

DWARFISM HISTORY

Disability Action Research Kollektive



Many prominent people with dwarfism have existed throughout history. Some held high positions within the royal courts of ancient Egypt, while others were hidden away, enslaved or dismissed. The degree of exclusion and prejudice that people with dwarfism currently experience is neither natural nor universal, as inclusion and acceptance has varied greatly over time and between cultures.

Dwarfism is generally defined as having an adult height of 4 feet 10 inches (147 cm) or less. This zine uses the term 'people with dwarfism' as it is intended for a variety of English speaking countries. Terminology varies as to what is considered appropriate. For example, 'little people' is commonly used in the USA. The use of the M slur is highly offensive, due to its links with historical exploitation and dehumanisation within "freak shows". This zine is eurocentric as well as having a strong gender bias in its representations, this is also reflected in many sources on the topic which it draws from. The bias when recording historical figures may be a consequence of the dual oppression of sexism and ableism that excluded women and people with dwarfism.

Heightism, which as well as being extremely silly, is the practice of assigning degrees of value, capability, intelligence, worth, and maturity to individuals based on how tall they are. Heightism makes life worse for everyone, but especially for people with dwarfism. Being taller makes you more likely to be hired for a job, promoted and paid more. Taller people are often perceived as more competent, charismatic, employable and 'healthy'. Similarly, heightism associates negative qualities with shorter people.

Dwarfism may be the future of humanity, as climate change reshapes our world. In at least two previous eras of global warming, mammal species saw an enormous rise in restricted growth among their populations. One of them is the Eocene Thermal Maximum, which is the most comparable geologic era to what is expected with the current trajectory of climate change. Dwarfism was evolutionarily selected among multiple species as a response to warming, resource scarcity or a lack of predators. Similarly, this reduced need for material resources could be useful for long distance space exploration. The ideal astronauts of the distant future may well be people with dwarfism.



Pereniankh (c. 2613 BCE) was a man who lived to be 45-50 years old during the 4th dynasty in ancient Egypt's Old Kingdom. His mastaba-style tomb is located in the Royal Necropolis of Giza, close to the Pyramids, and he was buried with both of his wives who based on skeletal and artistic evidence were both non-disabled. His primary wife was named Nyanth-Hathor. He is the only person with dwarfism from ancient Egypt for whom we have skeletal, artistic, and written evidence. Egyptologist F. Hussein compared the measurements and proportions of his portrait statue to those of his skeletal remains and found that they matched, showing that the artist had depicted him realistically. Pereniankh held the titles of administrator of the treasury, and royal acquaintance of the Great House, meaning he was also a member of the pharaoh's court.



Seneb (2520 BCE) (ancient Egyptian for “Healthy”) was a man who lived during the Old Kingdom period in ancient Egypt. His tomb stands in the Royal Necropolis of Giza close to the Pyramids, and while his body was lost and most contents looted long ago, the inscriptions from his false door and statue tell us a few things about his life.

He held many ceremonial titles such as Holder of the King’s Linen and Overseer of the Sacred Barque, and served as a Priest of Wadjet. He had a wife named Senetites, who was a Priestess of Hathor and Neith, and with whom he had three children. His inscriptions tell us he participated in the funeral procession of the Pharaoh Khufu, and that he owned “several thousand herds of cattle”. He was undoubtedly a man of great importance.



Khnumhotep (c.2350 BCE) was a man who lived during the 6th dynasty of ancient Egypt's Old Kingdom. We have a surviving portrait statue whose inscriptions tell us his name and describe him as a dancer, overseer of the royal wardrobe, and overseer of ka-priests: the priests who performed daily rituals for the deceased. These titles reveal he was a respected essential part of the pharaoh's court and was of elite status in ancient Egyptian society.

The painted limestone statue depicts him smiling serenely, standing arms by his side wearing a white linen kilt which is knotted in the front. He is depicted as a person with dwarfism, with a larger torso and short legs and arms. Khnumhotep is also described in the statue's inscriptions as dancing at the funerals of two sacred bulls.



