

# OWNING IT

## TEACHING RESOURCES

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*Owning It* is an essential read for every student in your school – and for you, too.

Some of these stories might be challenging for educators. There are difficult or embarrassing interactions with teachers and staff, and these memories have stuck with the writers into adulthood – which is why we're reading them now.

Adults are often out of their depth when it comes to disability. The teachers, school receptionists and coaches in these stories no doubt did their best. There are no easy answers.

But personal stories have a unique power to allow us to see the world from a different perspective – in the case of this book, to see the world not from the perspective of the well-meaning adults we often hear from, but the disabled children on the receiving end.

We also see in these stories how important the reactions of the writers' peers were – both the non-disabled children who bullied them or caused them pain and the joyous, true and precious friends.

Perhaps we have a role, as educators, to foster an environment where the latter comes more easily than the former.

As the authors write, 'This is the book we wish we'd had when we were young.'

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- Other themes that can be developed into lesson plans for ages 12–14

These notes are to be used in conjunction with the images on the accompanying PowerPoint.





# Lesson Plan: *Owning It* as an introduction to disability

**(Powerpoint, Slide 1)** Use the front cover to explore students' perceptions of disability. Ask: what is disability?

If a negative answer comes back, like 'it means there's something wrong with you', then gently correct to a neutral definition, like 'it means your body or brain works differently to the norm'. NB this is a useful, simple definition for children, where an important first step is often to combat stigma. More nuanced discussion of the legal definition of disability in the UN convention or the Americans with Disabilities Act or Disability Act UK, for example, can come when they're older.

So it's about being different . . . but it's also very common, as pointed out in the book's introduction (encourage students to think about their own experience of disability, but without making disabled students feel singled out, as they may not identify as such).

Suggest to students that they may know disabled people, but not know that they do, because disability comes in many forms. Let's explore . . . **(Powerpoint, Slides 2-6)**

- Steven and Jan use powerchairs which run on a motor, whereas Rebekah and Alex use manual wheelchairs, which are self-propelled. Why might that be? (Answer: their disabilities affect their arms in different ways/to different degrees.)
- James and Christa are amputees using different mobility aids, and Imani has her legs, but uses crutches. Why might those mobility aids suit them well? (Answer: James and Christa are both missing one leg, but to different extents, whereas Imani has both her legs, but must support them using her arms.)
- Sora has a facial disfigurement, Carly a very visible skin condition, Jen has a hand disfigurement and scarring from skin grafts, Eugene has dwarfism – they don't use mobility aids, so what do they have in common? (Answer: the burden of being stared at and commented on by strangers.)
- Ilya's essay is partly about using sight – lip-reading – while Leona's is partly about using hearing – echolocation. What might their disabilities be? (Answer: Ilya is Deaf and Leona is Blind.)
- Kendra, Polly, Jessica and Elle are invisibly disabled – what does this mean? What might be difficult about it? (Answer: the burden of being misunderstood and doubted by everyone, but especially grown-ups like teachers and doctors.)

So disability comes in many forms, and all these writers had childhood experiences that were different from each other, and from the norm. They've each written down a story from their childhood that captures something of that experience – of what it was like to grow up and live in the world with their disability.

But they were also normal kids with normal interests and experiences, as their portraits show. Let's look again, and see how we can line them up not by their disabilities but by the things they loved to do. Maybe your students love some of these same things . . . **(Powerpoint, Slides 7-11)**

- There are sports: Steven is a chess and baseball fan, Alex and Eugene play basketball, Eugene skateboards too, Carly rollerskates and James plays football.
- There's music and dance: Christa and James play the guitar, Sora does ballet and acrobatics.
- Elle and Polly are into reading; Leona's into animals and science; and Alex likes . . . holding hands with boys at the movies!

**(Powerpoint, Slide 12-13)** Finally, here are those writers now. Which is which? Here again, with names.





## Owning It – Reading Comprehension using “Faking It”

This is a comprehension exercise suitable for key stage two, ages 9-11, using extracts from “Faking It” by James Catchpole. For the curriculum in England, it should cover all key content domains for practice KS2 reading assessments.

