

Understanding and Respecting Disability

a personal statement by Padma Venkatraman

author of THE BRIDGE HOME

These days, it feels important for me to share the fact that I have a chronic condition. More than one, in fact. There are times when my mind is taken over with anxiety and something that may seem like a minor incident to someone else feels like a major catastrophe to me, and an action or piece of dialogue plays in an endless loop that makes me feel like I'm spiraling out of control. I've also been diagnosed with clinical depression. In addition, I need to take care of my asthma. I live with all these conditions and manage them, with a combination of yoga, meditation and medication. I didn't speak about any of this when I started CLIMBING THE STAIRS as a writer over a decade ago, in part because I was shyer and more reclusive then. And of course, it wasn't easy for me to speak about anxiety or depression.

Even now it's not easy. But I realize that it's important for me to mention this as part of who I am, because if someone in the audience has an "invisible disability" they often come up later to speak to me and thank me, because it helps them to see an author be open about this aspect of who they are. I don't always mention it, though - probably in part because I immigrated to the United States alone before I was 21, which was a long time ago, and I never have checked the box on disability in any form. I have also not been involved politically in the movement for disability rights in any of the 5 countries in which I've lived. However, given my personal history as well as the fact that there are many people with physical and developmental disabilities and mental illness in my family, this is an important aspect of diversity to me.

The dialogue between Viji and Lalitha in THE BRIDGE HOME is inspired, in part, by an incident I experienced while visiting an organization called [V-Excel](#) in India, which serves children with disabilities. Others who serve children with disabilities whom I have had the honor and pleasure to spend time with include [Dr. Ambika Kameshwar](#) (who teaches dance), [Mrs. Meena Dhadha](#) (who has a center that manufactures prostheses and helps provide artificial limbs to people who may not be able to otherwise afford them) and Dr. Sundar.

I love the expression "nothing about us without us" and in my journey as a writer, I've been fortunate to learn from two wonderful writers who have disabilities - Cynthia Rodriguez (author of WHEN REASON BREAKS) and Lyn Miller-Lachman (author of ROGUE) - and I truly hope you'll take time to read their #OwnVoices novels. And, I have also had the joy to befriend another generous human being and a marvelous author, Leslie Connor, whose THE TRUTH ACCORDING TO MASON BUTTLE was a National Book Award Finalist and whose WAITING FOR NORMAL won the Schneider Family Book Award, given each year by the ALA. TENDING TO GRACE by Kimberly Newton Fusco is another Schneider award winning book that's long been one of my favorites. A book for children that I've recently enjoyed and that I was thrilled to see recommended by the blog disability in kidlit is A BOY CALLED BAT, by Elana Arnold. A few more books featuring characters with disabilities that come to mind include FISH IN A TREE by Lynda Mullaly Hunt, FINDING PERFECT by Elly Swartz, OUT OF MY MIND by Sharon Draper, and ON THE EDGE OF GONE by Corinne Duyvis. A resource book for librarians that I can't recommend enough is INCLUDING FAMILIES OF CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS: A HOW TO DO IT MANUAL FOR LIBRARIANS which is written by Carrie Banks and others. I hope you'll consider adding these books to your reading lists as you think about disability awareness in the global context.