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Moving from “the Realm of Hospital Room to the Realm of Political Minority”: Ever Dundas’ *HellSans* and the Radical Contemporary Disability Novel

Du domaine de l’hôpital à celui des minorités politiques : HellSans d’Ever Dundas et la littérature du handicap radicale contemporaine

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Moving from “the Realm of Hospital Room to the Realm of Political Minority”: Ever Dundas’ *HellSans* and the Radical Contemporary Disability Novel

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Sometimes writers feel uncomfortable with being seen as political. I don’t really have that problem. Some of our finest literary books—1984, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, *Brave New World*—are overtly political. Everything is... A lot of people who don’t think their writing is political are sometimes shoring up the status quo, or ignoring the status quo.

Ever Dundas (Interview with RG, 4 August 2023)

Introduction. – From the hospital room ...

- ¹ In her book *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*, the disability studies scholar Rosemarie Garland-Thomson called for the disabled body to move from the realm of the hospital room to the realm of political minority, to “recast it from a form of pathology to a form of ethnicity” (2017 [1997], p. 6). First published in 1997, the book is now widely considered a cornerstone of contemporary disability studies. A quarter of a century later, major international writers such as the Ukrainian-US poet Ilya Kaminsky, author of the internationally celebrated *Deaf Republic* (2019), have explicitly credited Garland-Thomson for shaping the role of disability in their own creative work. The following article focuses on Ever Dundas, a contemporary novelist whose work I argue does something similar to Kaminsky’s poetry—that is, challenging established narratives about disability, while

reframing disabled communities within an activist context as part of a major creative work. I argue that, within a Scottish literary context, this too represents a move away from the realm of the hospital room.

- 2 Ever Dundas is a writer from Edinburgh who identifies as “queer crip” (Inklusion Team, 2023). She is autistic, has M.E. (myalgic encephalomyelitis), and also fibromyalgia, which causes her chronic pain. Her debut *Goblin*, a novel about “an outcast kid whose family and comrades are non-human animals” (“4 Ever Autistic”, 2023) brought the author to critical attention, demonstrating Dundas’ instinct for celebrating “extraordinary bodies” across species (she routinely refers to all living things as “creatures”), and for unflinching, visceral description. *Goblin* was first published in 2017 and won the Saltire First Novel of the Year Award the same year. In the critical sphere, *Goblin* (Dundas, 2016) was sometimes seen as a study in trauma and loss revolving around the so-called “pet massacre” of the Second World War. Those elements are central to the novel, though any narrowly focused reading along these lines is reductive. The evidence of Dundas’ interest in intertextuality, also in centring the marginalized, the unseen, is evident throughout *Goblin*, a clear pre-cursor to the territory explored in *HellSans* (2022).
- 3 Since the publication of her debut, there have been newspaper reviews and interviews analyzing Dundas’ work where disability has acted as a part of the analysis, but so far these have been rare, or have been found in more marginal literary spaces, such as the blogs of individual readers. One such review, written by “Heather T”, a critic with M.E., complains about too many reviews of *HellSans* missing the disability theme entirely, making the links explicit in her own review between M.E. and the world of *HellSans* (Heather, 2023). Meanwhile, Dundas has discussed the impact of M.E. and her fibromyalgia openly in interviews, such as with Creative Scotland and Fantasy Hive, including how it shapes her working life and her approach to her chosen subjects. Considered together, these various pieces and platforms give essential clues to the roots of the radical approach evident in *HellSans*, while providing important context. Consistently, Dundas has presented herself as a writer whose fiction and politics are indivisible from each other. This applies particularly in terms of her linguistic choices. In a novel like *HellSans*, where words can kill, approaches to language are essential.

What is *HellSans*?

- 4 Set in a dystopian near-future, *HellSans* is a novel in three parts, the first two of which, “Icho” and “Jane” can be read in either order. At the end of Parts One and Two, the narrative comes together, having told a similar timeline from the perspectives of the two main characters, Jane Ward (mid-40s) and Dr Icho Smith (mid-20s), up to that point. In Part Three, Jane and Icho are mostly presented together, though this is repeatedly undermined and complicated as the narrative races towards its high-octane end.
- 5 The plot of *HellSans* follows the interleaved stories of Jane, who is CEO of The Company, and Icho, who is working on a cure for HellSans allergy in secret at the start of the narrative. HellSans is a font which is ubiquitous, able to “bliss out” many citizens whenever they see it, on posters, on clothes, projected in front of them, even in their minds. The font itself, along with the ways in which normativity are represented in the various adverts, television programmes and other media which literally contain that

font, work together to place disabled bodies—that is, bodies allergic to the HellSans font—outside the norm. By definition, these bodies cannot ever attain the authority of the body which is *not* allergic. This underpins the whole structure of the society presented in the novel, while limiting and controlling what kind of life is possible for those who are HellSans allergic (HSA).