Djeho (Djeder) (c. 346 BCE) was a man who lived during ancient Egypt's Late Period. He was buried in Saqqara in an elaborate granite sarcophagus in his patron Tjaiharpta's tomb. His presence in the tomb and the quality of the sarcophagus indicates his favored status with his patron. Djeho is depicted on the sarcophagus naked, with the proportions of dwarfism in a profile stance.

Inscriptions on the sarcophagus's lid reveal that he was a dancer who performed in funerary ceremonies of the cults of the Apis and Memphis sacred bulls. Unlike the other dwarf people's biographies listed here from ancient Egypt, Djeho's patron was a non-royal elite.



Andreas Vesalius (1514 –1564) was an anatomist and physician who is considered to be the founder of modern anatomy. He was born in Brussels, but later lived in Paris and Italy, and died in poverty in the Venetian Ionian islands at age 49. He pursued a medical career, studying the theories of Galen, graduating from the University of Leuven with his doctorate, before taking up posts in Italy, assisting Pope Paul IV and Ignatius of Loyola in healing those with leprosy. He later served as an imperial physician of both Emperor Charles V and Philip II before leaving on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Vesalius was one of the first physicians to accurately record and illustrate human anatomy based on human autopsies and dissections which greatly advanced our understanding of the human body. His groundbreaking publications include *On the Fabric of the Human Body*.



Jeffrey Hudson (1619-1682) was born as the son of a keeper of baiting bulls. Famous for his “extreme but proportionate smallness,” likely meaning that his short stature was the result of a pituitary gland disorder. Although, it was rumoured that his short stature was caused by his mother choking “on a gherkin while pregnant.” At eight years old, his father gave him to the duchess, he was then dressed in a suit of armour and hidden in a pie. Upon cutting the pie, he was offered as a present to King Charles and Queen Henrietta Maria. He remained loyal to the Queen until he was expelled from her court after killing a man in a duel. He was held captive to Barbary Pirates for 25 years. He was later imprisoned again for “Being a Roman Catholick” as his only recorded offence. He was released in 1680 and died about two years later.



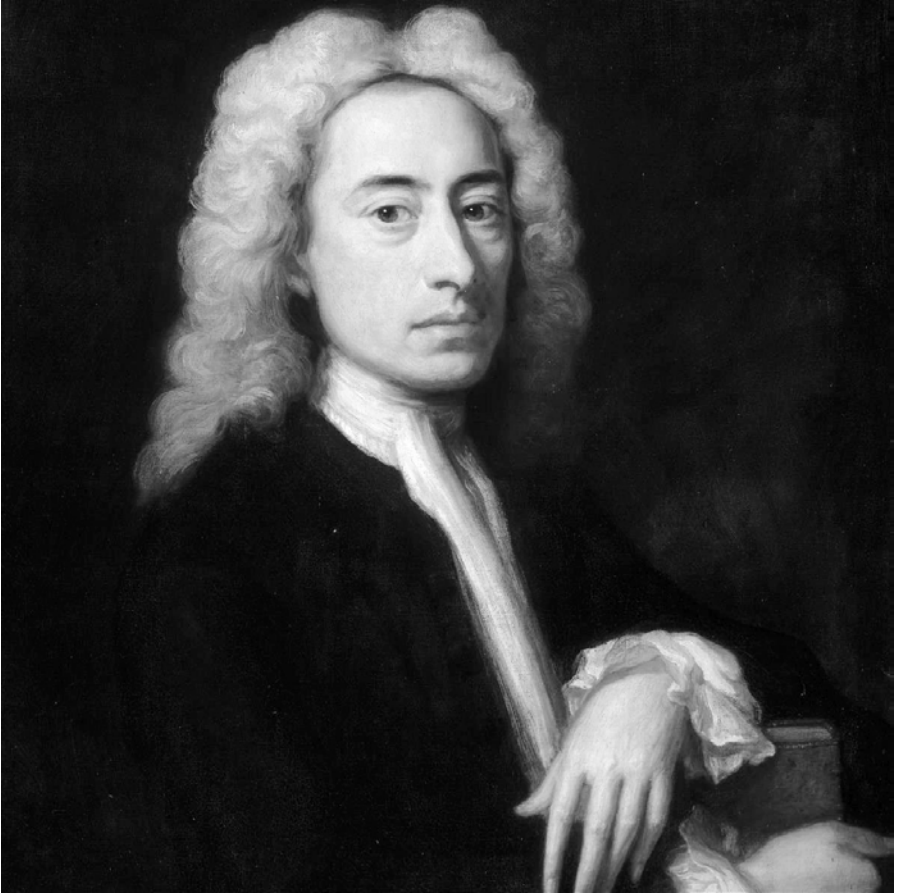
Matthias Buchinger (1674-1740) was a German artist, performer and magician who travelled Europe entertaining royal courts. He was the youngest of nine children, and his parents kept him secluded because of his disability. He likely had Phocomelia which resulted in him not having hands or feet. He began performing at local fairs when he was twenty years old.

