

# Visualising ‘Unacceptable’ Lives? The Moving Story of *Hikari to tomo ni* [With the Light: Raising an Autistic Child] (2001–2010)

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In this article we will interrogate the notion of ‘the unacceptable’ by tracing the movement of a particular text, a series of manga novels by Keiko Tobe entitled *Hikari to tomo ni* [With the Light: Raising an Autistic Child] (2001–2010), from serialisation in a Japanese women’s magazine, to publication in Japanese as a series of manga novels, to publication in English in book form. In following this text—a narrative of parenting a child with autism from birth to adolescence—through its various contexts of production and reception, we want to raise some doubts about a shibboleth of a particular kind of media and cultural studies: that the unacceptability of a text in mainstream popular or political contexts makes it particularly interesting from a scholarly point of view.

Over twenty years ago, Meaghan Morris (1990) talked of the banality of populism in cultural studies with its endlessly repeated gesture of excavating resistant readings and sub-cultural resignifications of mainstream popular culture. The hey-day of such cultural populism may be over, although the ‘cyberbole’ to be found in some accounts of online creative practices suggests otherwise. However, the claim that the object of one’s analysis is more broadly perceived to be unacceptable—from *avant-garde* film to

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anti-consumerist reclaimings of commodified spaces—both precedes and outlives the particular variant of cultural populism.

Choosing apparently unacceptable—radical, extreme, or limit-testing—case studies or describing the cultural practices or texts one chooses to discuss in this way has great allure for writers in cultural studies. If, as Stuart Hall has argued 'There is something at stake in cultural studies, in a way that is not exactly true of many other ... intellectual ... practices' (cited in Milner 1999: 170), an academic reconsideration of the unacceptable offers a social function for the dissemination of academic work: to raise awareness of or normalise practices considered to be liminal. The academic author becomes activist through reinterpreting and raising the profile of marginal, counter-hegemonic or radical practices or texts. There is a comparison to be made here to Foucault's (1990) argument about the 'repressive hypothesis' in popular accounts of sexuality. The claim to be defying prohibition warrants an explosion of discourse around the apparently taboo topic. The inclination in many humanities disciplines to skirt around explicit discussions of research methodologies, including the rationale for selecting a particular case study, creates a space in which claims of unacceptability, and thus the necessity of interrogation and interpretation, can flourish.

This article will not entirely escape the attraction of unacceptability. However, as we trace the movement of *Hikari to tomo ni* across modes of publication, reading contexts and continents, we want to be alert to the way certain forms of unacceptability make this text notable and publishable, as well as potentially threatening. The enabling possibilities of unacceptability are evident both in the publishing industry and in academia. We therefore situate the academic reception of fictional texts as yet another context of production and reception, as another stage of publication and circulation. The circulation of *Hikari to tomo ni* through a range of publics, we argue, has been motivated by *both* its acceptability and its unacceptability. While we are interested here in unpacking the history and potential meanings of *Hikari to tomo ni* as a text—particularly as a text representing people with autism—we are equally interested in the meanings of the circulation of this text, what the movement of this text tells us not just about representations of disability within Japan, but of representations of Japan in publishing and academic circles outside its borders.

### Visualising 'others' in manga

Manga, a form of visual storytelling originating in Japan, is capable of dealing with many subjects, offering diverse imaginary sites for a wide range of readers and viewers of different ages, sexes, interests, and backgrounds. In 1996, its popularity hit its highest point, with manga accounting for 40 percent of all books and magazines sold in Japan (Schodt 1996). This was followed by global appeal (Bryce, Barber & Plumb 2012). In recent decades, the sales of manga have declined significantly due to the increased popularity of other entertainment media, such as mobile phones and games. However, the most successful manga magazine *Shūkan Shōnen Jump* [Weekly Boy's Jump], reached 6,000,000 copies between 1991 and 1995, and maintained sales of more than 2,800,000 in 2012 alone (Japanese Magazine Publishers Association 2013).

By integrating stylised graphics, utterances and flexible framing, manga is effective in constructing multiple layers of voices and perspectives, hence the spatial, temporal, socio-cultural and psychological dimensions within the narratives. With its origins in the nineteenth century as a story-based hybrid of various Japanese traditional arts and Western popular cartoons, manga have foregrounded stories of Otherness and discrimination against the visibly different. The form was pioneered by Osamu Tezuka (1928–1989), a gifted story-teller and the most influential manga artists (Ishigami 1989; Sakurai 1990; Takeuchi 1992; Schodt 1996; MacWilliams 2000; Ōno 2000).