### **My Leg: Extract 1 from “Faking It” by James Catchpole (pages 24–27 in *Owning It*, slides 14-23)**

People always want to know what happened to my leg. They did when I was a kid, and they still do now that I’m forty-something. So I’m going to tell you.

It’s a good story. Ready? My leg never really felt like part of me, and this feeling grew over time, so that, by the end of primary school, I’d started to feel I’d be better off without it. And soon after I started secondary school, I knew it was time for action. So, off came the leg.

My parents were a little anxious, it must be said. They worried for my health. But I reckoned it was my decision at that point – I was thirteen after all – and they couldn’t really stop me. I just did it myself one morning before school: I left my leg there, on the bedroom floor, and off I went.

Best decision I ever made.

I hope you’ve worked out by now that I’m talking about my fake leg. If not, then that last scene must have looked kind of dramatic in your head. Was it . . . messy? Sorry. I can tell you now, no home-surgery involved. No one had to shampoo the carpet.

The leg I ditched at thirteen was the false one. That’s what we called it: my false leg. And that’s how it felt to me, by that stage: like a fake. A counterfeit.

I’m a single-leg, through-hip amp – pretty much always have been. The first part of that is medical-speak for ‘one leg, all off’; the last part is amp-speak for ‘amputee’. And ‘amputee’ just means you’re down a leg or arm, or two.

As a leg amputee, from the time I could stand up, I’d been given a prosthesis – a false leg – to walk on. If that brings to mind those dashing Paralympians, charging round a running track on futuristic blades, then do by all means enjoy that thought. I do. Those guys are excellent. But that was never an option, and not just because it was A Long Time Ago.

To run with a blade, you need part of a real leg to attach it to. Just a few inches of leg will do. But being a through-hip amp means there’s nothing below your bum. And you can’t attach a running blade to your bum.

Well, you probably can, but not in any useful way. No, a through-hip prosthesis doesn’t really conjure the word ‘dashing’. It’s a modified bucket-and-stick job. You sit in the bucket and walk on the stick. I say ‘walk’, but it’s more of a lurch, really – you know, like Lurch, from The Addams Family.

To be fair to the prosthetists, they did their best and the modifications were clever. There was a rubbery foot-shaped foot to give you some balance and spring. And there were joints: a ‘free hip’ to allow the leg to swing forwards independently of the rest of you, which did make things just a little less lurchy; and for the very daring, a ‘free knee’, ‘for the smoothest, most natural walk’.

I liked the idea of a free knee, because it rhymed, which made it sound like a political slogan, and who doesn’t like the idea of freedom, even for knees, which work so hard after all. But I never mastered it. There was a price to be paid for walking more smoothly. To walk with a free knee, you needed to walk slowly and evenly. And what kid wants to walk slowly and evenly? I tried rushing and collapsing for a bit, then gave up on the free knee, and went back to rushing and lurching. Sorry, knee.

You may not know this, but they weigh a bit, through-hip false legs. Especially grown-up ones. These days, if I leave mine standing in front of the snack cupboard, my youngest daughter can just about drag it clear so she can reach her crisps after nursery. She’s almost four, though, and powered by crisp-lust. A year ago when she tried moving my leg, she tended to get squished.



## Crutches: Extract 2 from “Faking It” by James Catchpole (pages 32–33 in *Owning It*)

I haven’t mentioned crutches, have I?

Crutches are the best. If you’re missing the whole of one leg, which of these sounds more natural? Either you can strap a fake leg around your bum with Velcro and learn to balance on it, and then, slowly, to lurch. Or you can use the limbs you do have to do the job of the one you don’t: you can use crutches to walk with your arms.

When I got home from school, exhausted from dragging my false leg around all day, and more likely than not rubbed raw from the socket, I’d take off my leg and pick up my crutches. And what a relief that was! Crutches may sound like hard work, but if you use them every day your body soon adapts. Your arms and shoulders muscle up until they can easily carry your weight, and the skin on your palms toughens: pretty soon your shoulders stop aching and your hands stop blistering, and then crutches are just how you walk. Or run . . .