Matthias could play half a dozen instruments, could do detailed engravings, was unbeatable at cards and was an expert marksman. His micrography included embedding biblical psalms into the details of his engravings. He was married four times, had at least twelve children and is rumoured to have had many more with seventy mistresses, although this claim is highly suspect.



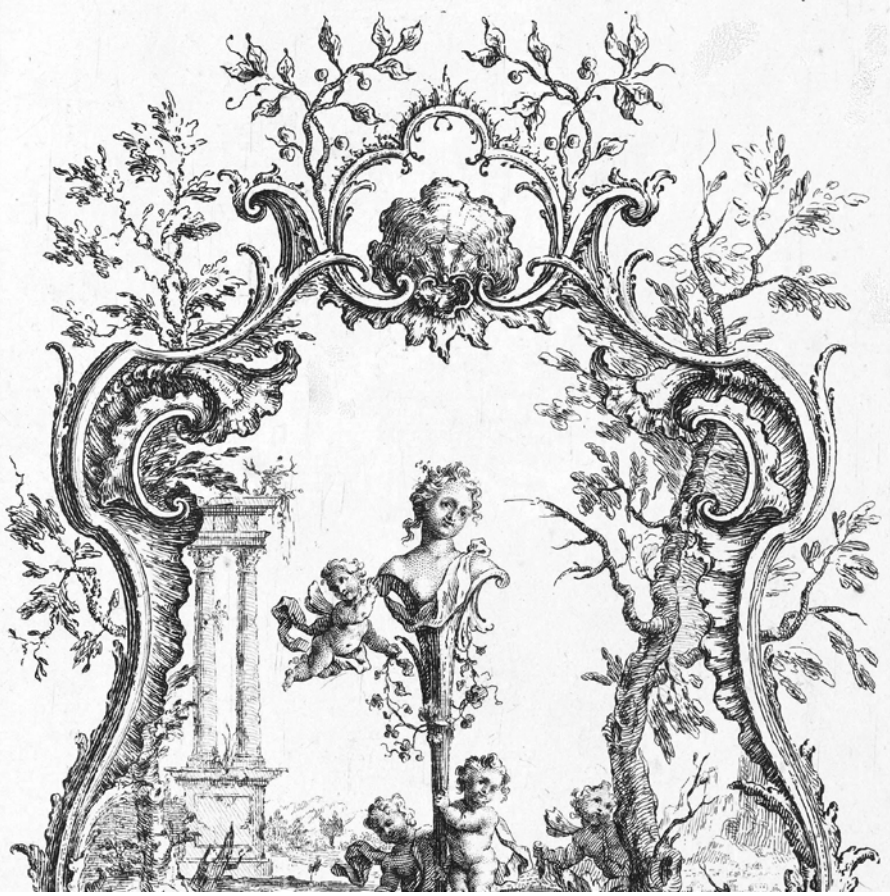
Benjamin Lay (1682-1759), was an American abolitionist, feminist, Quaker, environmentalist, vegan, and animal rights activist. For a time, he lived in a cave with his wife Sarah (Smith) Lay, who was also a person with dwarfism, and owned one of the largest book collections in the American colonies. He was one of the first to call for the immediate abolition of slavery worldwide.

He was uncompromising and was cast out of four Quaker communities for his dramatic protests. Some of these included smashing expensive tea sets, walking barefoot in the snow and splattering slave-owners with fake blood. He believed that “We must truly and sincerely desire the present and eternal welfare and happiness of all mankind, all the world over, of all colours and nations.”