From his earliest writing, Tezuka showed a strong interest in Otherness as represented by his hybrid protagonists, such as the well known Astro Boy (a robot with a human heart) (Tezuka 1952–1968), Sapphires (a princess-knight with both a boy's and a girl's hearts) (Tezuka 1953–1956) and Leo (a white lion that can speak human languages) (Tezuka 1950–1954). In a collectivistic Japanese society, being 'different' is often framed negatively to mean 'unacceptable.' These manga characters are shown suffering internal and external conflicts, while storylines reveal social intolerance of difference and explore the many socio-cultural and interpersonal issues individuals have to face under strong social pressure to conform. This cruelty towards 'others' is depicted in Tezuka's *Ode to Kirihito* (1966–1967), which dramatises how quickly and severely the social position of the protagonist, a respected doctor, has been degraded by the transformation of his body by disease to a wolf-like appearance, exposing him to harsh discrimination and abuse as a half-beast. Such narratives represent marginalized groups

that are visually distinguished from a collectivist society that requires of its members conformity and appropriate role-playing. Manga's hybrid characters, then, offer a means to explore a sense of alienation and exploration of the self for many Japanese readers. Despite this history of Japanese popular culture foregrounding non-normative bodies and accompanying experiences of marginalization and discrimination, more literal representations of people with disabilities in Japan have, until recently, only featured secondary or dependent characters and their experiences have rarely been articulated.

This absence can be traced, in part, to the public unacceptability and invisibility of disability in Japan. Scarcity of public welfare services is predicated on a powerful familial ideology that sees support for people with disabilities, alongside care for the young and elderly, as the responsibility of the family (Osada *et al.* 2012; Kamio, Inada & Koyama 2013). Until 1979, children with disabilities were often exempted or excluded from the education system due to a lack of support, resulting in a number of people with disabilities having no formal education (Yamamoto 1998). The establishment of residential institutions for disabled people in the 1960s served not only to violate the rights of disabled people, but also to again occlude awareness of experiences of disablement from the non-disabled public (Hayashi & Okuhira 2001). Katsumata (2008) also points out that Japan's comparatively limited recognition of people with disabilities and distinctively low governmental spending on services for them.

A number of writers have pointed to the social stigma attached to disability, not only for the person with a disability but also for their family. Miho Iwakuma (2005: 136) writes, for instance, 'for a family with a disabled child, sometimes parents withdraw and alienate themselves from others due to a strong sense of shame that they brought the disabled child into the world.' The importance of collective values and empathy in Japan amplifies the hostility to people with autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) who may be regarded as 'selfish,' 'destructive' and thus 'unacceptable' (Hayashi, Karasawa & Tobin: 2009). This has been particularly so when the person with a disability seems to be physically 'normal' yet fails to conduct their socially required roles (Ku & Bryce 2011).

While the disability movement has been active in Japan since the 1970s, as typified by the development of the Independent Living movement (Iwakuma 2005; Hayashi &

Okuhira 2001), some unexpected outcomes of this activism have arguably presented further barriers—via media self-censorship—to the representation of the lives of people with disabilities. Indeed, pornographic manga have been harshly and publicly criticized in public in Japan (Nagaoka 2010), yet self-censorship within manga has remained largely invisible.

A key driver in overcoming the reluctance of magazines to publish such stories is generally the artist's own enthusiasm and social awareness, as exemplified by the testimony of a prominent manga artist, Osamu Yamamoto, about his publication of *Harukanaru Kōshien* [Far Away Kōshien] (1988–1990). This manga was based on Yoshinari Tobe's non-fiction of a high school for Deaf students in Okinawa and its students' attempt to participate in the most prestigious high school baseball tournament in the Kōshien stadium despite the Japan High School Baseball Federation's refusal to let them participate. Since then, Yamamoto has learned sign language and became involved first with the Deaf community, then with children with multiple handicaps. He has continued to publish various manga narratives on disability, including *Waga yubi no Orchestra* [My Fingers' Orchestra] (1991–1992), and *Donguri no ie* [House of Acorns] (1993–1997). The latter depicts the attempts of parents, teachers and Deaf children with multiple handicaps to establish a small community workshop, *Donguri no ie*, allowing adults with cognitive disabilities to be able to work and participate in society.

The appearance of manga narratives focussing on people with disabilities coincided with an increasing number of new manga magazines for women in the 1980s and also a proliferation of informative manga on diverse topics, particularly targeted at adults. These manga narratives often play an important role as life-long educational resources (Murakami & Bryce 2009). Notably, the 1990s saw the emergence of manga featuring disabled people as central characters in magazines for women. The emergence of these stories parallels the proliferation of similar narratives—dramas focussing on the everyday lives and loves of women with disabilities—on Japanese television (Stibbe 2004). Examples of such manga include Karube Junko's *Kimi no te ga sasayaiteiru* [Your Hands are Whispering] (1992–1997), which has a Deaf female protagonist, and Hama Nobuko's *Happy!* (1995–2010), which features a blind woman and her guide dog, Happy. By comparison to Yamamoto's manga, these stories were light-hearted human dramas depicting young female protagonists and the people around them. In these

manga that emphasise the relationships between disabled and non-disabled people, the protagonists' otherness functions as a catalyst for a more inclusive society.

