CHAPTER 3

The Many Voices of Charlie Gordon
On the Representation of Intellectual Disability in Daniel Keyes’s Flowers for Algernon

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Like many SF novels, Daniel Keyes’s Flowers for Algernon relies on a technological “advancement” in order to shed light on the challenges of the present. In Flowers, that technology comes in the form of an experimental neurological operation that, if successful, will make the novel’s intellectually disabled narrator-protagonist, Charlie Gordon, highly intelligent. In a typical first-person Bildungsroman, a unified narrative voice recounts the experiences of the protagonist’s life at a point in time that occurs after, or at the end of, the sequence of events that the novel describes. The technological device that drives Flowers complicates this convention in several significant ways. The novel is composed of short journal entries, or “progress reports,” that Charlie has been asked to write in order to record the results of the operation. Charlie indeed grows in intelligence and self-awareness, and the journal entries thus provide a nearly real-time account of Charlie’s development during this period. Ordinarily, the compressed time span of Charlie’s involvement with the experiment would provide limited scope for an overview of his life; however, the dramatic changes caused by the experiment produce a radically condensed version of his life, from the metaphorical “child” that opens the narration to the self-aware “adult” that he gradually becomes. As a result, it is difficult to locate Charlie’s true voice, as he perceives his experiences through varying levels of disability and capability. Yet, while his nature seems to change, the narrative is rooted throughout in a consistent, or core, voice in relation to which the several apparent versions of Charlie can be seen as variations. Of critical importance to this representation of Charlie’s transformation from intellectual disability to hyperintelligence, therefore, is the way in which the author manages, despite
the apparent differences in narrative voice as the novel proceeds, to maintain a coherent sense of character. In this essay, I examine how Keyes accomplishes this alternation between variety and unity, in part by making the character’s awareness of his past experience central to the representation of his developing identity. Moreover, I suggest that it is precisely this unified voice that reinforces the plausibility of the experiment on which the novel depends. Finally, I argue that, while Keyes is largely successful in developing this voice, the representation falters somewhat toward the novel’s conclusion, as it consolidates and reinforces conventions of dystopian SF that have been suggested throughout the narrative.

**SF, Experimental Plausibility, and “Mrs Brown”**

Let’s look first at that experiment, for it is on this minimal thread that the novel *as science fiction* hangs. Charlie is a 32-year-old “mentally retarded” man who works in a bakery. He attends a night school class for people with intellectual disabilities, and it apparently is through his teacher’s intervention that he is chosen for participation in the experiment: a surgical procedure that purportedly will transform him from a person of limited intellectual ability into a “genius.” The experiment has only been tested on a lab mouse, Algernon, who has already begun to demonstrate some of the increased intelligence that the experimenters hope will be successful in humans. We realize, early in the novel, that the procedure for which Charlie is a candidate is quite unproven. As Charlie reports in his journal, Algernon is “a speshul mouse the 1st animal to stay smart so long after the operashun” (Keyes 16), and the procedure has never been tried on a human being. Once the operation has been performed and Charlie has returned to work, he also tells us that the experimenters have asked him not to tell his coworkers about the procedure, with the implication being that the experiment would seem radical even to those who live within the parameters of the speculative world that *Flowers* establishes.

At the same time, significantly, the radicality of the experiment within the context of the narrative world may make it easier for readers to disregard the current impossibility of the procedure and allow themselves to entertain the “possible but non-actual world” (Stockwell 40) that the narrative posits. Indeed, by registering the doubts of the characters regarding the procedure, and then countering that skepticism with Charlie’s incremental increases in intelligence after the procedure, Keyes enables readers to “domesticate the amazing” (Suvin 4)—to regard the operation as a plausible breakthrough that occurs before their very eyes. In order to accomplish this, Keyes, through the first three-quarters of the novel, presents a world that, while “estranging” on some levels, resides mostly in the familiar of our everyday world—a tension between generic restriction and