Alexander Pope (1688-1744) was an English writer, translator, satirist and poet. He was one of the most influential poets of the 18th century and remains a significant Enlightenment figure within English Literature today. Alexander was known for his sharp wit and he had tuberculosis of the spine and chronic pain. He was mostly self-educated, as due to the restrictive laws about Catholics, he was not able to attend public schools or universities. Alexander could read five different languages including Latin and Greek, and translated *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* into English.

He had a quick temper and often engaged in literary public feuds. Some of his most famous quotes include "To err is human; to forgive, divine.", "Fools rush in where angels fear to tread" and "A little learning is a dangerous thing".



Francois De Cuvillies (1695-1768) was a Belgian-born architect and designer who is associated with popularising the Rococo style. At age 11 he began working in the court of Max Emanuel, Elector of Bavaria, who recognised his intellectual potential and had him tutored in mathematics and engineering.

Francois studied architecture in Paris under François Blondel the Younger, where he became immersed in the emerging Rococo style and upon returning to Bavaria became the court's architect. Rococo is an exceptionally ornamental style of decoration, with lots of curves, pastels and gold. He is most famous for the Amalienburg in Nymphenburg Palace park and the Cuvillies Theatre (Residenztheater) in Munich.



Andrew Whiston (1770-1826) was known as the ‘King of the Beggars’ after succeeding Billy Waters. He was born in Dundee, but spent most of his life in London, where he was somewhat of a celebrity, with his exploits frequently making the newspapers. He had achondroplasia and paraplegia, and used crutches to push his cart. He was said to have a “irascible disposition”, considerable physical strength, and was able to drink 30 glasses of gin in a sitting. Police described him as a “great nuisance” as “He was very prone to insult females as they passed, using towards them some of the lowest and most indecent expressions of which the English language was capable” After his death his landlord tried to sell his body but police intervened to give him a proper burial and defend his body from being exhumed and stolen by resurrectionists.

