AT: Welcome to the Infinite Women podcast. I'm your host, Allison Tyra, and today I'm joined by Kristen Lopez, a journalist and author of the new book, *Popcorn Disabilities: The Highs and Lows of Disabled Representation in the Movies*. So first, could we start with, why did you write this book?

KL: A lot of it, I joke, is because I needed a second idea. I's just kind of come off a first book. I was pretty content to never really write anything again. And I was lovingly encouraged to come up with something else and get over the sophomore slump. And I pitched a couple of ideas and none of them had really gone. And I kept telling myself, Writers 101, which is write what you know. And I'm like, "well, what do I know?" I'm disabled. Disabled representation is a big thing, but I don't want to write something that's already been written. So, I conjured up this idea of I don't necessarily want to write a book about disability in the movies and pull out the same things that people have probably done before. But I'd kind of come up with over the years of my own writing, I had come up with tropes and one liners and little things that I was like, maybe this would be nice to immortalize in a book. And at the same time, I was really interested in how movies affected me as a kid, being a disabled person and not having a lot of disabled role models and people that I knew that were disabled growing up. So I was like, well, what if we wrote a book about not just disability in the movies, but how it creates this this concept of how disabled people see themselves and how a generation of disabled people have grown up and how other people around them come up with how they view disabled people by the movies that they've watched. So apparently I did a great job in the room when I pitched it and they wanted to do it. And when I finally had to sit down to write it, I was like, crap, probably should have come up with like some sort of outline or whatever the heck I'm going to do. So it was a real trial and error learning curve at that point of trying to be like, okay, well, I know what I want to write. I just don't know where the hell to start in order to say it. So after some crying and screaming and saying, "why did I do this again?" it finally got done. But yeah, it started mostly from me wanting to just avoid being a one hit wonder and kind of coming up with something where I was like, okay, well, no one else has written this book from my perspective as a disabled journalist and as somebody who watches a lot of movies and grew up with a lot of back and forth questionable thoughts about being disabled because of the movies. So it kind of went from there.

AT: I really like in your intro, you do talk about growing up with osteogenesis imperfecta and how you developed this lifelong love of cinema because it was transportative. And I think a lot of people have that experience in different ways, depending on who you are and how your life is playing out. So I feel like that's a perspective that we're often missing in cinema in the sense of the actual disabled person's three-dimensional experience, because so often what we get instead is inspiration porn, where it's "here's how a disabled person's condition and experiences are used to enrich and help an able person to grow." So it was actually very refreshing to see that.

KL: When people start reading the book, and I bring up just some of the very simple things I think most disabled people are looking for in a movie. One of them is the concept of them being the protagonist of their own movie. That does not happen a lot. If you take the majority of disabled movies and you say who the star is, most people will point to the abled person that stands next to them. It's a technique I call the "able body buffer," which is a screenwriting technique that is under the presumption that disabled people are so mysterious or so unknowable that a predominantly abled audience, which is what screenwriters are catering to, believe that the only way that the audience will connect is if there is an able bodied person that they gravitate towards. Because when a person closes their eyes and thinks of somebody like them, they'll usually think of somebody able-bodied so it's a real means of, unfortunately, kicking the disabled person to the side. So you get to see how the disabled person's life is through the eyes of the able person, who usually benefits in some some way, shape or form, whether that's financially or morally or personally. I talk in the intro about how as a part of a marginalized group, and I think most marginalized people do this, whether it's race or gender or sexual orientation we look for coding. We look for characters that have commonalities to us, and then we gravitate

onto those, because we don't have anything better. And for disabled people, we do that a lot. Because if I gravitated towards the disabled characters, I probably feel way worse than I would probably have growing up. So for me, I tell people *The Little Mermaid* is a disabled story. Is it a great one? No, not really. But as a child, the concept of like a rebellious young girl who wants to live on land and can't because she doesn't have a pair of working legs, like, that was pretty damn close to me as a kid until you become an adult, you're like, “well, it's a bit troubling.”

AT: I think we're getting into first off the empathy gap, which for anyone who's not familiar, the empathy gap is essentially, it's difficult for us to relate to life experiences that are very different from our own. And the irony is that, in theory, the best way to close the empathy gap, or at least narrow it, is to consume the stories of others, whether that's fiction or nonfiction, people who have those different life experiences from yours. But the problem is that most of the people in power are what I like to call CHAWMs. So cishet abled white men. And because of their own empathy gaps, they look at these stories, and they're like, Oh, well, I can't relate to that. Therefore, I don't think other people will be able to relate to that. And so it's this self-reinforcing cycle where their empathy gap is making it harder for everyone else to close our own empathy gaps.