- 6 Within this set-up, Dundas makes disability itself the central conceit of a novel which also acts as an unashamed statement of radical resistance. As Garland-Thomson has it in her essay “Beauty and the Freak”, “representational systems such as gender, race, and disability operate hyperbolically to create an illusory position of authoritative normativity into which a viewer can enter for a price” (Garland-Thomson, 1998). In her own work, Dundas has sought to “move beyond the normative, calling for an ontological revolution” (Dundas, 2023 [2018]). Satirizing the ways in which the UK government treats the disabled, the literary territory of *HellSans* is not just the ways in which illness and disability are understood by the able-bodied, but also how queer and disabled people are marginalized by both individuals and institutions in capitalist societies. This applies even when those institutions contain people in positions of power who are, themselves, queer and disabled.
- 7 In chapter 1 of *Icho’s Part*, she is busy working in her lab with the subjects of her research. She cannot think of those subjects as human, because they are HSAs (HellSans allergic). They do not have names, but numbers. Five of these so-called “deviants” are suddenly, brutally, casually murdered when *Icho’s* lab is disturbed by Prime Minister Caddick; the blood of these HSAs are spattered over *Icho’s* own body (Dundas, 2022, p. 42). As she contemplates their dead bodies, *Icho* is forced—at least for a moment—to accept evidence of their common humanity, while readers may interpret the term “deviant” as an analogy for queerness as well as an analogy for disability. The main narrative thread of *HellSans* follows *Icho* and *Jane* as they try to survive in this society once their respective, previous powers are compromised. This takes place after *Jane’s* newly apparent disability becomes clear to all around her (she’s now allergic to the HellSans font) and *Icho’s* privilege has been stripped away. The parallel love story between *Jane* and *Icho* takes fast-paced twists and turns, as the various men surrounding these two women, not least the devious Prime Minister Caddick, seek to manipulate and dominate them for their own motives. The two storylines play out while readers see examples at work of the extreme effects of HellSans itself.

Where does *HellSans* come from?

- 8 The structure, language and world of *HellSans* are rooted in ways observers can clearly identify by studying Dundas’ other work. Over the few years preceding the publication, while drafting the book, Dundas sought to present her writing as a reaction to her politics, for example through her hybrid, creative-critical “*Frankenstein’s Children*” essay, from 2018. This was commissioned to mark that novel’s bicentenary. Subtitled “Here Be Monsters and They Are Glorious”, this celebratory assertion of disabled rights, originally published in *Transnational Queer Underground*, also acts as a statement of intent:

I am a queer sick scarred woman and I’m in the public sphere. I am not your martyr.
I am not your villain. I am here with my regiment of monsters. We won’t let you
make us — we raise a glass to being more than human and we call for an embodied

revolution. We have come down from the mountains, out of the shadows, out of our sick rooms — I hold hands with Frankenstein’s monster and all our queer disabled amorphous monstrous allies. I do not speak *for* them, but walk with them, in solidarity. (“Here Be Monsters”, Dundas, 2023 [2018])

- 9 Typically forthright and unapologetic in tone—also, framing disabled struggle as a move away from “the sick room”, in language similar to Garland-Thomson’s own—this essay is laid out as a series of letters responding creatively to Mary Shelley’s celebrated novel. In the essay, Dundas uses the epistolary form to assess interconnected examples of how disabled bodies may act in that “public sphere”, shifting tonally between letters, from the confrontational to the discursive, the playful to the interrogative, interleaving references to *Frankenstein* with nods to theorists and fellow activists along the way, detailing accusations of hypocrisy relating to the Alison Lapper statue in Trafalgar Square while challenging notions of the so-called “good disabled” in art. Dundas’ dedicates a central part of her “*Frankenstein’s Children*” essay to the importance of resisting these notions, drawing a clear line between Frankenstein and her own approach as a writer:

On this journey I’ve found there’s a dominant disability narrative, and it’s that of the ‘good’ disabled; pre-approved, stamped and *confined*. Yet if you conform, if you play nice, you are still not ‘one of us’ — Frankenstein’s monster is self-educated and articulate, but he still isn’t good enough. In response to the creature’s account, Frankenstein says, “Begone! *I will not hear you.*” The creature’s narrative is shut down. Never listened to, he’s understandably enraged and bitter, but he says: “I was benevolent and good... Make me happy and I again shall be virtuous.”

Why, dear readers, should disabled people depend on the goodwill of normative society? Why should they endeavour to be ‘virtuous’? Normative society treats the disabled abominably and expects unconditional regard. If you are the polite and ‘good’ disabled and you are allowed ‘in’, you’re the exception that proves the rule; don’t ever believe you are ‘one of them’ — and who would want to be? Who wants to live such a curtailed life, a life built on limiting others? (“*Frankenstein’s Children*”, Dundas, 2023 [2018])

