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# “I saw at a glance that your case was exceptional, and that you also were Occult”: Comedy, magic and exceptional disabilities in Stella Benson’s *Living Alone* (1919)

Leslie de Bont

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- 1 Two biographical sketches by Bottome and Ellis published shortly after Stella Benson’s death in 1933 along with the full-length biographical essay drawing on Benson’s forty-one diaries donated by her husband, James O’Gorman Anderson, to the Cambridge University Library show how exceptional Benson’s life was (Bottome 1934; Roberts 1939; Grant 1987). Born into the landed gentry, Benson was educated at home in Shropshire but in 1913 she left for an independent life in London where she quickly got involved with the Suffrage movement. Despite her “frequent, painful, debilitating, life-threatening bouts of bronchitis, pleurisy, and sinus infection” (Benton 2020) as well as her partial deafness probably caused by a series of sinus operations, Benson travelled around the world and lived and worked in the West Indies, California, China, India, Hong-Kong and Vietnam. Jane Berney’s 2017 paper for one examines Benson’s surprising—and successful—campaign “against the licensing of prostitution in 1930s Hong Kong” (Berney 2017), while Vera Brittain (1940), and more recently Catherine Clay (2017), documented her long-lasting friendship with writers such as Winifred Holtby and Naomi Mitchison.
- 2 That Benson wrote eight novels and several collections of short stories (along with two travel books, three collections of poems and numerous diaries) surprisingly seems to have caught less attention. Benson was, however, a fairly successful author who received praises from Virginia Woolf, Rebecca West and Katherine Mansfield for example (Woolf 1983, 191-2; Grant 83; Mansfield 102-4). Her writing was also recognised by several literary institutions, and her last novel, *Tobit Transplanted* (1931), won the

Silver Medal of the Royal Society of Literature as well as the *Prix Fémina Vie Heureuse* in 1932 (Roberts 273). However, excepted Meredith Bedell's full-length critical essay on Benson's literary works published in 1983, very few scholarly publications sought to delve into her fiction. Fortunately, three recent book chapters, Debra Rae Cohen's "Encoded enclosures: the Wartime novels of Stella Benson" (2001), Marion Gibson's "'We have started a new spell': Witchcraft in wartime" (2017) and Nicola Darwood's "Laughter and Dying: Stella Benson's *Hope Against Hope* and *Other Stories* and *Tobit Transplanted*" (2020), have pinpointed the complexity of Benson's fiction while demonstrating its exceptional status. Cohen, Gibson and Darwood observe that Benson's novels and stories do not quite fit with contemporary aesthetics despite numerous parallels with canonical modernism, which Rebecca Harwood and Klaudia Hiu Yen Lee also comment upon in their respective papers (Harwood 124; Lee 570-2).

- 3 *Living Alone* (1919), Benson's third novel, is indeed not fully amenable to categorisation. Bedell refers to the novel as "ten loosely connected short stories" (Bedell 61) while Robin Hyde, writing in 1937, claims that "Stella's books are in a world of their own" (Hyde 226) that trouble our understanding of modernist fiction. After an intriguing caveat: "This is not a real book. It does not deal with real people, nor should it be read by real people [...]", *Living Alone* opens with a sombre poem that is immediately followed by an amusing incipit in which an odd-looking young woman, who turns out to be a witch, interrupts a Charity meeting on War Saving, "discussing methods of persuading poor people to save money" (1). This is where she meets the main protagonist, Sarah Brown, who is quickly defined by her peculiar aloofness and declining health. The novel gradually connects magic and disability, and Sarah Brown eventually moves in the witch's "House of Living Alone", where she experiences magic, as well as several ordeals. The eponymous house only hosts exceptional characters and really concentrates the novel's articulation of individual exceptions and modern social groups:

[it] is meant to provide for the needs of those who dislike hotels, clubs, settlements, hostels, boarding-houses, and lodgings only less than their own homes; who detest landladies, waiters, husbands and wives, charwomen, and all forms of lookers after.  
(14)

- 4 In this essay, I will also consider Stella Benson's novel within the frame of the new modernist studies introduced by Mao and Walkowitz in 2008 as an alternative, an "other" of modernism (Darwood 2020, 1) that articulates many modernist concerns and stylistic experimentations without fully engaging with them. Like many modernist texts, the novel combines or borrows from several genres and subgenres, and interrogates many labels, ranging from high modernism to low- or middle-brow<sup>1</sup>, from fantasy to comedy and psychological realism, from inclusive political stances to withdrawal into the self. And even if it has been referred to as one of the first fantasy books in the aftermath of World War I, predating Hope Mirrlees's *Lud-in-the Mist* and Sylvia Townsend Warner's *Lolly Willowses* (Stableford 112), I aim to demonstrate that because of its delicate and elusive depiction of magic, the fantastic dimension in Benson's *Living Alone* is a bit of an exception in the canon<sup>2</sup>. The omnipresent historical and psychological realism, added to the importance of autobiographical details (including the protagonist's initials, the name of her dog, as well as her deafness and numerous afflictions which all clearly echo Benson's own life), could lead us to pinpoint it as "transitional fantasy", thereby mirroring Cohen's remark that the novel "has as much to do with late nineteenth-century fantasists like Barrie as political allegorists

like Sylvia Townsend Warner" (Cohen 2001, 38)<sup>3</sup>. Colin Manlove refers to Benson's novel as an example of "emotive fantasy" (Manlove 102-3) but *Living Alone* has also been classified under "humorous fantasy" because of its incongruous juxtapositions of realism and the supernatural. These conflicting labels lead Cohen to conclude that with *Living Alone* Stella Benson "re-genres" war fiction (Cohen 2002, 48-64). "Genre-mixing", Cohen adds, is one of Benson's many stylistic and aesthetic idiosyncrasies (Cohen 2001, 38), which also include a particular aesthetics of fragmentation and vignette, as well as an innovative representation of affects and intimacy, sometimes directly involving the readers<sup>4</sup>. In this essay, I will argue that focusing on the novel's generic hybridity might enable us to better comprehend the exceptional nature of its representations of affects and disability.