KL: Yeah. And I think a lot of it has to do with that element. And then you go even further, which is the people that are working at studios and green lighting these things are also not disabled. I went to a studio once for a diversity and inclusion event, and asked them, “what are the stats on how many disabled people just work in the studio?” And they were like, “We don't know, it's it's up to self-disclosure.” And I was like,” Okay, but how many wheelchairs or mobility equipment do you see on a daily basis, working on the lot?” And they're like, “none.” Cool. That's not troubling at all to me. It's got arms and just every part of the disability in film. just disability in general, I think. And when the representation is bad, movies teach us about cultures, people, scenarios, we don't know. And yet, if the representation is bad, then that real life practice is going to be bad. I have so many people when I tell them to this day, and they say good movies don't last forever. When I tell people what my disability is, they're like, “Oh, the Unbreakable disease. Have you seen *Unbreakable*? What do you think about it?” I had a doctor asked me this, I was just like, “O..kay.”
Or I'll have somebody come up to me. And I had a neighbor once stopped me on the street, while I was walking my dog. And she was telling me how it was so heartening to see me. Because I get up every morning, and I go out in my wheelchair, and I walk my dog. And it makes her think, well, if I can do that, then she has no excuse for not doing her things. And I think a lot of that is the concepts of what movies feed people. Or I'll get a lot of people that'll look at me, and they'll be like, “Oh, you're disabled, I have a movie recommendation for you.” And I'm just like, “I’ve probably seen it, and I probably have opinions about it.” So movies do, even though they don't, I think, carry the same level of social cache over the last five years, they've done a lot, I think, towards cementing a lot of ideas that we have about what disabled people are capable of and what their lives look like, that we really have no motivation, I think, in entertainment, aside from the disabled community, I don't think the allies though were really interested in moving that needle forward.

AT: I just love that this woman literally cast herself as the abled protagonist in her own mental inspiration porn movie.

KL: Yeah! I was very unclear how to respond. I was just like, “thank… you? No? Yes? I get it. I don't know.” I had no idea, and this was a woman I never met before in my life, never interacted with her, never interacted with her again after that. But she felt the need to literally come out. I was just like, “as long as you're not going to complain that I'm not cleaning up after my animal while you're telling me this story. I'm fine with that.”

AT: The least you could have done is pick up your dog's poop. That's all I'm saying.

KL: Exactly. That would have at least I think gone a long way to just repairing the awkwardness.

AT: Now, coming back to the CHAWMs, what we see across the board is that the further you get from being that cishet abled white man, the less representation you're going to get. So for example, as an autistic woman, I can tell you for a fact that most autistic characters people can think of are white guys, (KL: Yeah) and a particular kind of white guy as well. So one of the things that I really liked about your book is how you're highlighting these intersectional elements like race and gender. And when you're talking about *The Little Mermaid* as disability-coded, it made me think of queer coding because like you were saying, people will strive to see themselves in the implicit when the explicit isn't available. And another commonality here is that you will often see villains being queer-coded, especially in Disney movies, like Ursula, who was based on Divine. (KL: Yeah) But you also have villains who are often disabled and or disfigured.

KL: Yeah, to briefly touch on what you were saying about autism in the movies, I knew I had to talk about neurodivergence, but I wanted to be really specific about it because I have ADHD, but that's a very late diagnosis. I've never lived my life as neurodivergent. And I didn't really want to talk out of my hat. But I also didn't want to ignore it either, because that I felt'd also be irresponsible. So I really did factor in a lot of the elements that I had noticed over the years that made me question how it goes to the whole panoply of disability. And when you look at autism in the movies, like you were saying, it's mostly a white man. And it's always a character who's of use to an able-bodied person. They have to have some sort of useful element. *Rain Man*, he can help Tom Cruise's character cheat at cards. Forrest Gump is quite literally a wunderkind of luck and good fortune for everybody around him and is generationally wealthy. So he's already coming at it from being a privileged person. And I think that often does create this stereotype that the only reason you would want to have a disabled person by your side is to use them for something else. I hadn't watched *Rain Man* in so long. And when I rewatched it for the book, I was like, “how is this a happy story?” considering that Tom Cruise's character kidnaps a grown man, holds him hostage, and then tries to go through the process of putting him into a conservatorship, which now audiences are a bit more reluctant post-Britney Spears to just willfully endorse.
I wanted to really look at intersectionality because I always say I get a lot of pitches from people about “I have a project. Would you review it? Would you watch it? Would you talk about it?” And nine times out of 10, what I see is it's usually starring a white person. And I'm like, “that's been done. That's been done. That's so done.” I get that it's hard enough to get a white disabled character in a movie. But at this point, it's just kind of ignorant to not be expanding that pool and showing disabled people of color, disabled women of color, which are still probably the lowest groups, queer relationships with disability. That is something that, I have a whole section about romance in this book that is all heterosexual because apparently it's hard enough to find a member of the opposite gender to date you, let alone a person of the same gender. It's just too much. So I really wanted to do my part to look at that intersectionality while reminding everybody that at the end of the day I'm a white woman with a disability. I can't clearly speak for every disability and every person, nor should I. But until everybody else is included, it's kind of on me to do my part.