- 10 In this context, readers are better able to understand the central importance, for Dundas, in both Jane and Icho being far from what might be termed “good disabled”. Routinely, the author has referred to Jane and Icho as “queer-crip anti-heroes”. Throughout *HellSans*, both characters resist cosy notions of any kind of “good” behaviour.
- 11 Across the letters contained within “*Frankenstein’s Children*”, Dundas draws on the work of diverse campaigners and commentators to situate Mary Shelley’s novel as part of a radical disability tradition. These range from the likes of Bob Flanagan, known for his sadomasochistic performance art, to the artist, writer and musician Johanna Hedva. Hedva’s “Sick Woman Theory”, quoted by Dundas in this essay—“It is the world itself that is making and keeping us sick”—is reappropriated, made central, in *HellSans*, a world where the very structures of society are presented as fundamentally unsound.
- 12 It is instructive to discover that Hedva’s work is an influence on Dundas. In her influential essay “Sick Woman Theory” (Hedva, 2015), she responded to Hannah Arendt’s definition of the political, questioning its exclusion of the private sphere—as she put it, one of Arendt’s failures was the creation of “the binary between visible and invisible space”. In *HellSans*, to use Hedva’s language, the “private is political”. Much of the narrative focuses on the hidden costs and imbalances created by a society which

excludes HSAs, often actively requiring them to be hidden. For HSAs in the world of *HellSans*, Arendt’s definition of political activism would not be inclusive enough.

- 13 Dundas’ activism is mostly seen in her own writing—as with the case of Kaminsky, whose book *Deaf Republic* is built around the use of sign language, the act of writing in a political way is her activism. That said, Dundas’ activism sometimes goes beyond the pages of her own work, too. As co-founder and self-styled “disruptor”, one half of the Inklusion partnership with Edinburgh poet Julie Farrell, Dundas published a free-to-access, online guide for making the literary world of events “accessible to disabled people” in 2022. In a short time, this has had a significant impact on the nature of debate around issues of inclusivity in the UK’s literary landscape, both “in real life” and online (Inklusion Team, 2023). In her author bio, Dundas identifies as “queer crip”, describing *HellSans* as a novel with “disability as a central theme” (Inklusion Team, 2023). As the above quote from the “*Frankenstein’s Children*” essay suggests, in a sense *HellSans* is written for the queer crip community she identifies with. Meanwhile, she has also used her own website, “Blood on Forgotten Walls” as a platform to discuss the intersection between her work and health, recently announcing her autism diagnosis in May 2023 alongside a meditation on how this has impacted on her creativity. (Reader may notice that even the name of her personal website is a reference to how the private is political.) Dundas is unusually open about her personal experience, her health, her experiences as a disabled person within politicized structures, and how these things have influenced the political nature of her writing. As she told Nils Shukla in an interview for Fantasy Hive:

Disabled people are stigmatised, scapegoated, constantly under surveillance, and repeatedly forced to prove their needs. Life for disabled people in the UK wasn’t great before the Tory government, but the Tories have systematically eroded and dismantled what little support there was, all while stirring up “benefits scrounger” rhetoric. (Fantasy Hive, 2022)

- 14 Seen in this context, the substantive focus of *HellSans* is plainly apparent. The novel may take place in an alternative future, but it is without doubt a story in which disabled characters are “stigmatized, scapegoated, constantly under surveillance, and repeatedly forced to prove their needs”. The novel consciously appropriates the language of the Conservative Austerity agenda post-2010, for example, “We’re in This Together” (Dundas, 2022, p. 449), as the sinister *HellSans*-rendered slogan of a corrupt government. Another government slogan used is “Work Makes You Free” (Dundas, 2022, pp. 192 and 449), the chilling wording familiar to many as the message at the entrance gates of the Nazi death camps at Auschwitz. “This is not a subtle novel”, says Dundas. “It’s not supposed to be” (Interview with RG, 2023). In a novel explicitly concerned with the business of community building through a kind of rallying call for fellow queer crips and allies, too much “subtlety” might act against the novel’s stated aims, becoming a cultural barrier to textual accessibility.
- 15 *HellSans* is an overtly political sci-fi thriller full of “shit and vomit” (Dundas, 2022, p. 85), a work of confrontational art which, like the works of Bob Flanagan, is “bold, italicized, underlined, neon-lit” (Dundas, 2022, p. 219), constructed with one express intention: to make it impossible to look away. As yet, there has been little sustained analysis of Dundas’ approach to her activist fiction in an academic context, nor of its roots in her own experience. For this reason, I am drawing here on websites, blogs, reviews and interviews, also on theorists like Hedva that Dundas has acknowledged herself, while also mining the novel itself. Here, I include the writer’s own voice as one

legitimate voice in the conversation about her work. This, in the hope that others may respond. My argument is also informed by an interview with the author herself, conducted at her Edinburgh home, in August 2023.

