

Disability and Racial Inequality in Theodore Taylor's *The Cay*

Writers of children's literature have a long history of adapting Daniel DeFoe's novel *Robinson Crusoe* for children. The growth of work in postcolonial and disability studies in the latter half of the twentieth century led to the creation of more children's books that challenge representations of the other and disability. However, some texts reinscribed the very issues they attempted to critique. Theodore Taylor's children's book, *The Cay*, is a castaway narrative that rewrites the imbalanced power dynamic between Robinson Crusoe and Friday. Both texts feature friendships between white survivors and racialized characters that perform subservient roles in these alliances, though they possess superior survival skills.

The main characters in Taylor's *The Cay* are Phillip, a white American boy, and Timothy, an older black man from Curaçao. They both survive a torpedo blast and find themselves struggling to subsist on an uninhabited cay. Phillip becomes blind soon after their arrival on the island. His sudden blindness is emblematic of his racial prejudice. Timothy's sacrifices facilitate Phillip's transformation from a spoiled, bigoted child to a more compassionate and self-sufficient one. Timothy's relegation to the role of a helper figure that enables Phillip's moral development is problematic. Ultimately, Timothy martyrs himself in a hurricane to save Phillip's life. It is only after Phillip buries Timothy that he gets rescued and undergoes a medical procedure that restores his sight.

Taylor's depiction of race relations has been widely debated, especially regarding his acceptance and subsequent pressure to rescind the Jane Addams Children's Book Award. The text's complex reception history and widespread acceptance among many children's librarians and educators overshadows the problems of its depiction of disability. I will interrogate how Phillip's miraculous cure is problematic, since it reinforces the belief that a happy ending and reintegration into an ableist society necessitate a cure from disability. The miraculous cure reinforces ableist ideology while also invoking an imbalanced interracial relationship that reflects colonial power.