AT: I do feel like I need to point out just since you brought up autistic people having to be useful, that the origin of the term Asperger is that Asperger was literally a Nazi scientist who was separating the kids who weren't too autistic, essentially, to be useful to society. So Asperger's job was literally pulling out the autistic kids who could mask well enough, (KL: Who could pass, yeah) to still be useful to society. So if anybody's like, “wait, why aren't we supposed to say Asperger's anymore?” That's why.

KL: Yeah, I think, too, with neurodivergence, what's so interesting to me, and I talk about this in the book, is that audiences have a very fine line with how neurodivergent a character can be before they become, I don't want to use the term “repulsed,” but before they don't like it. They don't know why they don't like it, or they

know why they don't like it, but they don't want to say why they don't like it.

AT: It's the empathy gap. It's the empathy gap kicking in.

KL: Yeah. I talk a lot about the section in *Tropic Thunder* where Robert Downey Jr.'s character is talking about, and for me, I think people got so wrapped up in the use of the “r” word that they really weren't listening to the content, which is painfully true and so sharp. And the fact that they were talking about it when that movie came out, and the fact that it's so relevant today, I think is one of *Tropic Thunder*'s most enduring qualities, which is that audiences will only take so much mental impairment. And for them, that character has to not only be of use, but the neurodivergence has to be quirky. It has to be an eccentricity. You'll get a lot of characters where they're just like, “he's just eccentric. He's just a quirky kook” type of thing. And if you look at Tom Hanks's performance in *Forrest Gump* or if you look at Dustin Hoffman in *Rain Man*, their performances are mostly verbal, not necessarily physical. Maybe Dustin Hoffman has a lot of downcast eyes, but he doesn't have facial tics. He's not doing anything that is not considered uncomfortable aesthetically. And aesthetics plays such a huge role in disabled representation. It's disturbing.
But when I was writing this chapter, I'm like, “well, I have to watch some of these other movies that people have talked about for decades as being the worst, worst movies.” So *I Am Sam*, Gary Marshall's *The Other Sister*. And these were movies that I had avoided for a long time because I had been told “they're awful. Don't watch them. They're terrible. Why would you do that?” But these were all abled, neurotypical people telling me this. And I finally watched them. And look, *I Am Sam* is not a good movie. It's not at all. And Sean Penn's performance, I think, very much is that overwrought, looking off into the middle distance, mouth agape. There's a lot of scenes where he's just clumsy and you're supposed to laugh at him, which I was not down for. But yet the movie is telling a very real serious subject about how frequent, and it is frequent, mentally disabled parents are having their children taken from them by the court system purely for being neurodivergent and having a mental disability. So it's telling a vital story. It's just this performance, that was Oscar nominated, mind you, kind of mars it.
Gary Marshall's *The Other Sister*. Again, Juliette Lewis is a neurotypical actress playing a part. But I think she does it somewhat better in that she's not playing it as flamboyant. And again, the storyline is one that is very, very authentic and honest and puts her in the main role. She's a character that wants to be independent. She wants to have a relationship. She wants to go to college and get a job. And her mother's like, “no, you have a mental disability. Your job is to live in this house and take it over after I die. And I don't care what you have to say.” It treats it with honesty. And it made me realize, are these movies bad? Or did abled audiences just collectively decide they didn't want to be uncomfortable and just said they were bad without, and now at this point, nobody's seen them. So how do you know they're bad? It's been really interesting for me to challenge my own preconceptions about why I've avoided certain movies and why certain movies I think don't hold up and probably shouldn't have held up. I included *What's Eating Gilbert Grape* on the list, which I had not seen for a very long time. And outside of the fatphobia that is very prevalent I know people love Leonardo DiCaprio's performance, but I think it kind of sets the tone for what we expect from somebody. It's I think what *Tropic Thunder* is making fun of with the Simple Jack performance. And so it's definitely one of those where it caused me to look at my own biases, my own self-loathing and kind of emphasize like, some of these performances can be overwrought. Some of them are just outright bad. But *I Am Sam* is a movie that reminds you that Starbucks was paying a mentally disabled man subminimal wage in the 2000s. And I'm sure they're really happy about that product placement now. So it was really interesting to kind of look at that angle.