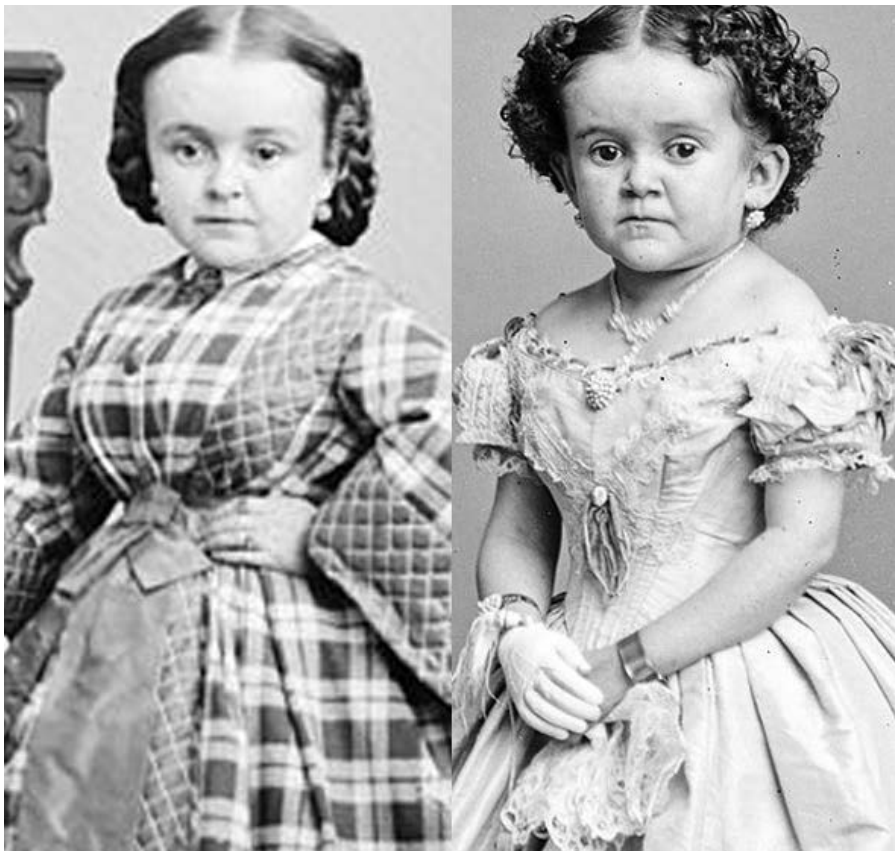


Don Santiago de los Santos (1786-1806) was a celebrity and part of a travelling show in England. Born in the Philippines, he was found in the forest and adopted by the Spanish Viceroy of Manilla, who raised and educated him as a foster child. He was fond of music, dancing, glittering attire and jewellery and spoke several languages. Don Santiago traveled to England where he married a woman with dwarfism. Due to the presumption that it was against canon law, the clergyman initially refused to marry them, but this was overturned by a bailiff. They had two weddings, split between a Catholic and Protestant church, and so many people attended that police were needed to get the couple in and out. Don Santiago joined a travelling show and often performed with Miss Angelina Melius, who was described as a giantess.



William Cuffay (1788-1870) was a democratic and labour rights activist. He was the son of a former slave and faced discrimination throughout his life. As a trade unionist, he won reforms like employers not imprisoning workers for quitting. Cuffay was considered one of the most militant leaders of the Chartist movement, which fought for the right to vote.

He was convicted of trying to lead an armed uprising and was exiled, but was then later pardoned. He said "Remember the past, fight for the future". Reynolds Political Instructor described him as "He was "loved by his own order, who knew him and appreciated his virtues, ridiculed and denounced by a press that knew him and not, and had no sympathy with his class, and banished by a government that feared him."