### **The publication and reception of *Hikari to tomo ni* in Japan**

The context of publication of Tobe's *Hikari to tomo ni* [With the Light: Raising an Autistic Child] (2001–2010) illustrates the playing out of some of the processes described above. The manga eventually achieved significant success: it was serialised in a magazine, *For Mrs*, by Akita Shoten continually between 2001 and 2010, and it was republished in comic books, with part of the narrative made into a TV drama in 2004.

When Tobe proposed to write a manga story on autism, that condition was still largely unknown to the Japanese public, and her intention was thus to educate people through her story. The production of *Hikari to tomo ni* involved detailed research on autism in order to provide an accurate depiction of the wide-ranging hardships faced by Hikaru (the child with severe autistic spectrum disorder) and his parents. Ian Hacking (2009) in his overview of narratives of autism, for example, considers *Hikari to tomo ni* to be one of the few fictional accounts that moves beyond stereotypical accounts of autistic people as inevitably having savant-like abilities. The series incorporates information about ASD and describes public misunderstandings of the disorder. For instance, when Hikaru screams during the family Buddhist ceremony, the chaotic scene is depicted from Hikaru's point of view, with confused people as the backdrop. This is followed by a scene in which his mother, the protagonist, is accused by her mother-in-law of having failed in her childrearing. Depicting realistic issues and focusing on Hikaru's mother's sense of helplessness thereby guides the readers to see the issues empathetically from the point of view of the autistic person and family members rather than as mere bystanders.

The success of the story, however, was unexpected and the initial stage of the publication was not smooth. Publishers' reluctance to circulate disability narratives is often bound up in financial concerns. Although manga is a creative artefact, it is a cheap entertainment commodity, focussed on sales. Traditionally a serialised manga story appears in magazines, and each magazine contains 10 to 20 stories, many of which are sequential. Only a manga that successfully maintains its popularity can continue and later be compiled and republished as a comic or *tankōbon*. The price of magazines and comics is kept low enough to be affordable even to children spending their pocket

money. Consequently magazines need to publish in large volumes to secure a profit. The popularity of each story is measured by the readers' ratings, meaning that publishers, editors and artists have to respond directly and immediately to readers' interests and criticisms.

The anxieties and reluctance of publishers to produce narratives about people with disabilities emerge in part from concerns about the potential loss of sales accompanying the presentation of content that is interpreted as being 'serious,' sober and, arguably, less entertaining. As many critical disability studies scholars have pointed out, disability is frequently framed as a tragedy (Hevey 1992; Avery 1999; Couser 2009), while people with disability may be presented as objects of pity, fear or horror (Hevey 1992; Meekosha & Jakubowicz 1996; Longmore 1997). Some manga focussing on the lives of disabled people, such as *Harukana Kōshien*, have been described as 'touching human drama[s]' (Yonezawa 2002) and 'tear-jerkers' (Yonezawa 2004). Thus fiction focussing on characters with disabilities, especially stories that include realistic details rather than featuring supernatural or otherworldly storylines, may be viewed by some audiences as depressing or dull, albeit politically worthy (Matthews 2010). Indeed, one English-language blogger reviewed *With the Light* in this way: 'kind of like carrots. I know it's good for me and healthy and probably a better alternative than more junky fare, but I just can't like it as much as I ought' (Smith 2008).

To be published, *Hikari to tomo ni* thus needed to overcome two significant hurdles: an implicit taboo regarding the representations of disabled people; and editor concerns over readers' ratings. Tobe's enthusiastic interest in raising public awareness of autism persuaded the chief editor of *For Mrs* to carry the story. The story came from an encounter with a mother of an autistic son in her son's day-care centre and Tobe's realisation of her own lack of knowledge about autism. Tobe's aim was 'to establish a society where everyone can understand autism without explanation, only by saying a word *jiheishō* [autism],'<sup>1</sup> shaking off preconceptions about autism as a mental illness or as caused by 'refrigerator mothers.'<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Personal communication between K. Ishii, Y. Honda and H. Takahashi to Y. Takeyama [in person]. Tokyo, 22 November 2011.