AT: And I do want to come back to the issue of abled actors playing disabled characters. Or even, you might have an actor with disability X, but they're playing someone with disability Y. So for example we both wear glasses, that is a disability. That is not the same as someone who has chronic pain, chronic fatigue, is a wheelchair user, right? So we are definitely going to come back to that. But I want to touch on what you were

saying about autistic characters having to be quirky, because I'm very curious about how you see gender playing out in representations of women, or anyone who's not a cis dude, let's just put it that way, with disabilities, separate from those of cis men with disabilities, because I've definitely heard the phrase “manic pixie autistic dream girl.” And I very much feel like that is how like autistic women, when we are portrayed, is like, “oh, she's just quirky.”

KL: Yeah, *Garden State* is kind of the go to example. I didn't focus on neurodivergence when I was talking about gender, but I think that they still have similarities in that when you see a disabled man in a relationship in a movie, it's usually something that they've acquired later in life. So you get these moments of seeing them abled before disability struck them down. They usually always have a girlfriend or some sort of caretaker figure already baked in to the plot. And the movie then ultimately becomes about how they, as a couple, navigate disability, which usually means the abled woman subsumes all her desires in order to care for this man, hoping for the day he will die and set her free. Or you'll get a disabled man who maybe has a lot of money, like The Upside, and wants to find a girlfriend, but the girlfriend rejects him because he's just too disabled for her. And then she just becomes a bitch. But disabled men have more opportunities for relationships. Those relationships are often fairly asexual, with the exception of something like maybe The Sessions, but they have more romantic entanglements.
Disabled women historically in film have been like, “no, you are not going to find a man to deal with all that. That's just not going to happen.” Most of the time, you'll get a female character with pretty disabilities, which is a disability that is non-visual. So deafness, blindness, being nonverbal, so that the abled actress can play the character without having to mess this up. Because you still have to have her be, I'm going to try not to use the term I include in the book, but you still have to have her be sexual. She still has to look hot for you to want to be near her. You get a lot of very saintly depictions of these beautiful virginal, and they're always virginal, princesses, like Virginia Cherrill's blind flower girl in *City Lights*, who has no name by the way. She's just blind flower girl. Or you'll get a character maybe with a disfigurement, who is usually the villain. So I think of Dr. Poison in *Wonder Woman*. There's a character in Steven Spielberg's adaptation of *Ready Player One*, who shows up at a certain point, and she's like, “I have a horrific disfigurement on my face.” And I'm just like, “that is the *Phantom of the Opera* argument right here, girl. You are fine.”

AT: Is this the girl with the port wine stain, and it barely makes a difference in her appearance (in my opinion)?

KL: It barely makes a difference. Yeah, no, exactly. When you do see a woman that is maybe in a wheelchair, she has no life. There are exceptions. I think what Don Mancini does with his later Chucky films, with his heroine Nica Pierce, who is a wheelchair user, is really great. It does, I think, a lot of good, even though the actress is not a wheelchair user. But the majority of relationships you see in movies where it's a disabled female, there is no physical relationship. You'll get exceptions, but those relationships are usually hindered by other things. So, *The Other Side of the Mountain* from the 1970s. The character is paralyzed, and she's dating a guy played by Beau Bridges, and his character is essentially cruel to be kind, which is telling her, “I'm going to scream at you in the street about how you need to not feel bad for yourself, and you need to be an adult and stop being upset about being disabled.” She's sitting at the table, and she doesn't have anybody to help her cut her food, and she's looking at him plaintively like a dog, and he's just like, “you can do it yourself.” And he looks at her parents and is like, “we wouldn't want to spoil her, would we?” So when he dies in a plane crash, I'm just kind of like, “yeah, you know what, fair, we wouldn't want to spoil you with a working airplane, now would we?” But that happens a lot where it's the partner, if the character does have a partner, that's put in the paternal role of forcing the woman into independence. Wait Until Dark with Audrey Hepburn, she's very childlike and talks to her husband about how she's the world's champion blind lady at blind school. She drops something on the floor, and her husband's like, “you're gonna crawl on the ground until you can find it,. Just because you're blind, I'm not gonna pick it up for you.” So it's very weird, even when a woman is deigned to be disabled and in a

relationship in these movies, there's this weird disturbing element of control to it that I'm not really keen on. And that's if there's not outright, like, assault or harassment. *The Shape of Water,* I think, is a great example, specifically of emphasizing the fetishization of disabled women's helplessness. I think Guillermo del Toro does a really, really unsettling job of emphasizing that there are men out there that like the concept of a dependent woman that is disabled that they can harass. So it's not great out there for disabled women these days. It never has been, but it's not getting any better.