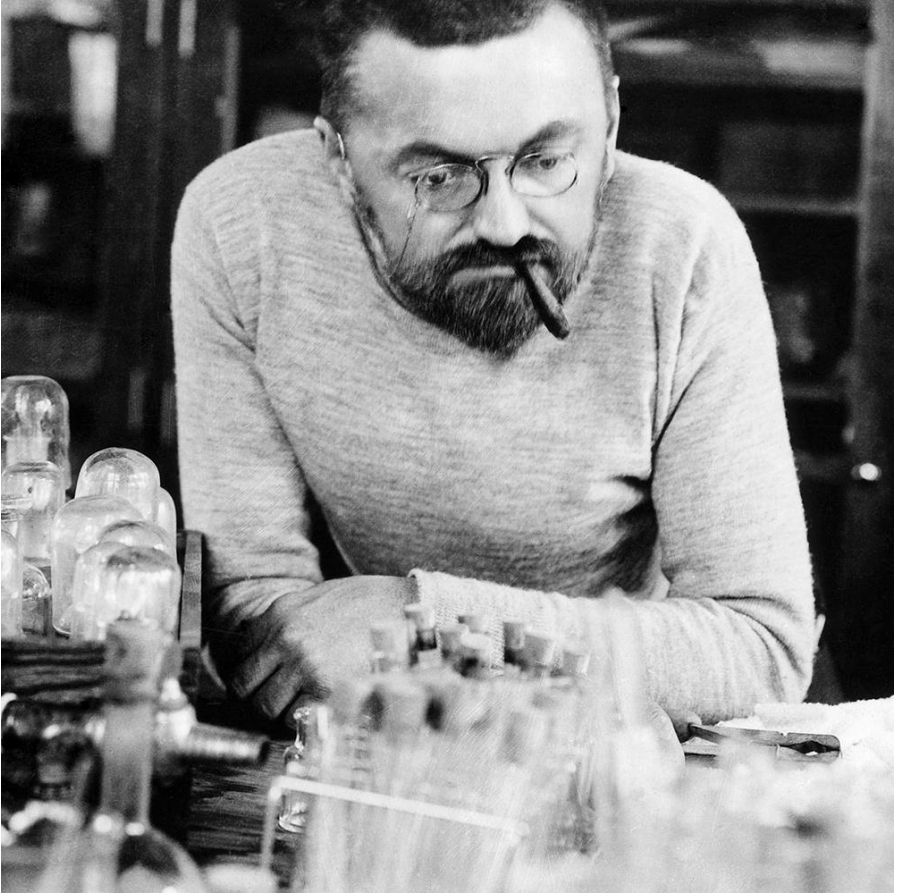


Mercy Lavinia Warren Stratton (1841–1919) and **Minne Warren (1849–1878)** were sibling actresses, singers, and circus performers. Mercy was the wife of Charles Sherwood Stratton, aka General Tom Thumb, while Minne was the wife of Edmund Newell aka General Grant Jr: both men also had dwarfism. Mercy's wedding to Stratton was one of the most publicized events of 19th century New York with Barnum selling tickets to their reception at \$75 each. Mercy and Minne went on to meet Abraham Lincoln at a reception held at the White House, and both sisters became millionaires. However their fame came with a price with Mercy not liking that she and her family were treated as children by the general public. Mercy wrote in her autobiography: "It seemed impossible, to make people understand at first that I was not a child; that, being a woman, I had the womanly instinct of shrinking from a form of familiarity which in the case of a child of my size would have been as natural as it was permissible," and is quoted as saying "I belong to the public."



Henri de Toulouse Lautrec (1864-1901) was an influential French painter and illustrator who was part of the Post-impressionists. He was a member of an aristocratic family and was a fixture in the bohemian scene of Montmartre, a district of Paris known for its cafes, cabarets, theatres and brothels. He had a sharp, self-deprecating wit, and an affinity for alcohol and sex workers, the latter of which also featured heavily in his paintings. He walked with a cane, which he had hollowed out to fill with alcohol. Lautrec collected Japanese woodblock prints, known as ukiyo-e.

He was a pioneer in the use of multi-colour lithography and used it to create vivid posters for the Moulin Rouge, a famous cabaret show and nightclub, which always kept a seat open for him. He once said “In art, as in life, it is the imperfections that make things truly beautiful.”



Charles Proteus Steinmetz (1865–1923) was an American inventor, mathematician, electrical engineer, and professor at Union College in Schenectady, New York. He was the holder of over 200 patents and his research centred around mathematics and electronics. Steinmetz was born in Prussia as Karl August Rudolph Steinmetz, but emigrated to the United States in 1889 fleeing persecution for being a socialist and agnostic. His many groundbreaking discoveries included a better understanding of the process of hysteresis, fostering the development of alternating current, allowing for better-designed electric motors, and the expansion of the electric power industry. He has many mathematical and engineering concepts named after him including Steinmetz's equation, Steinmetz solids, Steinmetz curves, and Steinmetz equivalent circuit as well as numerous scholarships and awards.



The Ovitz family (1868-2001), were a Jewish family comprising of ten siblings, seven of whom had a form of dwarfism known as pseudoachondroplasia. In 1944 the whole family was deported from their hometown of Rozavlea, Romania to Auschwitz-Birkenau in Poland. All members managed to survive due to Mengele's medical interest in dwarfs, which prevented them from being sent to the gas chambers.

Prior to their imprisonment, the Ovitz family made their income as a family of travelling musicians and performers. Known as the Lilliput troupe, they travelled across central Europe and insisted on being taken seriously as performers. "We never wanted to make a living out of exhibiting our deformity. We always wanted to be taken seriously as professional actors."



Samir and Muhammad - a modern legend that derives from an 1889 photograph taken on the streets of Damascus by French-Italian photographer Tancrède Dumas, Samir was allegedly a paralysed Christian man with dwarfism who lived in a close, interdependent partnership with a blind Muslim man named Muhammad.

The two found each other on the streets of Damascus as orphaned children and teamed up to survive, with Samir guiding Muhammad through the city streets as Muhammad carried him on his back. The two lived, ate and slept together in the city's slum housing, depending on each other for all of their needs. When Samir later died of illness, Muhammad died shortly after of grief. The story has become a popular children's fable across the Muslim world.



Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) was an influential Marxist intellectual and politician who was one of the founders of the Italian Communist Party. He also had restricted growth and a hunched back due to tuberculosis of the spine. Gramsci believed that every aspect of life was political. He is primarily known for his work on cultural hegemony, which is how the worldviews of the elites became that of the general population.