- 16 To be clear: Dundas did not read Garland-Thomson’s call in *Extraordinary Bodies* and respond to it. Her influences are more commonly musical, filmic, or influenced by TV shows. She does not see her work primarily as being within a national tradition and claims not to be responding to any works of Scottish Literature, with the possible exception of Michel Faber’s *Under the Skin* (2000). Interestingly, that book is also an exploration of “deviant”, extraordinary, creaturely bodies across species, written by a neurodiverse Scotland-based author operating in a transnational context.¹ But even in this rare case, *Under the Skin* itself did not act as a direct influence on the making of *HellSans*. Rather, Faber’s sensibility as a writer was a more general influence on Dundas’ own developing approach over time (Interview with RG, 2023).
- 17 Compounding this notable lack of contemporary peers within Scotland, Dundas believes there is “something of a black hole” for her, where voices writing about disability might be, “though that is changing” (Interview with RG, 2023). She cites Hannah Kaner’s hugely popular *Godkiller* as an example of a recent novel with queer and crip representation, Kaner describing herself as having “her heart in Scotland and her roots in the north of England” (Kaner, 2023, author website). (*HellSans* was mostly written before the pandemic of 2020–2021, edited during and after, while *Godkiller* was published in 2023.)
- 18 Faced with this lack of like minds or examples to work with while drafting *HellSans*, Dundas found common approaches in other forms instead, using her “enduring magpie enthusiasms” (Interview with RG, 2023) across popular culture, especially from music and film, to charge her work.² Much more than academic writing or literature across form, these are relevant guides. This is not an author responding to literary Scottish novels of the past. As she has said, “I am a Scottish writer. I just am. But it’s never really influenced my storytelling” (Interview with RG, 2023). Rather, this is an author drawing from popular culture across media, across time, and across borders, the magpie looking for scraps to feed her own work, in her own world, in her own way.
- 19 In the rest of this article, I attempt three things in brief as a way of making a case for *HellSans* as a radical contemporary disability novel. The first is to take a close look at what makes up the world of *HellSans*. The second relates to the structures of society in *HellSans* and how these interact with the structure of the novel itself. The last of these three relates to how epigraphs and paratexts act as examples of Dundas’ radical approach in action, the indivisibility of that work from the author’s politics.

The world of *HellSans*

- 20 For many readers, the idea at the heart of *HellSans*—the use of a font to pacify and control a whole population, with destructive consequences—may initially encourage comparisons to the “Soma” pills of Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932). There are important commonalities to be found here, ones Dundas has consciously embedded throughout her novel. *HellSans*, like Soma, is a tempting drug, almost impossible to resist, a crucial part of a society which is much more sinister than it first appears. The very existence of *HellSans* also suggests a kind of “sickness” in terms of society’s dependence on it, as does Soma. Meanwhile, there are, as in Huxley’s novel, different

classes of human, a pyramid of privilege at work, also a sense of outside “savages” representing a threat to society. *HellSans*, too, presents a world of unequals, of elite safe spaces and the wilds of “savages” beyond (the ghettos), two worlds that threaten to collapse in on each other as the narrative progresses.

- 21 Clearly, *Brave New World* is a key touchstone for Dundas, but the world of *HellSans* is more complex than a simple mapping of Huxley’s world onto the twenty-first century. Notably, it is a much more technologically advanced world. Characters can communicate internally with their “Inex”. These are personal cyborgs assistants who live to serve. Street cleaning is done by “Ino” cyborgs. A key aspect of the world is how menial work is done by these often taken-for-granted, often abused technical assistants, who are a kind of sub-society of carers who are programmed to serve their masters without recognition. Inos literally suck up the vomit of their owners when they are sick. Meanwhile, everyone is tracked, wherever they are, whatever they do, whatever they buy, however they stray into “deviancy”. That word “deviant” matters deeply, being one that echoes the use of “weirdos” or “freaks” in *Goblin*, which includes the refrain, “weirdos always find each other”. In Dundas’ work, these words, often used outside of her literature as insults, are reclaimed within it as punk badges of pride by the author, even as her characters resist them. That applies particularly in *HellSans*, where both Jane and Icho have their faces rubbed figuratively in their own vomit—as Dundas—influence J. G. Ballard might have it—by being “forced to look in the mirror”, again and again. Jane and Icho often literally look in mirrors and are horrified by their changing appearance, affected as they are by exposure to *HellSans* and the consequences of their behaviour in reaction to it.
- 22 One distinguishing feature of radical disability fiction is the insistence on exposing kinds of denial that would otherwise allow actors, able-bodied or not, to deny the consequences of the way their society treats disabled people. As Garland-Thomson has been arguing in her work for decades, including in “Beauty and the Freak”, New Disability Studies’ efforts “to transfigure disability within the cultural imagination” is partially about insisting on a change of perspective, one in which “the body that we think of as disabled becomes a cultural artifact produced by material, discursive, and aesthetic practices that interpret bodily variation” (Garland-Thomson, 1998). In the course of their respective narratives, as in Icho’s chapter 1 mentioned above, Icho and Jane are forced to abandon their previous denial of the disabled body as a “produced cultural artifact”. The events of the novel force Jane and Icho to reconsider the way the disabled body is perceived, controlled and represented in this society that previously enabled them, though they try to resist it at every turn, even as evidence of the consequences of their previous denial pile up. To use Garland-Thomson’s language in “Beauty and the Freak”, public representations of bodies in the world of *HellSans* consistently serve to “verify the social status quo”—a status quo that, in their own contrasting ways, Jane and Icho have both worked to reinforce, before being forced to admit their own complicity in the oppressive treatment of those excluded by it.
- 23 In the world of *HellSans*, *HellSans*-allergic people, or the afore-mentioned “deviants”, operate as a kind of human underclass, as Inos and Inexes serve as an underclass to humans. It is no accident, as Icho reports early on, that “most HSAs and Seraphs are women, a high proportion are Black women or women of colour, the majority from a poor socio-economic background with experience of trauma” (Dundas, 2022, p. 32). The definition of “deviant” matters in this context, not only as it begs the question, deviant

to what? and who is most likely to be termed “deviant”, based on their race or background?—but also because there is, in *HellSans*, not one singular kind of deviancy, but many potential types.

