he’s subjected to cruel and intense bullying on a daily basis? For going through traumatic medical procedures? Something needs to change in our society.”*

Here we see the research designed and the research question weighted, not so much to aesthetics, but to ethical values, the worth of the story. For instance, when the research question is, “Can we tell from these reviews how we, as a society, discuss and might treat a protagonist who has a visible difference that marks that person negatively? Negative reviewers’ reactions to the story emerged most often in some, but importantly not all, of the comments coded as: **Awareness as Activated Social Conscience expressed.** In the sample from this analysis, reviews of this kind are much more polarized, and some are much more *critical*, both in the everyday sense of that term, and often in the sense that the focus of the criticism is not simply the movie, but the cultural context in which the movie is located. The comment below is paradigmatic:

*“Disabled people do not need a medal for being disabled. Frankly, I thought this book was condescending. It actually made me feel uncomfortable. I kept thinking about that video of the disabled woman telling the public that as a disabled person, she didn't want to become anyone's "inspiration" or "hero" just for simply living her day-to-day life. She exposed society's tendency to put disabled persons on a pedestal, when goodness gracious, they're just normal people like us. (albeit, they have to do things differently than all of us) But worse still, Auggie isn't even disabled in the least. He's just a regular guy, but with a different face. I don't know which was worse, the group of people bullying him, or babying him because of that. I felt as if the majority of love and recognition Auggie got throughout the story came only because of his disfigurement.*

*And let's not even mention the insinuation that the people who did befriend Auggie are just saints. I don't even want to get into that."*

*I felt like this book was just pure "inspiration porn". At best, I'm very uncomfortable with its message, and at worst, I'm just infuriated.*

***Conclusion: Can cross-media analysis end the tension between entertainment and education?***

“The first demand any work of art makes upon us is surrender. Look. Listen. Receive. Get yourself out of the way. There is no good asking first whether the work before you deserves such a surrender, for until you have surrendered you cannot possibly find out.”

C. S. Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism*, 1961

C.S. Lewis conveys in this quote yet another way to understand the connection between perspective-taking and open-mindedness which has implications for how educators experience and choose stories. As with the question of how to select stories, what preparation, then, do educators need to make a close, cross-media comparison of a story before bringing it to the attention of their students? The epistemic approach to illuminating humanistic story is not only a pedagogical framework to be situated in the classroom for students, but also a way to support educational practitioners in best understanding thus utilizing stories to improve their practices. For teachers, the application to their own analyses, beliefs and practices of a pedagogical framework that focuses on the aesthetic, ethical, and academic content of a story will help educators locate why to invest the time to do their own close cross-media comparison of a story.

Cross-media analysis, as previously discussed, is not the multitudinous, superficial comparison of what was kept, what was left out or what was changed in the crossing from books to films and back. Rather, it is both the individual reflections and group discussion of choices made by authors, directors, producers, and actors that enrich and expand the experience of the twice-told story. When studied using the three epistemic lenses, the humanistic stories that we operationalize in curriculum and instruction, encourage students to become more discerning readers/viewers and enable educators across domains (education, law, medicine, etc.) to embrace popular as well as canonical and non-fiction stories as allies to serve in the best interest of their students' development.

All this suggests if educators *open their minds* to explore how, when framed in aesthetic, academic, and ethical perspectives— twice-told humanistic stories across media have both entertainment value and—great educational value.

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