AT: I think this is sort of the intersection of two larger patterns that we see playing out. So in disability spaces, a lot of times you'll see paternalism, so the people given the most voice are often not the disabled folks, but the parents (KL: Yeah) or otherwise caregivers for disabled folks. And that can really shape things like policymaking. So I feel like we're seeing that on one side. But then on the other hand, there is so much anecdotal evidence that I've seen about men leaving their female partners when women get sick, when women do actually need care. And so what you're describing sounds very much like men who want women to be dependent, but don't actually want to have to provide the care that they need.

KL: There is actually a study that I include in the book that they did an actual study and asked people. And the stats were that a woman would stay in a marriage. If her male partner was disabled, she would stay. The divorce rate was actually lower than if a woman became disabled, and the partner would be more inclined to leave and divorce rates were actually higher. And that bears fruit with another study that says that disabled women are at a lower level of getting married, which I read that as a 20-something person and oh, I went through quite a crisis of like, “well, I'm already screwed from the jump. I might as well just, you know.” So movies do illustrate and I think exacerbate that and expand on it. In *The Other Side of the Mountain*, the character's a skier. She's disabled in a ski accident. She has a boyfriend and the boyfriend, and I laugh about it because the movie is so overwrought. It's from 1974, but she's sitting in the wheelchair and he comes in and she's got this bowl of potato chips and she's able to lift one just out of the bowl, not up to her face, but just lift it a little bit. And he's just like, “so and so, thought you were going to be walking.” And she's like, “nope.” And over voiceover, she's like, “I never heard from him again.” And I was like, “cool. That's really great.”
So oftentimes you see, I think a lot of this belief that a disabled woman is a bridge too far. It's not sexy. It's not appealing. It's not pretty. And that's what people want. And I think that usually when you see disabled women, I think of something like, and I didn't include it in the book and I thought about it after the fact, I'm like, “God, I should’ve.” I think of, you remember Dr. Freeze's wife and *Batman and Robin*? She's got some unknown illness and he puts her in this suspended animation in the hopes of finding a way to revive her and essentially cure her. And I'm like, that is what men want when it comes to disabled women. If the fear is that you're going to get sick, they want to just be able to suspend you in a pod where you still look hot forever. And they can just kind of put you out on display until they can find a way to fix it.
And the magic cure is something that is a huge thing in disability discourse. And I'm very interested to see how *Wicked* handles that in this new movie, because there is an element of the fact that Nessa Rose, which is Elphaba's sister in the movie, who is a wheelchair user. If you've seen the play, there's an element that makes her ambulatory at a certain point. And I'm interested to see how that plays in this new movie, considering it plays with the wish fulfillment that I think a lot of genderized portrayals of disability are, which is that women cannot be disabled. They can't, they have to be the caretaker for the disabled man. Like that's what's more important. Paternalism, I think is a huge part of that. What's interesting is, is when I talk about, I have a chapter in the book called Caretaker Cinema, because again caretakers are, I think ,the easiest able-bodied buffer to have a character that is going to be the caretaker. When you see female caretakers, the line between sex worker and caretaker is so blurry as to be non-existent. The Sessions actually, she is a sex worker that is a therapist offering sex therapy. *Me Before You*, Emilia Clarke's character is hired because she's pretty and the hope is that the Sam Claflin character will be so hot to trot for her that he won't want to off himself at the end of the movie. So it's really, really disturbing how often the implication is that there needs to be romance between

these two characters.
Whereas on the other side of it, you get this paternalistic, weird control element. I think of something like *Ice Castles*, which is another movie I had to include. It's barely a disability story, by the way. There's only like 40 minutes of actual disability when the girl is blinded in a rogue triple axel accident where she runs into a bunch of lawn furniture that's placed on an ice rink for some reason. But her boyfriend, the kind-hearted Robbie Benson, spends a lot of time just screaming at her as she's trying to get back on the ice. She's blind, mind you. He's telling her, “you should be able to do a triple axel. I don't care that you're blind. You're going to do it.” Turns into pretty much just like a Russian gymnast coach. He's just really on her. And at the end of the movie, when she does the triple and everybody's like, “wait, she's blind? We just watched a blind girl do this thing?” I was like, “are you going to ask for your money back? I'm not really clear on why you feel duped.” But it is her, and Robbie Benson comes out on the ice. I'm like, “you didn't do anything! No, why are you sitting here with flowers and a trophy? You did nothing, my dude. That's horrific that you're taking credit for her thing.”
At the same time, I think of something like, I love *Wild Hearts Can't Be Broken*. I was happy that I got to spotlight it. It's a Disney movie. One of the few Disney movies that I don't think does disability particularly terribly. But again, it's a pretty disability. The character is blinded in a carnival accident and she wants to get back into doing what she's been doing. And her partner is one of the few characters where I was shocked that he's not paternalistic. If anything, he's like, “no, you're not going to do this again, because you're blind and I don't want you to get further hurt.” They have a real, actual discussion of their fears and what goes on. And when she does finally make her return, you feel that neither one has really lost anything. They're an actual couple. And that's a rarity when it comes to female-led relationship in a disabled movie.