- 24 Jane and Icho’s story illustrates this well: as we see, Jane is HSA, but Icho’s reaction to the HellSans font shows there is no simple binary. HSAs are technically what is known as “unblissed”, but this latter term as used in the novel mostly refers to those, like Icho herself, who do not experience the “bliss” of a HellSans “hit”, but also are not allergic to it. (In Icho’s case, her status is revealed in Part Three.) This is further complicated by the fact that when Jane takes Icho’s formula, designed to “cure” HellSans allergy, she does not return to her previous “blissed” state, as expected, but rather she turns “unblissed”—that is, not allergic, but also not susceptible to the blissing effects of HellSans, as most people in this world experience it. In this way, readers see in miniature that for the people of this society, disability, or “deviance” is not something that can easily be reduced, simplified or categorised. In the author’s words, though Icho’s case “isn’t *the* deviancy, it is still *a* deviancy” (Email to RG, 31 August 2023).
- 25 This, then, is the world of Dundas’ second novel. A place where the “blissed” are kept as ignorant consumers of this one powerful drug, safe (for now, so they believe) from being ex-communicated from mainstream society due to their non-allergic reaction to the font, while HSAs live out a marginalized existence, in some senses free, but also experiencing “constant nagging pain” (Dundas, 2022, p. 202)—and the unblissed fit into neither category, reminding us of the fact that “disability” itself is a term which is necessarily generalized and has limited usefulness. I argue that what charges the novel, at least in part, is that no individual in any of these categories—HSA, blissed, unblissed—is in that category indefinitely. When Jane becomes HSA, she becomes “trash” in the eyes of those who previously admired and served her. Her previous status makes no difference to how she is perceived in the present. Her fall from grace is quick and brutal.
- 26 The power of the HellSans font itself is critical from the novel’s outset. Echoed across the start of both Parts One and Two from Jane and Icho’s perspectives, Jane is attracted to Icho at their first meeting partly because of the HellSans dress Icho is wearing. HellSans is everywhere, as the adverts have it, “HELPING YOU BE THE BEST YOU” (Dundas, 2022, p. 15). Meanwhile, HSAs are made physically and mentally sick by exposure, their disability used against them by a society that literally removes their rights, their possessions, blames them for their allergy and removes them to the ghettos. In the shiny, ultra-modern city centre, Jane and Icho previously lived out selfish existences where, in the first instance, they did not need to engage with certain harsh realities of these societal structures—that is, until Jane is no longer useful in the way she was within the capitalist system, as CEO of The Company.
- 27 Readers learn about the nuances of HellSans allergy as the characters do. As Jane learns from Icho (Dundas, 2022, p. 217), stress and trauma can trigger allergic reactions, moving previously “non-deviant” members of society into the realm of the deviant. This is what happens to her. However, there is so much stigma associated with being HSA, also much danger and fear, that even when presented with undeniable evidence of what she is, Jane cannot initially accept it. First, she denies her allergy, repeatedly insisting she is fine. Then, she despises herself for her changing physical reaction. She turns on others who try to support her and she repeatedly lashes out, her every instinct a selfish one as she tries to regain her previous power. In this way, we can see

Dundas repeatedly resisting fiction of the “good disabled”, preferring to make her protagonists complicated, complicit, deeply compromised. Nor is this fiction of the hospital room. Indeed, whenever characters in *HellSans* find themselves in hospitals or in situations where they are being cared for, they recoil. The hospital room is the last place anyone wants to be.

- 28 As the narrative speeds towards its end, Jane and Icho must adapt to the structures of the society they find themselves in. However, as we have seen, presenting outsiders in this society as one coherent group is deeply problematic. Rather, Dundas repeatedly resists the idea that any minority are united or can be seen as anything but a collection of individuals with different needs, different priorities, different views. Even as lovers on a joint mission later in the novel, Jane and Icho cannot be seen as one, as they continually turn on each other—while their time in the ghetto, on the run from the authorities, shows them just how complicated the response is to the oppression of HSAs is by HSAs themselves. In the world of *HellSans*, the realm of the political minority is complex, ever-moving. In *HellSans*, those who have been rejected or stigmatized take radically different approaches to their circumstances. Echoing Hedva’s “Sick Woman Theory” once more, the Seraphs, who live in the ghettos, “say society is sick, not them. They think *HellSans* should be eradicated” (Dundas, 2022, p. 62). Violence is essential to the Seraphs’ campaign, though as Jane and Icho discover, there are multiple campaigns going on at once, none are what they seem, and the Seraphs do not have a monopoly on violence.