To him, culture played a significant role in societal domination, and that ideology transcended economic class boundaries. He was imprisoned by Mussolini's fascists and wrote his now-famous Prison Notebooks. Gramsci said, "What comes to pass does so not so much because a few people want it to happen, as because the mass of citizens abdicate their responsibility and let things be."



Manuel Escorza del Val (1912-1968) was the chief of the intelligence services for the anarchists during the Spanish Civil War against the fascists. He was considered the most powerful person in the CNT, where he oversaw executions, assassinations, interrogations, intelligence gathering and espionage. Manuel used a wheelchair and crutches; he had paralysis and a short stature from polio.

He was described as honest, reserved, austere, headstrong, highly educated and efficient. After the war, he moved to Chile and became a cultural journalist. He was greatly feared by his ideological enemies, who only dared to defame him after his death. A friend described him as “An incorruptible and implacable revolutionary” He said ‘We shall show no mercy in dealing with fascists and neutrals’

Modern people with dwarfism

Billy Barty (1924 – 2000) was an American actor and activist. He starred in numerous films and television series over seven decades, beginning as a child actor in Mickey Rooney's "Mickey McGuire" shorts in the 20's and 30's starting out playing babies; and in 1933's *Bride of Frankenstein*. He worked with Elvis Presley, Redd Skelton, Rod Stieger, Michael Landon, Tom Cruise and famously in Ron Howard's film *Willow*. He was the first person with dwarfism to have his own TV series; Southern California childrens' program *Billy Barty's Bigtop*. Billy was a staple of 70's Saturday morning television under Sid & Marty Krofft. He founded the now known Little People of America in 1957; a place to meet and network with persons with dwarfism. He was the first to use the term "Little People" on TV in *Love Boat*. He has a star on Hollywood's famous Walk of Fame.

Judy-Lynn del Rey (1943 –1986) was a New York based science fiction and fantasy editor responsible for revolutionizing the science fiction industry. She started her career as an office assistant at *Galaxy Magazine* in 1965, and worked her way up in the industry becoming an Associate Editor just four years later. Del Rey went on to work for Ballantine books and started her own imprint, *Del Rey Books*, along with her husband Lester del Rey, revitalizing Ballantine's science fiction line. She then went on to edit the science fiction anthology series, *Stellar*, which won the Locus Award for best anthology in 1976. As a powerhouse of the industry del Rey was instrumental in obtaining the rights to publish novels based on George Lucas's then unreleased *Star Wars* movies, earning Ballantine millions of dollars. Del Ray was also a huge science fiction fan herself, attending cons throughout her life. Philip K. Dick called her a "master craftsman" and "the best editor I've ever worked with," and Isaac Asimov described her as "incredibly intelligent, quick-witted, hard-driving" and "generally recognised (especially by me) as one of the top editors in the business."

Danny Woodburn (1964-present) is an award winning American actor, comedian and disability activist. Starring in numerous films and television shows, Woodburn ensures that none of the roles he takes reinforce problematic stereotypes of dwarfism. In the past this often led to bouts of unemployment, but on the other hand led to bigger and better roles, not necessarily written for little people. As a disability activist Woodburn is a strong critic of the practice of 'cripping up'. He came up with the 'Woodburn ratio', which encourages producers to give three speaking roles to disabled performers if they choose

to cast a non-disabled person to play a disabled character. “People like me [little people] are not ashamed to be small. We accept who we are. Anything that comes at us is external, it is not internal.”

Tom Shakespeare (1966-present) is a prominent academic and author whose work touches on sociology, bioethics, and disability studies. He is best known for his book, *Disability Rights and Wrongs*. Shakespeare challenged orthodox interpretations of the Social Model of Disability, which views disability as solely caused by societal barriers and oppression, for neglecting the lived experiences of impairment and embodiment. As a student he supported liberation groups advocating for feminism, anti-racism and gay rights. He is fond of crumpets, cheese, whiskey and the music of the Ramones. Shakespeare himself has achondroplasia and uses a wheelchair. “Disabled people have been in every one of your revolutions; you had better be there for ours!”