<sup>2</sup> In the 1940s and 1950s in the USA, mothers of autistic children were blamed for their children's condition, following the widely circulated writing of Bruno Bettelheim that attributed the onset of autism to a cold mothering style (Kriske 2004).

At the time *Hikari to tomo ni* was first published in Japan, publishers were also concerned about the risk of attracting criticism from disability activists, once again threatening the prospect of sales. Writing later, Yamamoto suggested that in the late 1980s it had been a taboo to write stories about disabled or other marginalised groups in the manga industry (1998: 40). He claims that one of the reasons for publisher's reluctance was criticism of the depictions of disabled and minority people in the media, which began to be articulated in the 1970s. Discriminatory language [*sabetsu yogo*] used to refer to people with disabilities was a particular focus of concern to activists (Hotta 2008; Koyabashi 2011). Culturally significant concerns with shame and the loss of face were mobilised in successful campaigns by Japanese organisations of disabled people to change the ways in which people with disabilities were discussed in the media. Gottlieb documents highly visible protests by some Japanese social commentators, such as Takeshi Yōrō, at such sensitivities about language. Yōrō argued that 'Thanks to efforts to root out "discriminatory language" it has become almost impossible to talk about such things' (cited in Gottlieb 2001: 986). Ironically, these heightened sensitivities to discriminatory language may have reinforced a reluctance to publish manga based around the lives of people with disability.

Gottlieb (2001: 991) cites Schodt's claim that from the 1980s: 'such was the manga world's fear of criticism for using discriminatory language by then that even writing about *shogaisha mondai* [the problem of the disabled] was viewed as taboo.' While a particular focus on offensive terminology may have been specific to Japanese media organisations, there is some evidence to suggest that authors, illustrators and publishers elsewhere shared concerns about the potential of inappropriate representations to offend, and that concern was one factor shaping the reluctance of publishers to develop stories that centred on people with disabilities. In the words of British children's author Jane Ray, 'we are paralysed by the fear of causing offense, of somehow making it worse' (cited in Matthews & Clow 2007). A second order of anxieties—of being seen as too sensitive to censorious activism—emerges in comments by British publishers relayed in a report by Bookmark (2006) cited fears of being seen as excessively 'politically correct' or simply 'ticking the right boxes.'

Such anxieties about language were present in the publication history of *Hikari to tomo ni*. According to an editor from Akita Shoten, the publisher of *Hikari to tomo ni*, those

working on the magazine were required to conduct a detailed proofreading to replace discriminatory terms to comply with guidelines in the magazine's proofreading section under the supervision of the chief editor<sup>3</sup>. This was an ironic and frustrating process given the story's clearly expressed position against discrimination. Words deemed offensive in this text were often being used to depict incidents of discrimination or bullying. For instance, Japanese manga generally uses the phrase *me no mienai hito* [a person who cannot see] to refer to a blind people, instead of a more specific yet discriminatory word, *mekura* [the blind], even though in some situations the original term would be more suitable. Likewise, *Hikari to tomo ni* uses the formal and clinical term, *chiteki shōgai* [intellectual disability] to depict the condition of Hikari, an autistic boy, instead of *chie-okure* [wisdom backwardness], which might more accurately represent everyday ways of speaking. As Nanette Gottlieb (2001: 984) notes in her discussion of the development by media organisations in the 1970s and 1980s of in-house guidelines—*kinkushū*—to identify potentially offensive terminology around disability: 'it would be difficult to argue that any underlying concern for socially inclusive language led to the development of these handbooks.' The irony that critiques emerging from disability activism might be mobilised by conservative publishers to rationalise their inclusion of a limited array of storylines and characters point to the double-edged sword of the notion of 'the unacceptable.'

According to editors of *For Mrs*, the initial plan was only to run three episodes of *Hikari to tomo ni* over three months (personal communication with Honda, Ishii & Takahashi 2011). This sequence clearly demonstrates how conservative and cautious manga editors during this period were in representing people with disabilities. Contrary to the expectation of the *For Mrs* editors, however, the first episode of *Hikari to tomo ni* was highly rated in the readers' survey, allowing Tobe to continue the manga, although for only another three episodes. Finally, a groundswell of reader support expressed in the readers' ratings and comments forced *For Mrs* to continue to run an on-going series. The story was rated number one in the readers' survey from 1999 through to the author's death in 2010 (Honda, Ishii & Takahashi 2011). The manga thus achieved both the publisher's aim, profit, and Tobe's personal mission to raise social awareness of autism. Moreover, the unexpected success of this manga led to a shift in the policy and

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<sup>3</sup> Personal communication between Yuki Takeyama [in person] and K. Ishii, Chief Editor of *For Mrs*, about changes of direction in *For Mrs*. Tokyo, 8 April 2013.

direction of *For Mrs*, shifting it towards a more confident exploration of social issues.