Structures of sickness: text and paratext

- 29 The way *HellSans* is presented to the reader matters. This applies both in terms of its three-part, moveable structure, also in terms of its paratexts and epigraphs—these elements constitute part of Dundas’ approach to radical disability fiction. One part, told from Icho’s perspective, is titled “*HellSans* Part One or Two – Icho”. Another part, told from Jane’s perspective, is titled “*HellSans* Part Two or One – Jane”. The third, which moves from a mostly third person perspective to focalize through either Jane or Icho at key moments, is simply titled “*HellSans* Part Three”. Parts One and Two both open with a short Prologue, which is a one-page glimpse of the drama to come, a short passage of prose that will be repeated later in that section of the novel. (Before Icho’s Part, Prime Minister Caddick’s attack on Icho is glimpsed on p. 11, then repeated on p. 55. Before Jane’s Part, the moment where Jane’s identity is doubted by a security guard, then confirmed via “face rec”, on p. 141.) Parts One and Two of the novel cover the same chronological period, starting with Icho the fangirl meeting Jane for the first time, while wearing her *HellSans* dress. They see this first meeting in contrasting ways, and their stories then take different turns, though they both happen in the same time frame, among the same moments of drama. This means it is possible to read either section first and still come to the same point, from either perspective, with Jane appearing to die in Icho’s arms, in the moments before Part Three starts.
- 30 In the first pages of Part Three, Icho and her Inex bring Jane back to life, Icho administering CPR, the Inex defibrillating Jane’s heart. From this point on, the narrative follows their joint crusade, though the nature of that crusade seems ever-changing, and the betrayals continue to mount. The question of what constitutes a body seems to be continually asked, the right to make new versions of ourselves being

part of a series of moral questions the novel itself poses that also include questions relating to the right of the able-bodied to “save” others on their own terms.

- 31 This all happens at a furious, sci-fi thriller pace. When Jane is replaced by an imposter who looks the same as her, she discovers her doppelgänger has announced her engagement to Caddick, who tortured Icho early in her own part of the book. When Icho dies, Jane remakes her in a new body and Icho is horrified she has been put into a physicality Jane considers “better”. Jane feels she has “saved” Icho as Icho once saved her own life, and feels confused and betrayed by Icho’s irritation, by her insistence that “I’m not your fucking Barbie doll”:

“Oh, my saviour! I am so grateful”, said Icho, bowing. “So grateful you made me just how you want me.” (Dundas, 2022, p. 412)

- 32 At moments in Part Three, one of Jane or Icho might leave the scene; readers are left with the other one on their own for a spell. But their story is presented as one, even as their relationship becomes toxic, its toxicity being directly related to how their respective circumstances change due to their changing status as “disabled” or otherwise. As explored in Sharon Snyder and David T. Mitchell’s 2001 critical text *Narrative Prosthesis*, the notion of disability itself often acts in storytelling “as a symbolic vehicle for meaning-making and cultural critique” (Snyder & Mitchell, 2001, p. 1). Certainly, this applies in *HellSans* in terms of the main narrative, but it also applies in terms of its structure too.
- 33 Why structure a novel about disability using three sections, two of which are moveable, the other one being immovable? I suggest it is because *HellSans* is a novel of resistance, of several kinds. Firstly, it concerns itself with resistance to capitalist structures, and the consequences for what Arianna Introna calls “the trash of capitalism” in her book *Autonomist Narratives of Disability in Modern Scottish Writing* (Introna, 2022, p. 94). That is, *HellSans* presents a world where any character’s value is directly connected to their ability to work and make money for those in charge of the capitalist state.
- 34 The structure of *HellSans* encourages resistance to this, inviting readers to consider more broadly the assumptions they may make about dominant narratives. As well as simply altering the order of events in the narrative, this structure is also a reminder to consider the other, to recognize that no society contains one objective truth for all its citizens. Rather, the shifting perspectives and moveable parts of *HellSans* draw readers’ attention to just how conditional those truths may be on any one individual’s own circumstances or privilege.
- 35 No matter which Part readers choose to start with, the ebb and flow of sexual power dynamics is also ever-shifting. (Initially, Jane holds all the power over fangirl Icho, though this reads differently if you read Part Two first—and no matter where you start, Jane’s power over Icho ebbs and flows throughout.) The sexual dynamics apparently set up at the start of both Jane and Icho’s Parts are complicated when Jane is forced to embark on a journey in which she and Icho are forced to accept that power structures, sexual or otherwise, are not always clear, evident, easy to categorise, easy to navigate. For example, when Icho must disguise herself as an HSA she has no real appreciation of what this means until it starts to limit her existence. She is thrown out of every café or bar she tries to go in—“As soon as the entrance system took my details, staff or Inos would appear and turn me around with a ‘We don’t serve deviants’”—and soon she has to admit to herself that, “in my rush to shed my identity, I hadn’t thought through the implications of deviant ID” (Dundas, 2022, p. 95).