Kiruna Stamell (1981-present) is an Australian-born actor, dancer and performer working in the UK (and internationally), with a career comprising West End, television and film roles, including Oscar and Oliver Award-winning pieces like Baz Luhrmann’s ‘Moulin Rouge’ and Martin Crimp’s stage adaptation of ‘Cyrano De Bergerac’. Kiruna is committed to breaking harmful and restrictive stereotypes for individuals and performers with restricted growth; she advocates for avoiding tropes for disabled characters, and using person-first language. In 2014, Kiruna undertook a well-reported lawsuit against the Post Office for the height-inaccessibility of their chip and pin machines (Kiruna herself has acromesomelic dysplasia). As result of this, the company pledged to improve access in 11,000 branches.

Ellie Simmonds (1994-present) is a retired Paralympic swimmer, media personality and documentarian. Her swimming career rose to prominence in the 2010s, when she won five Gold medals at the Paralympics and several more at the World and European Championships. She broke the world record for fastest 200m individual medley in 2016, beating her own previous world record. After retiring from swimming, Ellie went on to become a TV presenter on BBC Sport, and has also appeared as a contestant on *Strictly Come Dancing*, *Celebrity Bake Off* and *The Crystal Maze*, among others. More recently, she presented and narrated two documentaries, BBC’s *A World Without Dwarfism* which explores the effects of taking the drug vosoritide on people with dwarfism, and one for Channel 4, called *Finding My Secret Family*, about experiences of people with dwarfism that are adopted.

Gods with dwarfism

Bes (2675 BCE) was an Egyptian deity associated with music, dance, sexual pleasure, childbirth, fertility, and protection of pregnant women and infants. Bes was commonly shown as a bearded person with dwarfism, with his tongue sticking out, large ears, long hair, and bow-legged stance, often depicted holding a rattle or other symbolic items like a snake or sword. Unlike other gods, images of Bes were kept in households, appearing at gates and bed headboards to ward off evil spirits and provide security by killing snakes and scorpions. Bes is often paired with Harpocrates in healing contexts; they are the only Egyptian gods to have feminine versions: Beset and Harpocratis.

Pataikos (1550 BCE) was a version of the Egyptian god Ptah who was a person with dwarfism. In some versions of the myths he is alternately considered a son of Ptah. He was a protective deity who was typically depicted in amulet form as a nude person in a bow-legged stance with a scarab on his head. He strangles various dangerous animals: snakes, scorpions, and stands on the backs of crocodiles: the amulets are meant to literally show him controlling chaos. Pataikos was frequently also depicted with the goddess of war, Sekhmet, and Nefertem, the god of the lotus. Pataikos was equated by the ancient Greeks to their god Hephaestus.

Vamana, (1000 AD) which means “small in stature” is an incarnation of maha Vishnu in Hinduism. He is depicted as a person with dwarfism dressed as a monk. A demon ruled the universe, Vamana asked to have ownership over as much land as he could cover in three steps, when the demon agreed, Vamana grew into a giant, with one step he covered the earth, then the heaven and then his own head. Having conquered all existence, the cosmic order is thus restored and the demon banished to the underworld. Other stories often have him defeating various other demons without shapeshifting into a giant form. Vamana represents humble beginnings and blessings from unexpected places.

Would you like to know more?

Articles

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- Watson, K. (2020) "With a smile and a song": representations of people with dwarfism in 1930s cinema. *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies*, 14 (2) 137-153.

Books

The Fearless Benjamin Lay by Marcus Rediker

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Videos

Youtube : Life as a 'little person' in a big city. YouTube.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_lZkFIXVjdA



This zine is produced by the **Disability Action Research Kollektive (DARK)**, which is a disabled-led group working to make disability perspectives, history, and research more accessible to a general audience. We are always looking for disabled (and non-disabled) volunteers to help write, edit and share their perspectives. Be part of something bigger than yourself, join us in the DARK today!

This zine features work by
**Richard Amm, Alexandra Morris, Erin Pritchard,
Red Hamilton Russell, Brydi Edwards, Danny Woodburn,
Kyle Lewis Jordan, Leah Smith, Marcus Rediker & Cathy Reay**