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The Power of Empathy in Palacio's *Wonder*

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“Wonder” a novel written by R.J. Palacio is an extremely moving and uplifting story with didactic overtone. The novel explores the complex outlook of man that does not address the difference between exterior and interior beauty. The story follows Auggie throughout fifth grade, depicting his worries and hurdles along the way. The story finally culminates, shattering the ironical ideals of life and letting the virtue of kindness rule over righteousness, regardless of background, circumstances, or appearance. The precept of kindness echoes aloud as it is important to be kinder than necessary because our deeds are like monuments built with memories instead of stone.

R.J. Palacio, an art director and graphic designer for more than twenty years took the world's literature by storm with the publication of her debut novel “Wonder”.Palacio has been for more than twenty years in the publishing industry and designing jackets for countless books but she always dreamt of writing a novel of her own. What inspired her to write this novel “Wonder” was a chance encounter with an extraordinary child in front of an ice cream store where her three year old son cried in fear and she grabbed her kids and left. She admits, “I was really angry at myself afterwards for the way I had responded”. She adds “What I should have done is simply turned to the little girl and started up a conversation and shown my kids that there was nothing to be afraid of. But instead what I ended up doing was leaving the scene so quickly that I missed that opportunity to turn the situation into a great teaching moment for my kids. And that got me thinking about what it must be like to... have to face a world every day that doesn't know how to face you back.” [Michele]

The incident had a strong hold on Palacio and she started writing her novel that same night to make the world know the story of August Pullman, the protagonist of the novel. She states that the character of August came to her mind fully formed. She set out to write a book about empathy and tolerance, an endearing tale of family, friendships, resilience of the human spirit and power of kindness. Her novel deals with August Pullman also known as “Auggie”, a ten year old boy born with a distorted facial features – a “craniofacial difference” caused by an anomaly in his DNA. Due to the anomaly his eyes are in the wrong place, he has no outer ears, his skin is “melted”, he has cleft palate, no cheek bones, and he has learned to steel himself against the horrid reactions he produces in strangers. He introduces himself: “My name is August, by the way. I won't describe what I look like. Whatever you're thinking it is probably worse.”The novel opens as he enters school and the story unfolds through several points of view: perspective of his sister, his parents, his best friends, his do-gooders and the mean kids. The chapters move from character to character, always in first person and with remarkable skill. Such an array of perspectives allows readers to understand how Auggie's entire community struggles to learn compassion and empathy. At the centre of all these stories narrated by different characters lies the conflict, the same challenge that Palacio faced at the ice-cream store: how to confront the discomfort around difference; how to choose kindness.

Auggie's tale begins with his arrival at school that does not test him only but it affects everyone in the community. Auggie may be struggling to find a place in this world but that world must find a way to make room for him, too. He, being an over-protective child had been home-schooled by his mother and as the novel opens he is about to start fifth grade. He is extremely worried as he feels how he will fit into middle-school life when he looks so different from everyone else. He had undergone the pain of twenty-seven surgeries to correct his facial anomalies but still possesses a face that has earned him cruel nicknames such as "Freak", "Freddy Krueger", "Gross-out" and "Lizard face". He knows all the reactions his appearance causes: the shock, the smirking, the covert glances, and the hostility. His "feature look like they've been melted, like the dripping on a candle" and he is used to people averting their eyes when they see him. The only night of the year he feels normal is Halloween, because everyone's wearing a mask and the outer skin lies hidden. He states: "I wish everyday could be Halloween. We could all wear masks all the time. Then we could walk around and get to know each other before we go to see what we looked like under the masks." To hide the sting of pain he wore a toy's astronaut helmet for two long years and in the process realized the significance of virtues and intrinsic worth in one's life. He snuggled with the pain to rise as an astute to teach the lesson of acceptance and kindness: what is inside is more powerful than the outside.