36 For Icho, then, ordinary, mundane activities become almost impossible. The society is not set up for HSAs. She is four miles from any place who will sell her a simple cup of coffee. When she’s sold one by her hostel owner, it’s a “gritty, shitty-tasting brew for an extortionate amount” she cannot complain about. Icho is being forced to see how deprived of basic dignity HSAs are, as standard. They cannot own property. They cannot own assets and must live in the ghetto. In short: they must take all the “shitty, extortionate” brews they can get, and simply try to survive in a world constructed in a way that demeans and marginalizes them. The consequences of that are all too apparent once Icho realises, when watching Jane on the Rheya Gadon Show on TV, that the CEO of The Company herself is HellSans allergic. All of which, I suggest, is made to read differently, given the playful structure of the book. Partly through its moving three Parts, and partly through its shifting perspectives and points of view, Dundas insists that readers experience disability and marginalization as the HSAs do—the world as an unstable place, where you need to keep proving your own validity. To return to the author’s own framing, it is a place where the disabled are “stigmatised, scapegoated, constantly under surveillance, and repeatedly forced to prove their needs” (Fantasy Hive, 2022).

Intertextuality, epigraphs and dedications

37 The two epigraphs at the start of *HellSans* point to both *Brave New World* and *Frankenstein* in ways that indicate the nature of text to come, and are intimately related to the way the text is put together. Dundas is responding creatively to both these novels. As we have seen, Dundas’ argument in the *Frankenstein* bicentenary piece, via Hedva, is that the structures of society disabled people must live with are poison. With that in mind, the Huxley epigraph used at the start of *HellSans*, “I ate civilisation. It poisoned me”, from *Brave New World*, echoes these ideas strongly. Meanwhile, the *Frankenstein* quote that partners it is the same one that Dundas uses to sign off her bicentenary piece, the words of the Monster itself at the end of Shelley’s novel: “Man, you shall repent of the injuries you inflict.” This strongly implies that the novel to come is somehow in conversation with both those books, as it is with Hedva. Dundas is not a writer who flinches from taking a side, or from apportioning blame.

38 Echoes from *Brave New World* can be glimpsed in critical places within the narrative of *HellSans*. For example, when Prime Minister Caddick and Jane share a toast at the end of the book, they do so with an indirect, subtle nod to Huxley, via an allusion to John the Savage’s suicide by hanging:

He wasn’t sitting. He was studying my bookshelf, his fingers running across the books. He stopped on one, his finger pressed against it. As I took the wine glasses out of the cupboard, he said “South-south-west, south...”

“South-est, east”, I said, pouring the wine.

He looked over at me and smiled, nodding. “The fate of savages.”

I joined him in the sitting room and handed him the glass. We clinked them and

I said, “To a brave new world”. (Dundas, 2022, p. 437)

39 In this way, once again Dundas situates her novel within a particular tradition of literature that explores othering and marginalization, but does so in a way that recontextualises those previous works—presenting them as radical texts in conversation with each other. At least within the pages of *HellSans*, the elements from *Brave New World* are intended to be read in conversation, also, with *Frankenstein*, as the

novel explores the complexity—and complicity—of Jane and Icho when it comes to the issue of creating monsters which cannot be controlled. On the novel’s last page, multiple Ichos and Janes lead the Seraphs across the country in a deviant’s revolution. It is hard to mistake the author’s intention.

- 40 In chapter 2 of Icho’s Part One/Part Two, the Hedva quote utilized above—that “society is sick”—is used directly when Icho is in her car with an old model Inex, Huxley’s quote from the epigraph echoing alongside Hedva’s own wording. In the scene, Icho searches for news reports in audio form, which the Inex traces for her. The item that comes up is two reporters discussing an attack on Jared Mulligan, Leader of the country’s Opposition, which also seems, indirectly, to reference the deaths in Icho’s lab. Icho listens in as they speculate on the involvement of the Seraphs, the so-called “terrorist group” of HSAs who have an agenda of their own:

“Surely the Seraphs wouldn’t target Mulligan?”

“He’s a known supporter of a cure for HellSans allergy, Claire, and the Seraphs don’t believe in a cure — they say society is sick, not them. They think HellSans should be eradicated.” (Dundas, 2022, p. 62)

- 41 As we can see from these examples, the epigraphs used in *HellSans* are not alone in being indicators of how to read the novel. Even dedications are indicators. Though initially the author had resisted being specific in labelling her own condition in this way within the pages of *HellSans*, eventually Dundas decided to dedicate the novel, alongside several key creatures in her life, being directly addressed to “all queer crips / and people with M.E. who have endured decades of cruelty and neglect” (Dundas, 2022). A break of two lines follows this, before the words “with love and rage”, given space of their own, a kind of prominence, even within the dedication. From the start, then, readers are invited to read what follows in that spirit, as a kind of activism rooted in an emotional response to injustice.