- 5 The "affective turn" in literary studies has been highlighted by many (Rabaté 100), and even if approaches vary greatly, Gregg and Seigworth's definition has remained a productive starting-point:

Affect is found in those intensities that pass body to body (human, nonhuman, part-body, and otherwise), in those resonances that circulate about, between, and sometimes stick to bodies and worlds, and in the very passages or variations between these intensities and resonances themselves. Affect [...] is the name we give to those forces [...] that can serve to drive us toward movement, toward thought and extension. (Gregg and Siegworth 1)

- 6 While Rita Cheyne showed that generic expectations are affective expectations (Cheyne 7), I would like to suggest that as a hybrid novel centred on disability, *Living Alone* elicits exceptional affective responses. As such, it might be read as an anticipation of Woolf's "On Being Ill" (1926) which invited readers to consider the "undiscovered country" of illness and invalidity in literary writing. "There is no record", Woolf lamented, of the "daily drama of the body" (Woolf 1926, 33). However, this is precisely what Benson's novel sets out to do as it scrutinises not only chronic pain and subsequent impairments but also the heroine's subjective (and sometimes comical) experience of disability, along with the isolation it entails, since her deafness and respiratory malfunctions play a major role in the story. As Fifield notes, "certain examples complicate and even erode what remains a largely functional distinction between illness and disability" (16). Benson's character certainly belongs to such category and raises questions about the representations of acute pain, poor health, and of their "penetration—the 'continual intrusion', as Woolf puts it—into every domain of the subject's existence" (Fifield 23). In order to explore Benson's exceptional articulation of comedy, fantasy and disability or poor health, I will thus first examine the novel's aesthetics of incongruous juxtapositions in relation to comedy and affect, as it sheds light on two of its major and most exceptional characters, Sarah Brown and the unnamed witch. Relying on affect theory, I will then delve into the construction of the witch's character as a particular case that intertwines fantasy with social norms and standards. Last, I will study the novel's use of isolation, which turns Sarah Brown's disabilities into empowering exceptions.

## Posters, doodles and enchanted sandwiches: incongruous juxtapositions, exceptional comedy

- 7 Benson's "idiosyncratic faux-naif style" (Cohen 2001, 38) is particularly perceptible in the way objects are represented in *Living Alone*. But paradoxically, magical objects (which are essentially the witch's "magic packets" as well as "Harold the flying broomstick", who, however, quickly becomes a *bona fide* secondary character) play a less important role than some everyday landmarks of domesticity. Sunlight soap, sandwiches, khaki uniforms or even bean plants are particular *loci* of (often uncomfortable) affects that illuminate Benson's unique depiction of pleasure, intimacy and social integration.
- 8 Magic and disabled characters have a rather unusual relation to objects, which gives birth to a particular type of anticlimactic comedy. Alenka Zupančič's brilliant essay emphasises that comedy has a lot to do with heterogeneity and exceptions (2008). In *Living Alone*, this is exemplified in the similar bathos-like pattern that runs through each chapter: in the story, the introduction of a positive object often triggers disappointment or discomfort, via either indirect derision or open mockery, creating in each case an affective gap. For example, the iconic Sunlight soap is referred to as nothing but a means to alleviate unassuming boredom and provide cheap amusement (10); khaki uniforms are associated with a strong sense of ridicule that their wearers, who don them with pride as they march towards their regiments, consistently fail to see (4). The parallel with Sarah Brown's pleasure in wearing her outdoor trousers while working on Richard's farm is quite striking as, unlike most secondary characters, Sarah eventually becomes self-aware upon realising that the trousers that she had taken so much care to choose are an exception to the skirts worn by every other farm girl (72). We could thus not be further away from Sara Ahmed's "happy objects" (Ahmed 33) as Benson's narrative typically deconstructs any sort of pleasure created by a given object<sup>5</sup>. On the contrary, objects fully participate in the construction of comedy and clearly show how the novel revolves around a series of exceptional (and often failed) relations and incongruous experiences.
- 9 Another way to look at Benson's anticlimactic comedy of exceptional objects is to refer to the incongruity-resolution theory, which, according to Brian Boyd, is the most widespread theory of comedy today (Boyd 2004, 4). The incongruity-resolution theory focuses on context and anticipation but also on twists and surprises that thwart expectations. In the novel, these many failed or "unhappy objects", to paraphrase Ahmed, produce antagonistic reactions, as they induce two consecutive types of affective responses with the expected or desired reactions being often accompanied by a distanced or critical backlash that highlight their exceptional role. Take for instance the acre-wide advertisement posted on an abandoned castle "represent[ing] a lady with a face of horrible size, whose naturally immaculate complexion was marred by the rivets and loopholes of the donjon keep itself" as it "recommend[ed] a face cream" (69-70). For Sarah Brown, the poster produces distress rather than enthusiasm or commercial interest. This reaction matches one of the witch's earlier distrust of commercial interests as she declared that "this new advertisement stunt is one of the problems that tire my head [...]. The world seems to be ruled by posters now" (20). This repeated deconstruction of object-related pleasures evokes a collage structure as the derided objects, most of them often icons of urban life, contribute to the proto-

modernist aesthetic that seeks to question the new avatars of modern life. The incongruity induced by the uncanny juxtaposition of a commercial poster and a donjon also builds both the comedic and the strong political subtext of the novel that intertwines fantasy and realism, contemporary modernity and a remote past, appearances or social pretence and intimacy. Last, that both main protagonists share a similar discomfort with mercurial concerns, while the other characters are either indifferent to (or staunch promoters of) advertisement, is indicative of their exceptional status and affective relations to the material world.

- 10 Their specific reactions are depicted as a direct consequence of their differences. For the isolated and suffering heroine Sarah Brown, intimacy and pleasure are systematically derived from objects, and not from other characters. Her love for stationery and pen is indeed excruciatingly sensual:

There are people to whom a ream of virgin paper is an inspiration, who find the first sharpening of a pencil the most lovable of all labours, who see something almost holy in the dedication of green and red penholders to their appropriate inks, in whose ears and before whose eyes the alphabet is like a poem or a prayer. Touch on stationery and you touched an insane spot in Sarah Brown's mind. [...] She would spend twilight days in stroking thick blotting-paper, in drawing dogs—all looking one way—with new pen-nibs, in giving advice in a hushed voice to connoisseur customers, who should come to buy a diary or a book-plate or a fountain-pen with the same reverence as they now show who come to buy old wine. (33)