Auggie, in order to survive in a cruel, disheartened and vicarious world, created a safe world for himself in North River Heights, his Manhattan neighbourhood. He states in a soft tone, "On our block, everybody knows me and I know everybody... I know Mrs Grimaldi, the lady who's always sitting by her window, and the old guy who walks up and down the street whistling like a bird... and the waitresses at the coffee who all call me 'honey' and give me lollipops." He is smart, funny, kind and brave yet his father thinks that sending him to Beecher Prep would be like sending a "lamb to the slaughter". But this decision to send him school changed his world. Although extremely self-conscious and scared of being around children of his own age, he starts enjoying school. He is touched by the empathy values he finds in Jack and Summer who befriend him almost from the instant they meet. Summer symbolises the unpretentious side of humanity as she takes the lead to sit beside him at lunch time. She feels motivated to be with him and soon realizes that he is great, funny and adorable kid. Jack, one of the students appointed by Mr. Tushmar to take August for the school tour, initially pretends to be friends with him but later genuinely appreciates Auggie for who he is. The company of Summer and Jack definitely lessens the intensity of torment Auggie has to suffer as he realizes that "the universe takes care of all its birds."

Auggie represents a world where love, compassion, patience, tolerance, piety and endurance are the pillars. He suffers and torments not to be shattered by the circumstances but rather to nourish his foundation values. In spite of Julian encouraging his "gang" to avoid and isolate Auggie and writing mean notes in his locker, Auggie reacts to his meanness with great composure and sensibility. He impresses with his compassionate values and upholds the statement that "It's not enough to be friendly. You have to be a friend" and "When given a choice between Being Right or Being Kind, Choose Kind." The power of empathy is seen in the novel through the portrayal of various characters. As the story unfolds, the characters including Auggie start realizing the power of empathy in this world: a power that atones the world. The family of August Pullman believes in kindness and are crucial to his growth and

maturity. They are a constant source of support, encouragement and love pulling him through all odds of life. Justin rightly points at the unconditional support of Pullmans. He confesses: “If it really was all random, the universe would abandon us completely. And the universe doesn’t. It takes care of its most fragile creations in ways we can’t see.” While the universe has been unkind to Auggie in many ways, it is perhaps the most important way that it has blessed him with a loving and supportive family. His sister Via makes it easier for him to face any challenge in life. But the cruelty and unkind behaviour of man devour him. Auggie does not want to be defined by the way he looks and hopes that people can see through his unexpected behaviour. He has multiple conversations with his mother about heaven, particularly about whether or not people keep their faces after they die. He likes to think that sometime in another life he might be known for something more than his unusual face. Things in his life do take a turn when his class plans an overnight Nature Reserve camping trip when Auggie and Jack are attacked by seventh grade students by another school who insult Auggie. Not only does Jack defend him but his several other classmates: Miles Noury, Henry Joplin and Amos Conti (formerly part of Julian’s crowd) come to his defence and befriend him. At the graduation ceremony, Mr. Tushman makes an important graduation speech about the importance of being kind to all people regardless of background, circumstances or appearance. He addresses that “If every single person in this room made it a rule that wherever you are, and whenever you can, you will try to act a little kinder than is necessary –the world really would be a better place.” Auggie is awarded the “Henry Ward Beecher Medal” that “honors students who have been notable or exemplary in certain areas throughout the school year.” He gets a standing ovation, takes picture with everyone including those who had earlier refused to. The power of kindness, compassion and love entices humanity as they rejoice in their evolved self. The note of happiness is resounded in the ears with the final words of his mother who whispered to him, “You really are a wonder, Auggie.” Earlier Auggie was known as a “medical wonder” on account of his strange condition but now he is seen as a wonder because of his strength of character and unwavering bravery and gentleness. He has taught both characters and real-life readers, important lessons of kindness.

Palacio with her novel “Wonder” revolutionised the world to take the pledge to choose kindness. She inspired a movement based on the importance of empathy and acceptance known as “Choose Kind”. She writes, “We carry with us, as human beings, not just the capacity to be kind, but the very choice of kindness.” Without being moralistic, she conveys to the world to be kind whenever possible as one act of kindness can make someone’s day and indeed can change someone’s life. She strongly expresses, “Courage. Kindness. Character. These are the qualities that define us as human beings, and propel us, on occasion, to greatness.”

According to Seamen “Wonder is a novel that enlightens and teaches, it opens our mind, eyes and heart and makes the world a better place.” It is a story that produces strong introspection wrought through the series of interiorized monologues that show the frailties and foibles behind each of Auggie’s trials and hurts. His life is a beautiful told lesson in empathy that clearly voices the incalculable benefit of being kind. Palacio strongly believes that empathy as a value cannot be taught but can only be inspired. She truly writes in the novel: “It is only with one’s heart that one can see clearly. What is essential is invisible to the eye.” [Internet]

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