- 42 This pattern continues beyond the end of the story. For a political writer such as Dundas, epigraphs, dedications and acknowledgements might be seen as spaces to direct the reading, and the experience, of potential readers. Interesting, then, that along with the usual thank yous and the references to music that soundtracked the writing of the novel, Dundas thanks the “Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D. writers, for Grant Ward” (Dundas, 2022, p. 451)—before signing off with a direct political statement which appropriates the language of the world of *HellSans*, making it clear one last time whose side the author is on. Also, who she stands against, and how:

Spit, bile and vomit to the Tories.

A salute to all Queer Crips for their tenacity and for existing. Stay deviant, creatures. (Dundas, 2022, p. 451)

Conclusion. – ... To the political minority

- 43 This article has not sought to attempt to prove that Ever Dundas is familiar with the works of Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, nor to argue that she is somehow consciously working in the same tradition as writers like Ilya Kaminsky, who do credit Garland-Thomson directly for influencing their creative work. She is not. Though Kaminsky’s “rebellion against a world that sees deafness as ‘a contagious disease’” (Young, 2019) might be seen as a radical call to arms akin to that in *HellSans*, one partially based on inverting the worlds of the able-bodied and disabled, any connection with Kaminsky or

Garland-Thomson is irrelevant for my purposes. Rather, I have sought to demonstrate how *HellSans*—in structure, language, thematic concern—can be seen as the kind of response that Garland-Thomson might have had in mind in her call to arms from *Extraordinary Bodies*. That is, for contemporary writers to resist narratives that present “sickness” or disability as a thing to be pitied, patronized, marginalized or suppressed, activism occurs within the writing—in decisions made about how to represent, and disrupt, understandings of disability, in all its nuance, complication and multiple sub-categories. Though radically different in genre, form and linguistic style from *Deaf Republic*, I suggest that *HellSans* might be seen as of a piece with Kaminsky’s work and other radical contemporary creative works of protest, as much as it is with, say, the twentieth-century performance art of Bob Flanagan, or with established literary works such as *Frankenstein* or with *Brave New World*.

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Further resources

Interview with Ever Dundas, by Rodge Glass (Edinburgh, 4 August 2023).

Emails between Ever Dundas and Rodge Glass (August 2023).

NOTES

1. Some critics count Faber as “Scottish” having lived in the Highlands for twenty-five years and written about the landscape there in *Under the Skin* and elsewhere. Others exclude him for being

born in The Netherlands and raised in Australia. I argue for him to be included within a Scottish context in my book *Michel Faber: The Writer & His Work* (Liverpool University Press, 2023).

2. Dundas has often returned to a handful of cultural markers, including the work of actor Dirk Bogarde, the music of rock bands such as Pearl Jam, Suede and the Manic Street Preachers, writers such as J. G. Ballard, filmmakers such as David Cronenberg, actors such as Dirk Bogarde, and TV series such as *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*, often mining these for character names, places and ideas hidden within *HellSans*.

ABSTRACTS

In 2019, the celebrated Ukrainian poet Ilya Kaminsky described his new book *Deaf Republic* as being rooted in the thinking of prominent disability scholar Rosemary Garland-Thompson. As part of an interview for that year’s T. S. Eliot Prize, for which *Deaf Republic* was shortlisted, Kaminsky quoted Garland-Thompson’s call in her book *Extraordinary Bodies* for “the disabled body [to] move from the realm of the hospital room to the realm of political minority”. This article argues that within contemporary Scottish literature, an example of this movement in action is the work of the queer crip activist and writer Ever Dundas. Set in a dystopian near-future, Dundas’ 2022 novel *HellSans* makes disability itself the central conceit of a novel which presents a society divided up into groups, those who are and are not made sick by the use of a particular font in government advertising. The article interrogates how Dundas challenges established ideas regarding the “good disabled”, while rooting the novel in radical artistic traditions in which disability itself is harnessed as an act of resistance.

En 2019, le poète ukrainien Ilya Kaminsky disait de son nouvel ouvrage *Deaf Republic* qu’il trouvait son origine dans la pensée de l’universitaire majeure des études sur le handicap, Rosemary Garland-Thompson. Dans son entretien cette année-là avec le comité du T. S. Eliot Prize, prix pour lequel *Deaf Republic* était considéré, Kaminsky cita l’appel de Garland-Thompson, dans son livre *Extraordinary Bodies*, à ce que « le corps handicapé passe du domaine de l’hôpital à celui des minorités politiques ». Cet article défend l’idée que dans la littérature écossaise contemporaine, l’œuvre de l’activiste homosexuel et pro-handicap Ever Dundas est un exemple de ce mouvement. Se déroulant dans un futur dystopique proche, le roman de Dundas, *HellSans* (2022), fait du handicap lui-même le dispositif central du roman, qui dépeint une société scindée en deux groupes : ceux que l’utilisation d’une certaine police de caractères dans la communication gouvernementale affecte, et ceux qu’elle laisse indemnes. Cet article examine comment Dundas remet en cause les préjugés bien établis concernant « les bons handicapés » tout en fondant son roman sur les traditions artistiques radicales dans lesquelles s’intègre le handicap comme acte de résistance.

INDEX

Mots-clés: littérature du handicap radicale, Écosse, Dundas

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