- 11 This passage, like many others, echoes one of Alice Hall's comments on disabled characters who often display "an acute awareness of texture, breadth and depth" (Hall 347)<sup>6</sup>. However, the comical undertone induced by the hyperboles and religious lexis used to reveal incongruous juxtapositions between common objects and niche or elitist behaviour cannot be further away from eliciting pity or vulnerability (Hall 348); what is at stake here is first and foremost Sarah Brown's exceptional reactions and tastes. Jean-Michel Ganteau reasons that "comedy exposes human limitations not to exclude from a community but to create the sense of a *common humanity* predicated on a radical vulnerability" (Ganteau 3). As the passage above sheds lights on Sarah Brown's idiosyncrasies or particular and intimate tastes, it simultaneously highlights her exceptionality while grounding her character into a common, realistic ground that readers can easily identify with.
- 12 This very passage also seems to depart from the novel's overall pattern of bathos-like depiction of failed pleasure since Sarah Brown's own pleasure is jeopardised but not fully shattered:

Sarah Brown found that the glory had gone out of the varied inks, and even a new consignment of index-cards, exquisitely unspotted from the world, failed to arouse her enthusiasm. [...] Sarah Brown felt sad and clumsy, and made two blots, one in green on the Watkins card, and the other in ordinary Stephens-colour on the card of one Tonk, chocolate-box-maker, single [...]. The industrious Sarah Brown finished turning the blot upon her card into the silhouette of a dromedary by a few ingenious strokes of the pen. (34)

- 13 As she turned one of her blots into a dromedary doodle, Sarah Brown managed to achieve something gratifying and meaningful (albeit ridiculous and minuscule), which is actually more than what all the other characters ever do in the rest of the novel, that is, except the witch, as we shall see in the next section. With Sarah Brown, we are here very close to what Ganteau termed "the benevolent exposure of frailty" (4). That this exposure of Sarah Brown's frailty relies on object and object relations—and is thus

somehow mediated and indirect—is especially noteworthy in the case of a disabled character who “retreats to her own world” (Bedell 56) and is not particularly receptive to social interactions. Highlighting complex frailty and vulnerability via tender, non-satirical comedy constitutes an exceptional shift in visibilities and politics of representation.

- 14 The network of unhappy objects is delectably complicated by magic sandwiches, which reinforce the interactions of comedy, fantasy and the innovative representation of disability. The witch’s strange and recurring obsession with “grassy sandwiches” (which she hopes to eat at one of Miss Ford’s fancy Wednesday parties) is indeed echoed by Sarah Brown’s three bites out of the “Sandwich of Knowledge” (41)—an “enchanted sandwich” brought by Harold and prepared by the witch: “Now I could not say with certainty whether the witch, in making up this packet of sandwiches, had included the contents of one of her own little packets of magic” (36). The embedded references to the packets of magic clearly solve the hesitations of the narrative voice and so does the depiction of Sarah Brown’s reaction. Indeed, after three bites, she “abandons her office, in an antic version of the end of *Paradise Lost*” (Cohen 2001, 48), pursued by visions of “the spirits of parsons and social workers with flaming swords, pointing at the door” (41). Overall, the entire chapter, entitled “The Forbidden Sandwich”, reads like a parody of the Expulsion from Eden after Eve has a taste of the Forbidden Fruit. However, Sarah Brown’s damnation is both liberating and ridiculed. Her vision and epiphany unfold through a rather intense monologue that intertwines social discourses and subtle self-reflections with particularly mundane details. As such, it evokes contemporary experiments with the stream of consciousness technique while anticipating later episodes of the novel and suggests that ordinary objects and random echoes are never mere vehicles of comedy or bathos. Benson’s affective depiction of objects and disability “serves to do unexpected and often unconventional aesthetic work” (Fifield 185). This is even more apparent, as we shall see in the following section, in Benson’s portrayal of her eccentric witch.

## **“I am a witch”: magic as disability and subtle counter power**

- 15 Like Sarah Brown who is “not a real woman” (81), and like Richard, Lady Arabella Higgins’s wizard son, who is not “like other women’s boys” (22), the witch is also a nonconforming exception, as in Chapter VIII for example, where she is believed to be “a man in female disguise” (93). Debra Rae Cohen thus links magical and sexual transgression and explains how magic is the locus of gender confusion (Cohen 2002, 50). However, I will show that the witch’s exceptionality goes beyond sex and gender as it is also present in many other aspects of her character, starting, quite obviously, with her magic powers.
- 16 In her study on witchcraft in wartime, Marion Gibson explains that “by witchcraft, Benson means a fluid combination of humanity, imagination and joy” and that the witch “open[s] up a heterotopic space in which corrupt authority may be questioned magically and wishes come true” (Gibson 66). A powerful, child-like misfit that cannot integrate to wartime England because of her lack of social skills and her inability to feel any emotions, the unnamed witch is indeed a contradiction in terms. Despite her magic powers, the witch remains notably frail, especially compared to the fully-equipped

German witch in Chapter VI (who weighs forty stones and wears a cloak that can turn into a parachute). Last, she is fully dependent on her broomstick "in the matter of air-travel" (59). As such, *mutatis mutandis*, she is reminiscent of Quayson's typology of disability representation, and more precisely its third category: "disability as articulation of disjuncture between thematic and narrative vectors" (Quayson 41). For these characters, Quayson maintains that "the disability is being used as a means of establishing multiple and often contradictory values" (Quayson 41). In the witch's case, these values are potency and a relatively vulnerable dependence, powerful aloofness and destabilising social interactions.

- 17 In the novel, the witch is by far the most incongruous character and carries most of the comic and humorous dimensions.<sup>7</sup> Even if she is not the only "magic being" of the novel, she is clearly identified as an exception precisely because she is both incredibly powerful and particularly fallible. Despite her constant efforts to learn and adapt to modern England, she is recurrently chased by policemen, she is harassed by social workers and eventually her house is burnt down (while Richard, an established and recognised land owner suffers no such loss and eventually marries and has a child). Last, and despite her compelling spells and magic powers, she, like the other witches, has a lot to learn:

Witches [...], as you perhaps know, are people who are born for the first time. [...] [They] are now rare, though not so rare as you think. Remembering nothing, they know nothing, and are not bored. They have to learn everything from the very beginning, except magic, which is the only really original sin. To the magic eye, magic alone is commonplace, everything else is unknown, unguessed, and undespised. Magic people are always obvious—so obvious that we veteran souls can rarely understand them,—they are never subtle, and though they are new, they are never Modern. You may tell them in your cynical way that to-day is the only real day, and that there is nothing more unmentionable than yesterday except the day before. They will admire your cleverness very much, but the next moment you will find the witch sobbing over Tennyson, or the wizard smiling at the quaint fancies of Sir Edwin Landseer. You cannot really stir up magic people with ordinary human people. [...] [They] are not blinded by having a Point of View. They just look, and are very much surprised and interested. (11-12)