The chief editor of the magazine, Kentarō Ishii (2013b) noted:

Compared to other magazines which target the same readers as *For Mrs*, *For Mrs* deals with more social issues. I think that *For Mrs* needs to continue to play our role as a magazine which runs *Hikari to tomo ni*. Also, after *Hikari to tomo ni* ended as a result of Tobe passing away, readers want to read another episode about autism. So, we ran a story (Mei Kawasaki's *Hikari kagayaku ashita e: Hikari to tomo ni ga nokoshita mono* [Towards a shiny tomorrow: the things left by Hikari to tomo ni]) about the work of autistic people in *For Mrs* in January 2011 whose subtitle was "Legacy of 'With the Light.'" I think that it is our mission to do.<sup>4</sup>

*For Mrs* targeted a broad range of adult women, primarily married housewives and mothers from their 20s to their 60s, and had no special brief to address the theme of disability; it thus had potential to play an important role in expanding the social awareness of autism. While readers may not have been looking for or been initially interested in autism, they nonetheless enjoyed the story as a human drama with a message. With the acceptance of the readers, the popularity of the story spread widely throughout Japanese society.

Following the success of the manga in the magazine, the story was compiled and published, with some difficulties, in the form of a 15-volume comic book [*tankōbon*]. Even with strong reader support and the initial success of the manga in *For Mrs*, Akita Shoten, which owns *For Mrs* hesitated to publish this manga in the form of comic books, commenting 'Who's going to buy this?' (personal communication Honda, Ishii & Takahashi 2011). Therefore, the initial print-run of the first book of the series was limited to 13,000, the minimum print run in the manga business, although it turned out to be a big hit with a total sale of over 2,500,000 copies. After the release of the TV drama in 2004, sales increased and the profit from comic books also encouraged editors and the publisher to continue *Hikari to tomo ni* until the death of the author in 2010.

### Visualising autistic lives in *Hikari to tomo ni*

If *Hikari to tomo ni* presented themes to some extent unacceptable to Japanese manga publishers, it adopted representational strategies that manage the threats of these themes through the multimodal affordances of manga. The ability of comics to represent through non-textual means gives them the capacity to communicate a wide range of sensory and conceptual experiences. It has been argued that manga can encourage

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<sup>4</sup> Personal communication between Y. Takeyama [in person] and K. Ishii, Chief Editor of *For Mrs*, about changes of direction in *For Mrs*. Tokyo, 13 April 2013.

readers to engage with 'the invisible worlds of senses and emotions' (McCloud cited in Foss 2011: 136). Visual texts are effective apparatuses to engage readers' emotions and manga is highly visual text: what Schodt (1996: 26) calls visualised novels in contrast to the illustrated narratives of western comics. Manga's ability to depict interpersonal and emotional interactions through natural utterances and situations means that it can represent issues at different levels and intensities, from the governmental, sociocultural, economical and psychological to (inter)personal levels. As Sarah Birge (2010, n. p.) argues 'comics' ability to represent complex interactions of emotions, thoughts, movements, and social relationships creates a promising opportunity for remedying the inadequacy of many contemporary representations of cognitive disability.' The explicitly educational intentions of Tobe in her creation of this manga story are evident in the way that the characters, relationships and incidents in the story are framed.

In *Hikari to tomo ni*, the autistic child, Hikaru, is largely depicted objectively, rather than via an interior monologue or from the point of view of other characters. Representing Hikaru through encounters and communication with other people including family and friends, this manga allows readers to familiarise themselves with situations in which they may meet autistic people and to know how to interact with them during these encounters. As Squier (2008: 86) suggests through analysis of other manga depicting disabled people, manga can function effectively to convey the experience of impairment and disability, pointing out that 'these works of graphic fiction and narrative demonstrate the power comics have to move us beyond the damaging discourse of developmental normalcy into a genuine encounter with the experience of disability.' Birge (2010) celebrates the possibilities of Mark Osteen's (2007) call for 'empathetic' encounters between readers and people with disabilities via the non-textual features of comics. *Hikari to tomo ni* does, at times, seek to develop empathy between reader and Hikaru and other autistic characters by drawing on these non-textual features. However, its key strategy is to invite readers to emotionally align with characters who initially react negatively towards Hikari but gradually build a good relationship with him.