AT: Something that I always feel like we need to talk about when we're talking about disability is the social model versus medical model of disability, because I don't think a lot of people outside of disability conversations are aware of this. So the medical model, which I would say is still more prevalent, it's certainly what I grew up, with basically says that your condition is what disables you. It is a problem that needs to be fixed. And I think we see this with stories like *Little Mermaid* where, oh, the fact that you don't have legs, that is a problem that needs to be fixed. So we're going to fix it at the expense of your voice, which creates another disability, but it's okay. We don't need women to talk.
Anyway, the contrast to that is the social model, which says that what is disabling you is not so much your condition, but rather society's refusal to accommodate for different needs. So like my glasses, I do consider my vision medically disabling, but not socially disabling because I have ready access to glasses, wearing them as normalized. Whereas my neurodivergence, I don't consider medically disabling. I don't think it needs to be fixed, but it is something that I have literally been fired from jobs for, despite being good at those jobs. So that is socially disabling. And so beyond *The Little Mermaid* example, how would you say that we see the medical model versus the social model playing out in disability portrayals?

KL: Yeah, I think a lot of it is on the surface. There's still a belief that a disability is purely a medical issue. It's not an identifier. When I talk about diversity and inclusion initiatives in the entertainment industry, it's gender, race, sexual orientation, and that's it. They don't include disability. And I've had colleagues say, “well, that's because disability is not a marginalized community. It's a medical issue.” But I think that that's because movies tout the concept that disability is something to mourn, that it is a lack of something. It is the loss of something. And if you lack something, other side of that is that you can get it back. And the belief, I think, that movies espouse is that through medical intervention, through magic, through whatever you have, that you can get rid of that. It's like plastic surgery, right? You don't like the size of your boobs, you can get them bigger. Science is wonderful. And I think that's what movies espouse is that why would you want this? Why would you want to have this when you could just get rid of it, when you can find a way to get rid of it? And for me, I think of something like *Children of a Lesser God*, where Marlee Matlin won the Academy Award. And I had seen that movie several times, and I was really struck watching it for the book, where she asks Bill Hurt's character if he

wants deaf children. And he says, “no, why would I want deaf children?” And she says, “well, why can't I have children that are like me?” And I think that's something that we still have not recognized in film.
When Marlee Matlin does *Coda* a couple of decades later, which is a movie I love, it's still told from the hearing perspective. Yes, of a young girl who has lived in a predominantly deaf household. And we do get her brother who is deaf. So I think that it's interesting to see the idea that disability is, for most of these characters, something that society is imposing on them is something to be wrong with. In *Children of a Lesser God,* Marlee Matlin's character, Sarah says “why do I have to get along in the world? Why can't the world get along with me? Why do hearing people not know sign language? Why do I have to learn how to speak?” And I think that's something that we've still never really reconciled with, why is it always us that has to make the first move? Why can't it be you? That's a huge thing. I think going back to 1932's *Freaks*, Tod Browning's film, that's a movie that's pretty much saying the real villains are the able bodied that find these characters to be something to fear, to eradicate, to be thrown aside. It's not the disabled community that welcomes everybody and yes, at the end of the movie, do they go after the villain? Well, she has it coming, to them. You watch a lot of war films. I have a section about war movies. And I think war films have really cemented this concept of medicalizing disability as strictly a medical issue. And you're seeing a lot of people in army hospitals where they're in communities of disabled people. And they're learning about the discourse of being disabled. And then they go out into the world and the movies don't really blame the world for the issue. It's their mindset. So I think there's still a lot of harm that comes from a lot of the concept of like selling disability as something that is purely a medical issue. We don't reconcile with how much society plays into it. When the ADA passes in the early ‘90s, movies were very quick to just be like, well, no one's going to ask about disability issues anymore. We've solved all of them. So you see a lot more ramps and period pit films that would not have had ramps. So I don't think we've reconciled with those two dichotomies yet at all.

AT: I mean, we know that people with privilege will always have a fear of the other, meaning anyone without those privileges, going back to the CHAWM. But I think disability is much scarier for abled people because on some level, everyone knows that you are one bad accident away from being disabled. You are the passage of time away from being disabled, if you don't die first. And I think that must be terrifying for people who are uncomfortable with disability because you could just wake up one day and be part of that other. And so I think that part of this medical focus is the idea that it **can** be fixed, which particularly in the U.S., given the extremely broken health care system, I would say is particularly ironic because even if there are treatments or even potentially cures, most people probably aren't going to have access to them.