- 18 Unlike the subtle and unassuming Sarah Brown, the witch is indeed "always obvious" and is the only character who is never fully ridiculed, even if she experiences rather challenging slapstick scenes, during which she lands on a police officer (99), or is forced to hold on to "a pinch of cloud" to save her life (61). Compared to the oft-studied modernist grotesque, satire and dark humour (Russo 1995; Colletta 2003; Greenberg 2011; Shin 2012), the witch's behaviour really gives an alternate sense of a modernist comedy: most of her reactions exude social disabilities as she always responds to events and cues in ways that seem to make all the other characters, except perhaps Sarah Brown, particularly uncomfortable. Her reactions contain underlying social criticism that targets conformity and the dehumanisation of modern lifestyle. Unlike other darker forms of modernist comedy, the novel uses the comic vein to draw attention to diversity and inclusion.
- 19 Following Rosemarie Garland-Thompson's terminology, I would argue that the witch is a specific kind of misfit. In her materialistic feminist approach to disability, Garland-Thomson proposes

the term misfit as a new critical keyword that seeks to defamiliarize and to reframe dominant understandings of disability. *Fitting and misfitting* denote an encounter in

which two things come together in either harmony or disjunction. [...] A *misfit* [...] describes an incongruent relationship between two things [...]. The problem with a misfit [...] inheres not in either of the two things but rather in their juxtaposition (Garland-Thompson 593).

- 20 In the witch, there is a conflict between exceptional powers and destabilising maladaptation. The juxtaposition of commonly accepted social behaviour with the witch's responses sheds light on both her exceptional abilities and on her social disabilities. As Garland-Thomson later writes following a common conception in disability studies, "the relational and contingent quality of misfitting and fitting, then, places vulnerability in the fit, not in the body" (600). This is particularly true of the witch. Her numerous repetitions (e.g., she asks "How d'you mean?" to various characters fourteen times) and her constant need to have other characters explain basic concepts (e.g., heaven, pay, advertisement, heart, experiences etc.) are echoed by her aversion to adult intelligence, which is to her either stale or stagnant: "this room smells awfully clever to any one coming in from outside. Do you mind if I dance a little, to move the air about?" (91). With the witch, the text conveys a seemingly innocent comedy that celebrates differences and deconstructs common conceptions of both weakness and power as well as contemporary social values. That is why Cohen asserts that in *Living Alone* "magic is the antithesis of the law" (Cohen 2001, 48) in the sense that "those who are close to magic stymie and frustrate categorization, undermining bureaucracy that supports the war" (50). As such, magic and its "always obvious" followers, appear as a paradoxically subtle counter power. By contrast, Cohen contends that Sarah Brown never fully reaches opposition because she has integrated and internalised norms, laws and social regulations:

[B]ecause of the impossibility of purging oneself of ideology, Sarah Brown can never actually *become* magic. [...] There is an incomplete communion: Sarah Brown, attempting to save the witch from prosecution, makes her leave with her for America. But in doing so, she reveals herself as still operating within the constraints of bourgeois ideology; in running from the law, she grants it power. (Cohen 2001, 51)

- 21 This is where the witch and Sarah Brown differ the most. Unlike Sarah Brown, the witch is depicted as an avid learner who engages in some (flawed and often one-sided) communication with the outside world. Because of both her exceptional status and her fluctuating will to communicate and exchange, she appears as a particular case that every character recognises as such, to the extent that they all feel like the witch is speaking to them directly, which triggers many comical misunderstandings. Unlike exceptions, "the case represents a problem or event that has animated some kind of judgment. Any enigma could do—a symptom, a situation, [...] or any irritating obstacle to clarity [...]" (Berlant 2007, 1). As an embodied particular case, the witch's character prompts many questions and reactions in all secondary characters and shows that all of these responses are particularly inadequate. Miss Ford, for one, advises her to get a lecturing job, "to meet one or two people who might possibly help you to a job—lecturing, you know. Lectures on hypnotism or spiritualism, with experiments, are always popular. You certainly have Power, you only want a little advertisement" (19). As a supernatural character interacting with a realistic environment, the witch's exceptional character exposes and questions all the awry details and premises of her conservative and bourgeois setting, while providing readers with an endless reservoir of humorous situations.

- 22 However, the most striking example of her comedic maladjustment to society is perhaps her use of “winks”, which introduces a new type of *double entendre* that expounds the witch’s exceptional feminine voice:

Then the Mayor arrived. The witch saw at once that there was some secret understanding between him and her that she did not understand. Her magic escapades often left her in this position. However, she winked back hopefully. But she was not a skilled winker. Everybody—even the Dog David—saw her doing it, and Miss Ford looked a little offended. (24)

- 23 The contrast between her magic powers and her utter inability to master social codes are foundational to her double status as comic character and exceptional misfit. As she later rejects the Mayor’s advances (and is quite forcefully helped by Harold the Broomstick to do so), she represents an alternative and exceptional femininity that escapes the marriage plot, openly mocks romantic gestures and fully embraces solitude as a prerequisite condition for her magic to work. That is why Bedell observes that if the witch seems to attract suitors and admirers alike, she, unlike Sarah Brown or Richard the wizard, “envies the lot of no one and is attracted to none of them” thereby embodying the prospect of appealing loneliness (Bedell 56). The text also reminds us that the witch does not correspond either to conventional standards of beauty (“The Stranger was not pretty; she had a broad, curious face”, 2), but unlike Sarah Brown, she has defined a new mode of being, in which magic is only one dimension:

[Sarah Brown] heard a sound of breathless singing, [...] the sound of some one unbearably happy, dancing. Now there is hardly anything but magic abroad before seven o'clock in the morning. Only the disciples of magic like getting their feet wet, and being furiously happy on an empty stomach. [...] The extraordinary music to which she was dancing was partly the braying of a neighbouring donkey, and partly her own erratic singing. She danced, as you may imagine, in a very far from grown-up way, rather like a baby that has thought of a new funny way of annoying its Nana; and she sang, too, like a child that inadvertently bursts into loud tuneless song, because it is morning and yet too early to get up. A little wandering of the voice, a little wandering of the feet [...]. There was certainly something more funny than beautiful about the witch’s dancing. She laughed herself most of the time. She was wearing a mackintosh, which was in itself rather funny, but her feet were bare. (25-5)