Empathy is always an important element of stories in Japan and is utilised to engage their readers and audiences. Yonezawa (2004) argues manga engages emotionally, allowing readers to explore the issues through their affective experiences, rather than

providing logical and clear answers. This is how *Hikari to tomo ni* successfully reached out to its readers, dealing with autism, unknown to many readers, through everyday events and familiar experiences. For example, the first three serials of this manga largely focus on Hikaru's parents and their relationships and respective responses to Hikaru's problems. It is safe to say that the success of this manga largely lies in the selection of the main protagonist, Sachiko, as an ordinary Japanese house wife and mother, like the readers of *For Mrs* themselves, nice yet nothing remarkable. The story successfully solicits the readers' empathetic alignment with Sachiko. Shedding tears alongside Sachiko allows for the broaching and critiquing of potential misunderstandings of autism—for example, the argument that poor mothering leads to autism. The editor of this manga testified the careful attention with which Tobe sought to engage the readers empathetically with the storyline and characters' feelings (personal communication with Honda, Ishii & Takahashi 2011). Her aim was not to emphasise tragedy, burden and obligation but to allow readers to gradually develop an insight into autism by depicting ordinary people's perceptions and emotions, in a relaxed mood. Moreover, rather than euphemistically avoiding potentially offensive perspectives on autism *Hikari to tomo ni* allows characters like a withdrawn father, a disapproving teacher, a judgemental mother-in-law, or disapproving parents in the playground to articulate these assumptions and feelings, depicting their slow yet steady changes in perspective. By doing so, the social position of an autistic person and their family is also delineated.

The drawings in manga can depict dramatic changes within characters and their feelings without the need for words, but through facial expressions and subtle gestures. This is exemplified by Hikaru's father, who has no interest in his son's disability at the beginning. After his breakdown from overwork, he begins to change his attitude toward Hikaru, accepting his son's disability. His transition is depicted through changes in his eyes. His eyes are represented with glasses before his transformation, however, afterwards gentle eyes are added behind his glasses. Similar changes are seen in Hikaru's teacher, Ms Gunji, who initially has a false impression about autism and deals with Hikaru inappropriately, refusing to hear Sachiko's requests. Her gradual change appears after one scene in which Hikaru massages her shoulders as she sits down on her chair wearily. Hikaru's wordless massage melts Ms Gunji's frozen heart.

The relationship between parents and their disabled children has been highly politicised within the disability movement. In disabling social and economic environments, parents' lives may be heavily impacted by needs for support and life-long care for adult children with disabilities (Stibbe 2004; Iwakuma 2005), and recent surveys in Japan suggest that an overwhelming majority of adults with ASD currently live with their birth family (Kamio, Inada & Koyama 2013). As Ryan and Runswick-Cole (2008) emphasise, while parents' life choices, including their participation in the labour market and their social worlds, may be constrained by their support of their children with disabilities such that the family as a whole may be described as 'disabled,' the interests of parents have often been seen as at odds with their offspring. Overprotective or ashamed parents have been seen as a constraint on the independence and autonomy of their children due to the scarcity of the social support (Nagai 1998). Parents' organisations, for example, played a key role in the development of heavily criticised residential institutions from Japan in the 1960s (Hayashi & Okuhira 2001; Stibbe 2004).

Consequently, Tobe's choice to narrate *Hikari to tomo ni* largely from the perspective of Sachiko is not an unproblematic one. Visual effects are used throughout the story to represent the sensory experience of Hikaru—for instance, small stars surrounding an object that draws his attention and interest. However, the emotional interactions between Hikaru and his family, teachers and acquaintances are generally captured through others' viewpoints and interpretations. In choosing to focus its storyline through the experiences of Hikaru's mother and her relationships, particularly those with her son, husband and mother, Tobe does not, perhaps, fully explore the affordances of manga as described by Susan Squier. She argues that comics enable articulation of people with disabilities 'because they include its pre-verbal components: the gestural, embodied physicality of disabled alterity in its precise and valuable specificity' (cited in Birge 2010: 86). However, the emphasis on the perspective of Sachiko serves to firmly locate the manga as an educational text, seeking, in the first instance, to address an audience of women akin to its pivotal character in age and marital status.

Tobe's approach to autism can be seen as an attempt to make this unacceptable theme—autism—acceptable to general readers. Importantly, Tobe's narrative does this with little recourse to the strategies used in earlier Japanese television dramas to manage non-disabled audiences' anxieties (Stibbe 2004). *Hikari to tomo ni* does not present