KL: Yeah, it's interesting to think of, the most famous disabled actor we've ever had is Christopher Reeve, who's been gone at least 20 years. And most people will still cite him as probably the go-to disabled actor. And what people tend to forget is that Reeve struggled a lot with being disabled. He talks in his autobiography about wanting to commit suicide. He's very open. If anybody's seen the documentary *Super/Man*, he talks very openly about how he had no idea about disability. None. He had no interest in it. It was never something that he had really focused on. And then when he became disabled, I'd like to believe that a generation of movies hadn't kind of shown him what he thought his life was going to look like. But it certainly played a role. For him, he became a very staunch advocate to finding a cure for spinal cord diseases. And that put him at a remove from the disabled community at the time who felt that he was only interested in using his money and his will to fix his own issues. And it was really his wife, Dana, who made a big part of the Christopher and Dana Reeve Foundation about helping people who are disabled, who weren't interested in the cure, find jobs and have resources and all of that. But till the day he passed, he was very much convinced that he was going to be better, that he was going to find a medical intervention. He was very much into stem cell treatment in the early days. And I think that that's something that hasn't really gone away.
When you watch movies about people who are disabled later in life, it's usually in grand fashion. *Me Before You*, the character’s on a cell phone doesn't look both ways before he crosses the street, gets hit by a car. I

think in The Upside, it's a hang-gliding accident. I joke that it's something only rich white men would get involved in. It's not something that is presented as normal. Even Stephen Hawking in *The Theory of Everything*, that's a disease that not everybody gets. So there is this stigma of movies only showing disability where it's a freak accident, where it's something that, “look both ways before you cross the street, you'll be fine. Don't use your cell phone while you're driving, you'll be fine.” We don't sell the narrative that it can happen to anybody. And when we sell that narrative, I say in the book that the history of disability in film is littered with the dead bodies of disabled characters, because death usually accompanies this. Suicide is very heavily presented in disabled films. And that's because of this belief that they cannot live without being able bodied. So you look at something like *Me Before You*, which reminds you, it's a love story. And it culminates with the rich character going to what I lovingly call the Swedish death chalet, to off himself. I think of something like the Andrew Garfield movie *Breathe* also ends with an implied suicide. Even something like *The Elephant Man*. It's a little ambiguous. Is it a suicide? Is it not? And of course, *Million Dollar Baby* is the big one, which I find it ironic that Clint Eastwood is in his 90s now and presumably still very healthy. And yet he gives us probably one of the most grotesque depictions of a disabled suicide that I'd seen in a minute. So I understand why there's this inherent terror of being disabled, because movies are not selling it as anything worth having. They're not selling it as we have a life worth living, unless we are quirky, like Forrest Gump, or we have some sort of rare talent like Christy Brown in *My Left Foot*, which I think *My Left Foot* actually is probably one of the more nuanced disabled films, but I think for most people, they don't watch it and they are like, “well, he's a painter, he can paint with his foot. So I think that movies are not doing their part to make us accepting of it.

AT: Now, coming back to the issue of abled actors, or at least actors without the disability of the character that they're playing, I'm torn on this because on the one hand, you have people winning Oscars for these performances while also depriving disabled actors of those opportunities. And we continue to see this today. But then on the flip side, you also have really commercially popular blockbusters, like superhero movies, where, thank goodness that 2024’s *Madame Web* was a total flop. But I remember my immediate response. I'm not even a comic book nerd, but I'm like, “wait, they cast an ambulatory, sighted actress who is also young as a canonically blind, wheelchair-using and old woman?” However you feel about Dakota Johnson, that's not cool, but also Professor X and Matt Murdoch, who are respectively a wheelchair user and blind, also continue to this day to be played by abled actors in these major movies. And so compare that with like *Glee*'s Kevin McHale, who played Artie, saying he wouldn't play a character in a wheelchair if given a chance today. And yet plenty of actors with much bigger names, much more star power, not saying that actually, no, that's a line we shouldn't be crossing. And so I feel like it's an evolution of people just deciding what is and is not acceptable. So in other conversations, I've talked about how we're not doing yellowface anymore, we're just going to whitewash Asian characters. And so I feel like disability is one of those areas where, for whatever reason, it's still considered socially acceptable that you don't have to be a member of this group to play a member of this group.