- 24 Here, the witch performs a new model of femininity that stands out from the many groups of ladies and charity members she encounters throughout the novel. If she and Richard joke about the witches and wizards’ inherent “tradition of martyrdom and the stake” and recurrently mention the uniqueness of magic (“What do you want Magic to become? A branch of the Civil Service?”, 115), the witch’s discourse always implies that her overarching difference from modern, wartime England is undoubtedly her stronger asset.
- 25 However, her “magic has some limitations” (59), which, quite paradoxically, strengthens her exceptional character: the witch is immensely powerful while having very little knowledge and, most importantly, even if she sells doses of Happiness in the shop of Living Alone, she is not able to do much for Sarah Brown’s afflictions. The expected redeeming power of magic over the pain, suffering and isolation of the heroine cannot possibly work. Like Sarah Brown, the witch is an isolated character, but it is the scope of her power that defies readers’ expectations, while, as we shall see in the final section, Sarah Brown’s complicated and evolving relationship to her disabilities is the actual core component of both her identity and our affective

responses. The story thus indicates that Sarah Brown is a lost cause (or even a "cautionary case" (41), as she herself has it), while the witch would be the much admired exception or the mystifying particular case that escapes common sense and challenges general discourses.

- 26 Through the witch, *Living Alone* explores the comedic effects of the supernatural on a realistic fictional world. The witch's presence is a delightful source of modernist comedy that denounces the absurdity of modern conformism while construing individual uncertainty as a powerful asset. If her character arouses conflictual reactions and raises multi-layered questions in secondary characters, some of her contradictions still resonate today. This is precisely what the final section of this essay seeks to think through, namely how disabilities and isolation turned into exceptional powers may induce a particular range of aesthetic and affective reactions. As Cheyne has it, "examining how texts evoke affects such as enchantment, anxiety, wonder, fear or joy enables a deeper understanding of how texts relate 'outward to the world as well as inward to the self'" (Felski 132, quoted in Cheyne 165-6).

## "I am doing wrong": the exceptional experiences of disabilities

- 27 If the narrative voice openly and unambiguously represents Sarah Brown as a disabled character, disability is not exclusively depicted as a personal disaster. The articulation of magic, comedy and disability in the portrayal of Sarah Brown paradoxically makes her a complex and relatable character with conflicting emotions and a keen awareness of both her self-identity and her environment. Benson's intricate representation of fictional disability is thus in keeping with both classic and recent work in literary and non-literary disability studies. While most scholars agree on the difficulty of defining disability "as a coherent condition or category of identity", "the central tenet of disability studies [is] that disability is produced as much by environmental and social factors as it is by bodily conditions." (Adams, Reiss, Sterling, 2) Unlike Benson and Woolf, modern theorists have often noted that fictional representations of disability are often used as a metaphor:

David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder read disability as a 'crutch upon which literary narratives lean for their representational power, their disruptive potentiality and analytic insight'. Mitchell and Snyder refer to this overarching theory of disability in fiction as a form of 'narrative prosthesis' and suggest that narratives depend on disability as a 'stock feature of characterization' and an 'opportunistic metaphorical device'. Their suspicion of metaphor is a recurring feature of disability studies criticism more generally, with Lennard Davis, for example, highlighting the tendency for disability to be invoked as an easy metaphorical shortcut—a marker of pity, vulnerability or, less frequently, the 'supercrip'. (Hall 348)

- 28 In Benson's text, disability is much more than a metaphor, because it plays a pivotal role in the construction of the heroine's exceptional status, and in the novel's political and social subtexts. Even if she suffers from many afflictions and impairments, Sarah Brown has very little to do with Hall's "supercrip". Conversely, her disabilities are simultaneously glorified and laughed at; they are carefully detailed as much as they are fantasised; and the isolation they entail is both denounced and turned into another type of superpower. Accordingly, we could read the expression, "unreal people" which

Benson uses in the opening warning of her novel ("This is not a real book. It does not deal with real people, nor should it be read by real people") as a positive or paradoxically empowering reference to both magic people and to disabled or suffering individuals. In other words, if Cohen considers that Benson's text "externalizes the strands of ideological debate, using the figures of witches and wizards to denaturalize social practice" (Cohen 2001, 48), I think that Benson also displaces social and political debates onto the supernatural in order to normalise the exceptional experience of disability and account for its full complexity.

- 29 Sarah Brown's disability actually gives her powers, it leads her to magic and opens some life-changing perspectives, while other characters either resist magic or are completely overwhelmed by its powers. In *Living Alone*, magic and disability go hand in hand, and the delicate and emotive depiction of the former simultaneously suggests its exceptional intensity and its potentially universal dimension. As Cohen demonstrates that Sarah Brown "hears magic better because of her deafness" (Cohen 2001, 51), the narrative voice mentions that "she was not really used to being alive at all, and that is what made her take to magic so kindly" (68). The witch herself seems convinced that Sarah Brown's disability is actually her stronger resource:

'But, witch—oh, witch—this is the worst of all. My ears are failing me—I think I am going deaf....'

'You can hear what I say,' said the witch.

'Yes, I can hear what you say, but when most people talk I am like a prisoner locked up; and every day there are more and more locked doors between me and the world. You do not know how horrible it is.'