narratives of cure or psychological adjustment to marginalisation and discrimination documented by Stibbe. While Sachiko is presented as enduring the consequences of the general public's poor understanding of children with autism, the narrative depicts her continuing efforts to overturn the structural barriers to Hikaru's inclusion in school and wider society. In fact, by cultivating empathetic engagement with characters who are hostile or resistant to Hikaru and depicting their shifting perspectives, *Hikari to tomo ni* stresses the need for psychological adjustment on the part of non-disabled people. While the success of *Hikari to tomo ni* largely depended on this approach, Tobe's pursuit of readers' acceptance and sympathy means she does not attempt to directly represent the point of view of people with autism. *Hikari to tomo ni* presents an interesting comparison to another manga work focusing more on the world of autistic children, such as Sone Fumiko's *Kono hoshi no nukumori: Jiheishōji no mitsumeru sekai* [The warmth of this planet: the world from the eyes of an autistic child] (1997). Sone's manga was based on Moriguchi Naomi's nonfiction about her experiences as an autistic child. The biggest difference between Tobe and Sone is the extent to which they are concerned with questions of entertainment. Sone's manga attempts to present the point of view of autistic children. However, Sone's realistic manga style and strong focus on social problems may have been too intrusive to attract female readers. In other words, Sone's manga left the theme of autism 'unacceptable.' On the other hand, Tobe's popular appeal partly relies on her manga style, with big-eyed characters and sensitive drawing lines, originating in girls' manga. By capitalising on maternal perspectives and emotions to link the story with the readers, *Hikari to tomo ni* succeeds in making the theme of autism 'acceptable.'

### ***With the Light* as break-out English-language manga**

In its transition to publication in English, too, *With the Light* as *Hikari to tomo ni* was dubbed in translation, and was marketed in ways that flirted with unacceptability by virtue of being within a subgenre rarely seen in English and pitching to an audience with little history of consuming manga. This unlikely crossover was enacted through the cultivation of a new audience for English-language manga.

Paralleling the limitations of English language publications of manga, English-language scholarship has focussed on a very limited range of manga. As Murakami and Bryce (2009: 48) comment, 'Though several genres of manga have become the object of

research, these genres only represent a fraction of the full range of genres available in Japan.' Of particular interest in media and cultural studies have been manga subgenres that challenge heteronormative understandings of gender and sexuality. *Yaoi* or boylove manga, for example, was a particular focus of interest throughout the 'noughties' (Farmer 2008; McLellan 2000; Nagakubo 2005; Thorn 2004; Welker 2006), while sexually explicit and sexually violent manga or stories thematising sexualised young women have been a focus both of academic and popular interest in the Anglophone world. Unacceptability, then, to hegemonic understandings of gender or sexuality—radically unexpected interpretations of mainstream popular fictional texts unimaginable by their original creators—has made particular genres of manga peculiarly acceptable, indeed fascinating, to English-speaking academic writers. In contrast, genres of manga referred to by *With the Light*, such as the wide range of instructional manga consumed within Japan, particularly since the 1980s, have gained much less critical attention and are less likely to be published for an English language audience (Murakami & Bryce 2009).

The contrast between *With the Light* and the kinds of manga more usually published in English is stressed both by the novel's publishers and its readers. It was the first book published by Yen Press (an imprint of Hachette) and Kurt Hassler, the publisher, emphasized *With the Light's* distinctiveness in the market for manga in the West. *With the Light* is 'the sort of story you haven't seen presented much to manga readers in this country before' (Aoki 2006), Hassler notes. Bloggers reviewing the first volume clearly note the instructional aims of the series and its distinctiveness in the English-language manga scene:

The basic idea—raising awareness about autism—is successful ... I definitely feel as though I've learnt something. (Smith 2008)

*With the Light* may be a fictional story, but it's clearly meant to be more than that: Keiko Tobe's most important goal is to teach people about autism ... while it tells a story, its purpose is more to educate than to entertain. Yen Press's presentation underlines this: the covers are so unlike standard manga covers that when I first saw in a bookshop, my immediate reaction was "What is this doing in the comics section?" (Katherine 2008)

While this instructional emphasis of Tobe's work was new to Anglophone readers of manga, this hybrid of narrative and how-to is a familiar one to readers of books thematising disability. The existence of a hybrid form of how-to and stories about disability has been noted in English language publications, particularly autobiographies

about parenting disabled children (Knight 2012). This generic hybrid was familiar to Yen's publisher, Hassler, through his previous work, was a buyer of self-help books for the bookseller Borders. The English language release of *With the Light*, then, was aimed at readers of such books. Hassler comments: 'we felt it was an opportunity to expand the readership [of manga] ... You have to put it in front of people who are looking for books about autism, about kids with special needs, and that's a whole different audience than what the usual *manga* publisher is going for' (Aoki 2006).