### Discussion Questions:

1. Why, for James, did his leg ‘never really feel like part of him’?
2. What does the word ‘counterfeit’ mean?

Genuine      Fake      Beautiful      Decisive

3. What is a ‘prosthesis’?
4. Explain all the reasons why James doesn’t like using his prosthetic leg. (Give evidence from the text.)
5. Find some examples of when James uses humour to capture the readers’ attention.
6. Why does James put the word ‘walk’ in inverted commas/quotation marks?
7. With a quote from the text, why did James like the idea of a ‘free knee’?
8. In James’s life, which order do these things happen in? Order the events from 1 to 4.

Leaving his leg on his bedroom floor

Going to primary school

Going to secondary school

Leaving his leg standing in front of the snack cupboard

9. Compare how James feels about crutches with how he feels about using his fake leg. Which does he prefer and why? (Read both *My Leg* and *Crutches*.)

10. What most sticks in your mind about James’s story, and what do you think he might talk about next? Use clues from the text to support your prediction.

### KS2 curriculum content domains covered

**Vocabulary Questions:** Will help to work out the meaning of unknown words and phrases using context clues. (Q.2)

**Retrieval Questions:** Will help to go into a text and retrieve the facts and key details. (Q.3, 7)

**Sequence Questions:** Help pupils identify, order and summarise key events in the text, and show understanding of the narrative. (Q.8)


**Inference Questions:** Will help to hunt for clues in a text about how someone might be feeling or why something is happening. (Q.1)

**Prediction Questions:** Will help to work out what might happen next from clues in the text. (Q.8)

**Compare, Contrast and Comment Questions:** Will help to discuss the content of a paragraph/text and compare events and characters. (Q.9, 10)

**Author Choice:** Will help to spot examples of ambitious vocabulary and figurative language and explain how the words and phrases that have been used add to the meaning of the text. (Q.5, 6)





## Lesson plan on prosthetics/mobility aids for ages 11+ : compare James Catchpole's experience of using a prosthesis/mobility aids in "*Faking It*" with those of Christa Couture in "*Growing Pains*" and Daniel Sluman in "*Performance*" (Slides 24-27)

Unlike James, who has been an amputee for almost all of his life, Christa and Daniel both have a leg amputated in their early teens because of bone cancer.

Here's the moment in "*Growing Pains*" when Christa's mum tells her:

*The only option left was to amputate my leg above the knee. Over dinner, my mom gave me the news. I poked my spaghetti for a moment, not looking up, and then said, 'Bummer,' before taking another bite. I felt like everything was exploding, but I pushed the feelings away and fought to not get emotional.*

*'I'll just get a fake leg, right?' I asked.*

*'Yes,' my mom replied slowly. I shrugged to try and hide how overwhelmed I felt, wanting it to be as simple as 'just' anything.*

Do you think it sounds like it's going to be simple, really? Why not?

Christa is a performer before her leg is amputated: she sings, acts and dances. After she gets her prosthetic leg, she asks her physiotherapist whether amputees can dance.


*'Can amputees dance?' I asked my physiotherapist, one day. I was standing on a trampoline and she had a belt tied around my waist to catch me when I started to fall over. Which I did, because she was bouncing me on a trampoline. Honestly, the question was premature. I couldn't yet walk without holding onto a person, a wall or a cane, and I was months away from being able to wear my prosthesis for a full day, but my focus was singular: I wanted to be a performer.*

*'Of course they can!' she replied encouragingly.*

This brief exchange has an outsize effect. It helps decide the course of Christa's life over the next few years. Having read to the end of the story, what do you think might have been a more helpful response to Christa's question in this moment?

Daniel in '*Performance*' is a quieter character than Christa – not a stage performer – and struggles to come to terms with the change in his appearance, and how the world sees him:

*My amputation was high – all of my left leg was gone, which meant learning to use a prosthesis was going to be difficult. The prosthetic wraps around your waist. It's hot and uncomfortable, and it digs into your hips, so most people like me move around more easily on crutches. But doing that meant I would bring a lot of attention to myself. I knew that every time I walked outside the door I would be stared at and held by the glances of strangers who at best would be curious, at worst, horrified by the way I looked. I was never the most confident child in my class but now I felt so nervous about how I appeared in public and what people would think about me. I was embarrassed just imagining it. I wanted to lock myself away from the world.*



How is this different from James' experience of having one leg? And how is it similar? How do James and Daniel feel about using their prosthetic legs? And their crutches?