'Oh, well,' said the witch, 'as long as you can hear magic you will not lack a key to your prison. Sometimes it's better not to hear the other things. You are the ideal guest for the House of Living Alone.' (16)

- 30 The passage departs from conventional narratives of disabilities. As Sarah Brown recounts her harrowing experience, the text also conveys subtle and rich discourses on the subjective experiences and on the normalisation of disability, which paradoxically triggers empowerment, while not being fully empowering. In *Living Alone*, the point is never to escape from disability and weakness but rather to explore them and perhaps better apprehend their unexpected potentials. Sarah Brown thus typifies the last category in Ato Quayson's typology of disabled characters, namely "disability as normality": "the disabled characters are completely normalized and exist within the full range of human emotions, contradictions, hopes, fears, and vague ideas, just like any other character" (51). That disability plays a central part in Benson's novel of fantasy and that even magic characters might be considered as disabled clearly anticipate Garland-Thomson's comment that "disability [is] not as anomalous but as a significant universal human experience that occurs in every society, every family, and most every life" (Garland-Thomson 603). In the fantasy world of *Living Alone*, disability is just as normal as magic and it is part and parcel of Sarah Brown's identity just like magic is inherent to the witch's character. Remarkably, both magic and disability induce powers and weaknesses and Sarah Brown is referred to as a "victim" to magic while none of the eight occurrences of the root "suffer" is used to describe her conditions.
- 31 But before investigating the empowering dimension of disability, I would like to turn to a final aspect of the normalisation of its depiction. Indeed, the normalisation of Sarah Brown's disability is also made perceptible in the way the narrative voice depicts her

varying relationship to her many ailments. As such, her disability induces conflicting responses:

'Heaven has given me wretched health, but never gave me youth enough to make the wretchedness adventurous,' she went on. 'Heaven gave me a thin skin, but never gave me the natural and comforting affections. Heaven probably meant to make a noble woman of me by encrusting me in disabilities, but it left out the necessary nobility at the last moment; it left out, in fact, all the compensations. But luckily I have found the compensations for myself; I just had to find something. Men and women have given me everything that such as I could expect'. (16)

32 The ironic parallel between disability and nobility as two sides of the same exceptional coin does point at the heroine's complicated relationship with her disability. And so do the positive notes that show through the end of her complaint. That is why I will demonstrate that the representation of Sarah Brown's disability, just like her peculiar relation with objects described in the first section, is actually both normalised and exceptional.

33 This tension between the exceptionality and the normalisation of her experience is first found in the way impairment and disability are sometimes disjointed: "the terms impairment and disability distinguish between bodily states or conditions taken to be impaired, and the social process of disablement that gives meaning and consequences to those impairments in the world" (Garland-Thomson 591). As she pays little attention to the world around her, she seems very little affected by "the social process of disablement" while her pain, illnesses and deafness are fully detailed, as in the following example where she has to stop working because of her condition:

She had altogether ceased to find pleasure in the day. Pain is an extinguisher that can put out the sun. She had ceased to find pleasure in the singing of the birds, the voice of the pigeon sounded to her no more than an unbeautiful falsetto growl. She was irritated by the fact that the cuckoo had only one song to sing. She tried not to hoe in time to that song, but the monotony of it possessed her. Her row of beans stretched in front of her right across the world; every time she looked along it the end seemed farther away. Every time she raised her hoe the sword of pain slipped under her guard. (76)

34 There is here no mention of unaccomplished duty or evaded responsibility nor of her particular fondness for Richard, the owner of the farm. Instead, the passage really does focus on the subjective experience of disability, rather than on its social dimensions; it is centred on her mind and body, on her perceptions and her thoughts. In 'On Being Ill', Woolf argues that illness and disability inspire new modes of expression: an individual is "forced to coin words himself, and, taking his pain in one hand, and a lump of pure sound in the other [...] so to crush them together that a brand new word in the end drops out" (7). In Benson's context, this linguistic novelty has a lot to do with the politics of representation and of emotions and affects. A life-long advocate for women's rights and a keen observer of aloofness, isolation and exclusion, Benson devised a multi-layered rendition of Sarah Brown's impairments that paves the way for new discourses and representations. The "brand new word" emerging from Benson's novel is actually, following Harwood, an elaborate and gendered discourse on "loneliness and aloneness [which conveys] her personal attempts to construct stability in the instability of the borderlands—a perilous space, but one that also affords possibilities of empowerment and belonging" (124).

35 Social "belonging" seems out of reach for Sarah Brown who does not wish and cannot integrate nor fully interact with the non-magic characters, as Bedell explains

(Bedell 56). However, the intratextual network of references that connects her to both the witch and to happier past events indicates that her pain and vulnerability can find echoes in both the natural and the supernatural world. For Sarah Brown, the empowering potential of disability and loneliness is also laid out in a non-social manner, as in the next example, where mentions of Sarah Brown's bodily sensations and agonising ache are intertwined with references to her intimate thoughts and musings:

If she sat absolutely still and upright the pain was bearable. But even to think of movement brought tears of pain to her eyes. She detached her mind from her predicament, and sank into a warm tropical sea of thought. The pain was like a wave breaking upon her, carrying her away from her safe shore of shadow, to be lost in seething and suffocating seas without rest. Her eyes felt dried up with fever, and whenever she shut them, the darkness was filled with a jumble of nauseating squares in blue upon a mustard-coloured background. The smell of beans was terrible. (77)

- 36 After the reference to sounds in the previous extract, smells and sight are here at stake and so are Sarah Brown's mental imagery and imagination. This representation of intimate physical sensation reads like a proto-stream of consciousness and clearly imparts the intensity of pain as well as the complexity of its experience. In the penultimate chapter, disability has become an intimate experience that conflates projections and self-reflection:

Sarah Brown climbed up the short stairway, painful step by painful step, to her cell. She sat on her bed holding her throbbing side, and breathing with fearful caution. She looked at the empty grate. She put a cigarette in her mouth, the unconscious and futile answer of the Dweller Alone to that blind hunger for comfort. But she had no matches, and presently, dimly conscious that her groping for comfort had lacked result, she absently put another cigarette into her mouth, and then felt a fool. [...] These are the terrible nights of Living Alone, when you have fever and sometimes think that your beloved stands in the doorway to bring you comfort, and sometimes think that you have no beloved, and that there is no one left in all the world, no word, no warmth, nor ever a kindly candle to be lighted in that spotted darkness that walls up your hot sight. Again on those nights you dream that you have already done those genial things your body cries for, or perhaps That Other has done them. The fire is built and alight at last, a cup of something cool and beautifully sour stands ready to your hand, you can hear the delicious rattle of china on a tray in the passage—someone coming with food you would love to look at, and presently perhaps to eat ... when you feel better. But again and again your eyes open on the cold dumb darkness, and there is nothing but the wind and strange sinister emptiness creaking on the stair.