If *With the Light* is a type of manga little published in the English-speaking world, unfamiliar to Anglophone audiences given its 'how to' genre and address to adults, particularly women, in other ways it formed part of a phenomenon familiar text to the Anglophone publishing world of the 1990s. As a book with an autistic young man as a central character, the manga series could be understood as part of the phenomenon of 'spectrum publishing' (Rose 2008) in the English-speaking world. A number of commentators have pointed out that stories about autism have been particularly prominent in recent years (Rose 2008; Hacking 2009; Murray 2010). One publishing house, Jessica Kingsley of the UK, has specialized in publishing around autistic spectrum disorders, for instance, while the novel for young adults *The Curious Case of the Dog in the Night-time* by Mark Haddon (2004) became an unexpected cross-over success with adult readers. In fact, we might argue that the commercial and critical success of *The Curious Case* as a novel that appealed to both adults and children (Adams 2005) provides a particularly important precursor to *With The Light*. It, too, is a 'cross-over' text, thematising concerns seen by its author and original publisher to be of interest to adult women through a genre that in the English speaking world, has been seen as primarily of interest to young people. G. Thomas Couser (2009) has identified in a boom in the publication of autobiographies by people with disabilities and chronic illnesses a notable cluster of 'autie-biographies' by autistic people, alongside a longer standing tradition of books by parents of children with autistic spectrum disorders (Knight 2012).

Critical disability studies writers have pointed out that although creative works by and for people with a disability may be few and far between in mainstream visual art, film and print, images of disability play a critical role for non-disabled people in understanding their world. In the terms of David Mitchell, representations of disability

function as a 'narrative prosthesis,' allowing plausible and coherent stories of normalcy, modernity (Davis 1995), morality (Longmore 1997) and 'ableness' (Snyder & Mitchell 2001) to be told. Mitchell and Snyder (2001: 375) argue that 'disability translates into a common denominator of cultural fascination (if not downright obsession)—one that infiltrates thinking across discursive registers as a shared reference point in deciding matters of human value and communal belonging.'

Stuart Murray (2007: 1) has pointed out that autism in the English-speaking world in the first decade of the millennium has functioned in precisely this way, as 'a flexible signifier of cognitive difference,' a metaphor to describe any number of phenomena—criminality, self-reflection, alone-ness, even formations of contemporary masculinity. It would be an over-generalisation to consider all of 'spectrum publishing' in this light – depicting autism and autistic characters primarily as a 'narrative prosthesis' (Mitchell 2002), that is, primarily functioning as a device for 'neurotypical' readers to think with. Evidently many writers publishing around ASD in this period—including 'autie-biographers' themselves—respond to the disability movement's imperative, 'nothing about us without us,' and seek to combat marginalization and misunderstanding, rather than to serve as metaphors for others. However, we can certainly assert that in the context of 'spectrum publishing' *With the Light* appears innovative and unexpected but certainly not entirely unacceptable.

### Conclusion

Our account of *Hikari to tomo ni*'s movement through its various contexts of publication and reception supports Mitchell and Snyder's (2001, 213) argument that disability politics does not allow easy categorization of representations into 'straightforward catalogues of "acceptable" and "unacceptable."' The context of the original publication of the serial demonstrates the barriers to publication of narratives centring on experiences of disablement. Such stories were seen as commercially unacceptable not only because they seemed difficult to market as entertainment, but also because they required the use of contested language which might draw embarrassing and potentially unprofitable attention. Tobe's work and its enthusiastic reception by the readers of *For Mrs* successfully overcame publishers' qualms, simultaneously diminishing Japanese readers' unfamiliarity with stories about autism. In our commentary here, then, we make two familiar academic moves—firstly, identifying our

objects of study as culturally unacceptable and thus claiming its significance a ground-breaking text which violates social convention, and secondly, celebrating the progressive power of the consumer of popular culture.

Yet both in discussion of the visual strategies adopted by *Hikari to tomo ni* and in its reception in an English language context, our account maps out the strategies used by the writer and publishers of this manga to manage and contain its apparently unacceptable theme. Tobe does this notably through recourse to a familiar maternal point of view, and powerful reference to the emotions and experiences of non-disabled readers. It might even be argued that Yen, in locating *With the Light* as part of a series of 'spectrum' publications in the English language publishing world of the noughties, enabled the manga to function, like these texts, as a narrative prosthesis by which representations of people with disabilities enable non-disabled readers to manage their anxieties and fears. Our aim in making these points is not to judge *With the Light* and find it wanting. Rather we want to step away both from the notion that the acceptability or progressive qualities of a text inhere within it and from the idea that unacceptable texts are particularly worth of study. *With the Light* is not a limit case, not a radically unacceptable text, rather an intriguing example of an under-investigated sub-genre of manga. We would suggest that the compromises made to reach audiences in the writing, illustration, translation and marketing of work like Tobe's deserve unravelling and exploration as much as more obviously shocking or remarkable texts.

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