Daniel reinvents himself through music. He learns to play the guitar and joins a band. Eventually, they play their first gig, and Daniel finds himself up on stage, in the spotlight:

*As I looked around the room from my chair, I realised I didn't feel any different to anyone on the stage. I didn't see anyone staring or pointing at me and my differently shaped body, and I was suddenly aware that this was something I could do: I could take to the stage in front of friends and strangers, and if I played well, I could not only be accepted and appreciated, but regardless of the way I looked, I could move people with my skill and my musicianship. I could still set my own terms.*

Why do you think his story is called 'Performance'? James and Christa learn to play the guitar, too – in fact, all three end up performing. Can you imagine what drew them to it?





## Owning It – Other Themes

Any of these can be developed into lesson plans, using the page-numbered references below, and thoughts from Rebekah Taussig (author of *Teddy Bear Island*), who has taught high school in the US. We've asked her to consider students in the 11+ age range.

### Exclusion and Inclusion

Ashley's thoughts on 'inclusion' as an introduction – *Well Served*, p.232:

*If you are disabled, your growing-up years can be littered with half-hearted attempts at inclusion that are done for no other reason than to check a box. You can be made to feel like an exception or a big deal, or that you ought to be grateful that you're being included, as if that's the be-all and end-all. As if the whole point of inclusion is that everyone else walks away feeling better about themselves.*

What does it really mean to be included, or excluded?

Examples of exclusion by . . .

- Peers: *Lobster Girl* p.85; *Totally Normal* p.104; *All Bodies Are Good Bodies* p.160
- Teachers: *My Own Words for My Own World* p.220; *Growing Pains* p.268; *Naughty or Sick?* p.286; *Disabled Heroes* p.292; *Pomegranate* p.338
- Medics: *Smile* p.64; *Dear Carly* p.138; *Snakes, Bats, Rats and Rotifers* p.244
- The built environment: *Wheels on Ice* p.121; *How to Belong* p.76

Examples of inclusion by . . .

- Non-disabled friends: *Teddy Bear Island* p.16; *Smile* p.60; *Totally Normal* p.115; *Wheels on Ice* p.123; *Performance* p.174; *Well Served* p.232
- Family: *Smile* p.66; *Totally Normal* p.115; *Wheels on Ice* p.130; *Dear Carly* p.141; *Lip-reading in Odessa* p.148; *The First Family Adventure* p.317
- Other disabled people: *How to Belong* p.73/75; *All Bodies Are Good Bodies* p.161; *Faking It* p.39; *Disabled Heroes* p.304; *Why Do You Feel Sorry For Me?* p.188; *My Own Words for My Own World* p.221

Rebekah's thoughts . . .

I can see a class discussion gathering a list of ways communities foster inclusion and exclusion. You could divide the class into groups, giving each group a few of the essays to mine for clues. Each group develops a list of best practices and reports back to the whole group. As a class, you could discuss the strongest patterns. (What comes up again and again?) Make a giant list on the board.

Alternatively, it might be interesting to have each student reflect on their own experiences. Have they ever experienced a time of feeling like they were uniquely included/excluded? They could write an essay telling the story of that experience and integrate one of the essays from the book as a way of highlighting a similarity or difference between their experience and the author's. The essay could conclude with their reflections about how genuine inclusion is created.

### Representation

- *A Word to Live By for a Young Imani* p.47: the importance for Imani of seeing the other black disabled girl in church, who is older and shows her how her life might go



- “Lobster Girl” p.85: how does it affect Jen to see herself represented in a freak show?
- Christa (p.263), Daniel (p.173), Sora (p.115) and Eugene (p.297) on having to be pioneers: people without precedent in their chosen fields
- Sora (p.117), Carly (p.142) and Elle (p.346) on being the precedent for others

Rebekah’s thoughts . . .