These are the terrible nights of Living Alone, yet no real lover of that house and of that state would ever exchange one of those haunted and desert nights for a night spent watched, in soft warm places. (102-3)

- 37 The use of the second person pronoun makes this passage particularly discomfoting. Here, disability induces pain and vulnerability but also questions, hypotheses, dreams that eventually open onto a budding sense of agency as Sarah Brown's condition seems to have merged with the eponymous house she lives in. Through her disability, the arch-outcast seems to have finally adapted to her surroundings. A few pages earlier, her utter despair was actually depicted under a nearly positive light that induces empowering self-knowledge: "Thought was like sleep to her, she sank deeply into it without reaching anything profound, nothing resulted but useless dreams, and a certain *comforting and defiant intimacy with herself*." (77. Emphasis mine) Here again,

Benson's text is a relevant illustration to Garland-Thomson's reading of the representations of disability. When we read fictions of disability, she notes, "we might communally develop what Scully calls 'the particular [...] understandings that are generated through the experience of impairment'" (Scully 9 quoted in Garland-Thomson 604). According to Cheyne, this fictional encounter with disability relies on affect<sup>8</sup> while according to Ganteau, the interaction of comedy and vulnerability produces a similar effect. The idea, Ganteau writes, is "not so much satire instrumentalising humour so as to correct, but comedy that harnesses it the better to connect" (3). In *Living Alone*, I think that this "connection" or encounter, i.e., our particular understanding of Sarah Brown's situation relies both on comedy and on the novel's fictional rendering of narrative identity<sup>9</sup>, which is the key conveyor of the joint exceptionalisation and normalisation of disability through its rendering of the complex affective life of the protagonist. Sarah Brown's disability is not merely shown or displayed; instead, it is narrated with a full range of nuances and contradictions, and is ridiculed as much as it is glorified.

- 38 As a result, the rendition of disability allows for a powerful sense of connection but it also creates a sense of reflectivity. Because of its joined normalisation and exceptionally discerning rendition of disability relying on a subtle interplay between comedy, fantasy and narrative identity, *Living Alone*, like the more recent tales of disability analysed by Cheyne, "enables reflexive representations by generating uncertainty about disability, a productive wondering that encourages the reader to question existing assumptions and beliefs" (Cheyne 162). Crucially, in the above extract, there is also a metafictional dimension that points to the text's autonomy. Its phrase "comforting and defiant intimacy with herself" reads like a description of the act of reading, as Marielle Macé sees it for instance, i.e., "a moment of individuation [...] a decisive moment in the construction of the grammar of one's relation to oneself" (Macé 18. Translation mine). In *Living Alone*, these reflexive or metafictional instances undermine the novel's general discourse on aloneness. Reading *Living Alone* is not an experience of isolation: rather, this seemingly simple, light-tone novel is an affective and cognitive experience that helps readers approach a complex spectrum of fictional identities and situations. There is indeed an exceptionally rich politics of representation and emotions in *Living Alone*, and, according to Cheyne, this might have to do with the specificities of fictions of disabilities:

It is precisely through meta-feelings or meta-emotions that naturalized disability feelings might be challenged or changed. By working with and upon feelings, generating affects and meta-affects, reflexive representations can destabilize sedimented responses to disability (Cheyne 163).

- 39 The genre-mixing and overall structure of the novel force us to embrace its logic and its affective dynamics. By representing a complex, if not absurd, spectrum of disability with Sarah Brown being the perfect example and the witch the particular case, via a network of echoes and repetitions, the novel forces us to engage in multifarious interpretative acts that echo the heroine's own actions. As Cheyne remarks: "disability is perceived—or, more precisely, ascribed—on the basis of an interpretation of particular bodies or behaviours. Disability is thus a meaning-making process" (Cheyne 10). We should note that Cheyne does not wish to oppose affective and cognitive criticism (Cheyne 164) and that she rather stresses, with Rita Felski, that "reading fuses cognitive and affective impulses" (Felski 132) and responses. As Martha Nussbaum reminds us ("sympathy inspired by literary imagining does not immediately

effect political change", Nusbaum 1997, 97), the point is not, however, to yield to any rosy interpretation about the presupposed exceptional and effective powers of literature. Very simply, what *Living Alone* underscores is that reading is an exceptional act that can both foster and cancel aloneness while celebrating both the exceptional powers and frailty of individual identity.

## Conclusion

- 40 *Living Alone* revolves around representations and aesthetic explorations of exceptions and is an exceptional novel in that respect. Its delightful cast of eccentric characters that constantly challenge social norms and habits, its peculiar articulation of genres and affects, and most importantly its unprecedented fictional representation of the subjective experience of disability stands out in literary history, which might, at least partly, explain its critical neglect and chequered reception. Like the witch's magic packets, the novel is, as Miss Ford has it, "a strange mixture" (19). As the depiction and exploration of exceptions are part and parcel of its aesthetic programme, *Living Alone* is a particular case that should be considered when investigating the exceptional variety of modernist literary productions.
- 41 Benson's novel could thus be read as an interesting avatar of "littérature mineure" (following Deleuze and Guattari's expression), applied not just to women's literature as Lauren Berlant does it in *The Female Complaint* (x), but also to disability fiction and its complex affective and intimate subtexts. Cohen's reflection on Benson's minor, if not obscured, status in literary history also illuminates her outrageous neglect: "Genre-mixing, which, I suspect, has eliminated Benson from serious consideration as a novelist, actually renders her books more useful for exploring [social and political issues]" (Cohen 2001, 38). While Cohen reflects on the novel's subtle denunciation of war and propaganda, I hope I have shown that it also finely addresses the fascinating intersection of disability and fiction. Because the novel equates magic and disability as exceptionally complex elements that help us question norms and habits through a peculiar use of anticlimactic humour, it forces us to reconsider what is usually deemed normal and exceptional.
- 42 Even if the book does not fully belong to one genre, genre expectations and emotional involvement are mobilised. Following Cheyne's arguments, if we read *Living Alone* as a novel of fantasy, we should expect that a quest will be completed (Cheyne 22) and that the affirmation of the protagonist will eventually prevail. The second page already warns us against such expectation as the iconic name of "Cinderella" is used to refer to the witch and not to Sarah Brown, who (like the witch in the rest of the novel) remains unnamed throughout the first scene. If, as Cheyne writes, disability fiction and genre fiction are "forms of affective practice" that both rely on expectations and preconceptions, reflexive representations often tend to contradict the certainty of affective expectations and thus pave the way for new discourses:
- Genre fiction's combination of affectivity and reflexivity facilitates the creation of reflexive representations of disability, by, among other things, making perceptible naturalized habits of representation and interpretation. Reflexive representations encourage the reader to think or feel disability anew, challenging, destabilizing, or denaturalizing assumptions about disability or disabled people [...]. Reflexive representations are always affective. They may arise specifically from affective misfits, where the way disability is depicted in a text makes the reader feel in ways

that are unexpected or incongruent, either in the context of that particular genre or within a disablist society. (Cheyne 162)