KL: So I come at it from a weird position. I think because of being a journalist in the entertainment world, I see both sides. I see why movies can be greenlit with stars and there are no disabled stars. And I used to be understanding of that. But I think that now there's far more that studios can do to mitigate that. If Steven Spielberg wants a disabled person in his film, he has the ability to make that happen. He chooses not to. And I think that there are certainly elements where we need to say, we need abled allies. Sebastian Stan, I think taking his Golden Globes speech to advocate for disabled actors and those with facial disfigurements to be in movies, that's great. What is Sebastian Stan going to do about it? Because he has power to do that. Is he putting that in an inclusion rider, which we now know inclusion riders, as much as Frances McDormand championed them, nobody would actually use them. So there's that element. And I always say too, I think Peanut Butter Falcon was a good example of how you can do this. Casting a disabled lead and then filling the frame with A-listers. You can do that. You can have Shia LeBeouf, I hate to say that he was an A-lister at the time, and bringing Dakota Johnson back into this alongside Zack Gottsagen, who was not a professional

performer. And that movie made some money. So there are ways that we can mitigate that. At the same time, my thing is, is I feel like we're still hung up. We're not seeing the forest for the trees. Casting is easy. It's so easy that you would think that studios would just fill the frame with disabled people so we'd shut up about it. It's very easy to do. And I understand that if we can't do that, then we can't ask for anything more. But at this point, the march of time is happening. And I don't care about casting at this point.

You know what I want to see? I want to see disabled directors. I want to see disabled screenwriters. I want disabled cinematographers below the line, craft services. That's what I want. And so my thing again, putting it on abled people in power is to say, okay, you have this movie where you have an able bodied person playing a disabled character. Fine. Who are the five people with disabilities that you're putting into other jobs to cover for that? Because if you do that, then I won't give you shit about it. That's my thing. And I think that right now, my big issue is allyship. My thing is, it's great that you want to cast one disabled person, Greta Gerwig, dancing in front of *Barbie* for five scenes. Mind you, there is a disabled Barbie. She has a name, but this rando character you have in *Barbie* has no name and serves no purpose. I think right now my issue with casting is that it feels very much like performative inclusion. Put a disabled person somewhere in the frame and then you can't say that we didn't include people, but that doesn't do anything. If you don't give them character, you don't give them a personality and they're there just to say you did it. So that's why I say casting is simple. I don't care about casting because what we're seeing now is not doing anything either.

So when I look at the majority of performances in my book, which are able-bodied people playing disabled characters, I'm really focusing on what the story is. Is the story compounding those issues alongside the casting of an able-bodied person? I think something like *Children of a Lesser God* or *Best Years of Our Lives*, Marlee Matlin's great. Harold Russell won two Oscars for playing Homer Parrish in that film and was a character with limb differences. And yet Harold Russell, when that movie was over, they had exploited him and sold him as this disabled vet that had won two Oscars. When he asked, “well, what's my next role? What can I do?” The director told him “you should go to trade school because there's no need for you anymore. There's no need for disabled performers at this point.” And it took him until the 1980s to get another role. So I think that people tend to get very hung up on the casting when I'm looking at the content alongside it as well.

I think what frustrates me is when I see able-bodied actors playing disabled and then the story also is just really repugnant. When *Shazam!* came out and the character Freddy Freeman, who uses a crutch, and yet when the magic cure hits him, he's a character that's transformed into his full potential, which is able-bodied. I'm like yes, the character being not disabled is a problem. But I think what offends me more and what makes me worried about the next generation is this concept that you're not a fully potential person if you aren't abled. So I think that there's a lot that can be done about putting more disabled people in all facets of entertainment. It's just, unfortunately, at this point, it's on abled people, I think, to make that happen. And until they kind of give a crap about it, I think that it's great, we still have we have so many great disabled filmmakers that are doing their part. And I love that someone like Ashley Eakin is doing some great work with like the Star Wars universe and all that. But it shouldn't just be on us at this point, like it needs to be on people with actual power.

I think that we're kind of stuck in this quagmire. I talk to a lot of disabled people who are in various facets of the industry, whether that's acting, whether that's producing. There's still a lot of anger, I think, at the fact that progress hasn't happened, and they all want to be part of the charge. I feel like there's still a lot of infighting about like, who gets to be that person? Who gets to be that person that gets to move the needle forward? And I'm just like, we can't be caring about that at this point. I think that seeing something like Aaron Schimberg's *A Different Man* which is one of my favorite disabled films that came out last year. I know a lot of disabled people that didn't see it, because they believe that Sebastian Stan was playing a disabled character. And that's not what the movie's point is. The movie is making a very, very sharp exploration of ableism and the fact it's kind of poking fun at itself about like, what are the boundaries in playing disabled? And what do abled people think that the disabled are getting? So I do worry that even the disabled community is not looking at the forest for the trees. That doesn't answer the question of where we are now, but I think it's where we need to start moving forward.