Independently or in a small group, choose your top three favourite TV shows and/or films. Do an audit - what disabilities are represented in this show? Then as a whole class, report your findings and gather the numbers. Out of all the shows students watch, how many disabled characters appear in the stories? You could dig into the numbers further by tallying the intersecting identities (e.g. how many of the disabled characters included are men? White? Wheelchair users?). Compare the class numbers gathered in TV/film to the actual number of disabilities.

A deeper dive could assess possible tropes attached to the few disabled characters represented. How many of the characters are the villains of the stories? How many are there to propel the plot for the main characters (e.g. teach a lesson, reveal another character is good/kind)? How many have a storyline that is about something other than their disability?

### Charity and Religion

- The benefits and drawbacks of charity when you’re disabled, in “Teddy Bear Island” (p.12), “Why Do You Feel Sorry for Me?” (p.188/191) and “The Price of Free” (p.203)
- Imani (“A Word to Live By for a Young Imani” p.44) and Matilda (“The First Family Adventure” p.325) on the dangers of religious narratives around disability
- This can be applied to contemporary instances of charity/disability narratives familiar to schoolchildren now – Children in Need in the UK, or perhaps Autism Speaks in the US.

Rebekah’s thoughts . . .

As a group and using examples from the book, identify what makes a charity/acts of kindness helpful/harmful. Then in small groups, come up with a plan/proposal for an organisation/campaign/activity/group that is actually helpful to a marginalised group. The plan should be detailed - exactly what the organisation is offering, how it would be structured, who would be on the leadership team, etc. Maybe the assignment culminates in the group making some kind of advertisement for their idea and/or defending their proposal in presentations to the whole class.

### Visible difference

The constant public performance of disability in examples from:

- Eugene (p.300), Imani (p.44), Jen (p.92), Steven (p.200), Matilda (p.313) and Sora (p.116), who refer to the burden of unwanted everyday encounters with the general public, due to visible disability: see [whathappenedtoyou.co.uk](http://whathappenedtoyou.co.uk)
- Daniel (p.179), Christa (p.271), Sora (p.117), Carly (p.141) and Leona (p.249), who sang, played, danced or spoke on a stage or in front of their class, partly as a way of retaking control of their own narrative
- Eugene (p.297), Ashley (p.232), James (p.36) and Steven (p.208), who all played sport in non-disabled arenas, which entails a degree of performance, and the overturning of assumptions





## Invisible difference

Being treated as non-disabled, because your disability isn't always visible.

- Jessica ("*Naughty or Sick?*" p.286), Polly ("*My Own Words for My Own World*" p.211) and Kendra ("*Smile*" p.64) are treated like they're making a fuss by school and camp staff because their disabilities aren't always visible or understood. Accusations of laziness, spoken and unspoken – of being difficult – hang over their experience of camp and school.
- Elle's autism ("*Pomegranate*" p.331) isn't visible either. She describes adapting her behaviour: 'I've learned to copy, to mimic, in order to pass as one of them.'

## Literary techniques

Owning It can be used as a jumping-off point for teaching students different ways of telling their own story, including . . .

- Looking back from the present ("*Faking It*", "*Disabled Heroes*")
- Retelling the past as the present ("*Lobster Girl*", "*Smile*")
- Writing to your younger self ("*Dear Carly*", "*A Word to Live By for a Young Imani*")
- Self-portraiture, as in Sophie Kamlish's chapter images for each writer

Rebekah's thoughts . . .

If I were teaching this class, I would love to do an assignment where students told their own stories adopting one of these techniques. The prompt could be -- tell a story about a time you felt uniquely included/excluded, or tell a story about a part of you that you feel is misunderstood or that most people don't see/understand. The essay could include a reflection component where they identify a few specific moments in one or more essays that helped them shape their own storytelling. After everyone writes their essays, the class could have an optional reading where volunteers read their stories aloud. There could also be a class discussion about what it felt like to share/receive these stories. Did the act of self-narration change the way they saw their own stories? What did it feel like to share/listen to classmates' stories? Why might storytelling be a powerful tool for under-represented individuals/communities?