- 43 *Living Alone* reworks many generic norms and expectations to the extent that Bedell identified an “anti-convention bias” (61) as its underlying principle. There is no clear social or poetic justice and with every chapter, hints of the comedy turning into a tragedy multiply, despite the remaining signs of bathos and humorous incongruity. The open-ended final chapter, with Sarah Brown claiming “I cannot hear you” to the American custom officer, can indeed be read as a female rendition of Melville’s *Bartleby* echoing his “I’d prefer not to”, i.e., as the ultimate act of rebellion against the modern world. It can also be read as the ultimate defeat since Sarah Brown, alone once again, since the witch has flown back to Mitten Island, has no choice but to “step over the threshold of the greater House of Living Alone” (116) that America is supposed to represent.
- 44 This ambiguous ending interestingly supports Garland-Thomson’s assertion that “the critical concept of misfitting emphasizes location rather than being, the relational rather than the essential.” (604). In *America*, Sarah Brown is now capable of accepting her condition and of eventually claiming it as part of her identity (“I cannot hear you. I am stone deaf”, 116) and of using it as a means to escape norms, controls and discipline. In addition, the “relational” aspect of Garland-Thomson’s comment rings true to Benson’s novel: unlike the ladies from the committee, the witch never considers Sarah Brown as a disabled woman (even if she remains a victim, according to Cohen, of her own ideological framework and fails to see the scope and extent of the witch’s magic as we have seen). For Bedell, “the ambivalence with which it leaves the reader at its conclusion” includes conventional pity for Sarah Brown along with a “resentful recognition that she does not need anyone’s pity” as she manages quite well alone (61). Thus, the text advocates “the inadequacy of rationality as a means of coping with an incomprehensible and seemingly indifferent universe” (61). Eventually, and along with classic works in cognitive literary criticism and in affective literary study, *Living Alone* suggests that one of the richest coping strategy might very probably be fiction.

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## NOTES

1. In 1937, New Zealander poet and journalist Robin Hyde wrote that Benson's books are "neither recognised 'highbrow' nor would the lowbrow understand her. But she is very important. She had an insight into the fatal flaw of twentieth century construction—its dehumanising character—and she knew exactly how to reveal it" (226). A more recent and inclusive approach would thus perhaps associate Benson with intermodernism (Bluemel and Lassner 22).
2. Marion Gibson, for one, documented the influence of Benson's witch on the evolution of the depiction of the witch as a literary figure and showed that "it was a relatively unknown young novelist, Stella Benson, and her book *Living Alone* (1919) that transformed the witch from an early modern into a modern Romantic icon" (Gibson 65).
3. A similar analysis is developed by Gibson who showed how Benson's novel is "filled with modernist and imagist fragments" (Gibson 71).
4. See Darwood 2020, 76 and McCracken 403 for an analysis of Benson's "desire to make the reader implicit in the narrative."
5. Feminist scholar and affect theorist Sara Ahmed explains that "For Locke, happiness is a form of pleasure: 'the greatest happiness consists in having those things which produce the greatest pleasure' (247). Happy objects could be described simply as those objects that affect us in the best way" (Ahmed 22).
6. It also echoes Fifield's analysis of the relations between illness and "sensory intensity" in D. H. Lawrence. However, it is worth noting that Fifield links this intensity to "emotional expression" (33) and "bodily functions" (45) while Benson's text draws focus on her character's inner life via the depiction of her intense perceptions or sensations.
7. For the distinction between "the comic" and "the humorous", see Eco 7-8. I am also drawing from Darwood's analysis on the relevance of these concepts to Benson's short fiction, which can of course be applied to Benson's novel (Darwood 2020, 66-67).
8. See for instance Cheyne's comment that Affect is "central to the disability encounter" (8).
9. Ricœur defines narrative identity as "the sort of identity to which a human being has access thanks to the mediation of the narrative function" (Ricœur 73). Narrative identity "is realized in three successive movements": prefiguration (i.e., "the individual's experience of being-in-the-world that is semantically construed but without clear form or figure"), configuration ("where the contingencies of experience are selected, shaped and ordered") and "the noetic act of reading where the self comes to a greater understanding of human experience over time through the mediation of narrative" (Crowley 1-12).

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## ABSTRACTS

That Stella Benson's *Living Alone* (1919) has received little critical attention can probably be explained both by its paradoxical articulation of absurd comedy, fantasy and psychological realism, and by the overwhelming influence of exceptional patterns and instances within the diegesis. The novel triangulates humour, magic and distress; it relies on two exceptional characters, an unnamed witch (whose magic powers jar with her inability to feel any emotions) and the heroine, Sarah Brown, who fails to interact with people around, partly because of her declining health and limited social skills. In this paper, I thus aim to contextualise the exceptionality of Benson's novel and, drawing from affective and disability studies, to explore the ways in which the exceptional experiences of these two marginalised female characters, a seemingly all-powerful witch and a particularly perceptive disabled female protagonist, are constructed, conveyed and interrogated.

C'est peut-être à cause de son dialogue paradoxal entre la comédie absurde, le fantastique et le réalisme psychologique, ainsi qu'à cause du rôle incontournable des exceptions dans sa diégèse que *Living Alone* (1919) de Stella Benson a attiré peu d'attention critique. Le roman articule en effet l'humour, la magie et la souffrance ; il met en scène deux personnages exceptionnels, une sorcière anonyme (dont les pouvoirs magiques contrastent avec son incapacité à ressentir quelque émotion) et l'héroïne Sarah Brown qui ne parvient pas à interagir avec les personnes qu'elle côtoie, notamment à cause de sa santé défaillante et de son manque d'enclin à socialiser. Cet article vise ainsi à contextualiser l'exceptionnalité du texte de Benson et, en s'appuyant sur des travaux récents issues des *affect studies* et *disabilities studies*, à explorer comment les expériences exceptionnelles de ces deux personnages marginaux, une sorcière en apparence toute-puissante et une protagoniste handicapée particulièrement perspicace et fine, sont construites, transmises et remises en question.

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**Keywords:** Stella Benson, affect, disability studies, modernism, supernatural, fantasy

**Mots-clés:** Stella Benson, affect, études sur les handicaps, modernisme, littérature fantastique

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