

Reshaping the Margins: Disability and Social Integration in Jean Little's *Listen for the Singing*

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Abstract

This article examines Jean Little's Listen for the Singing, which narrates the uplifting tale of Anna Solden, a little girl with a vision disability. The tale chronicles Anna's challenges in acclimating to her new school and life subsequent to her relocation to Canada. Initially, she experiences a sense of dissimilarity and ambiguity over her position in the world. With the help of her affectionate family, compassionate educators, and newfound companions, Anna learns to confront her challenges with bravery and optimism. The narrative illustrates how specialised learning instruments, including Braille, audiobooks, and typewriters, assist Anna in pursuing her education and fostering self-confidence. The article draws on ideas from Lennard J. Davis's The Disability Studies Reader (5th ed.), which explains that disability is not only about physical or mental differences, but also about how society views and treats people who seem different. Many of the challenges faced by people with disabilities come from a lack of understanding, poor accessibility, and limited acceptance from others. This idea is clearly reflected in Jean Little's Listen for the Singing, where Anna, a young girl with a visual impairment, struggles not only with her limited eyesight but also with how others perceive her, teachers and her classmates in Germany fail to understand her needs, making her feel isolated and discouraged but later joins a more supportive school in Canada, she is given access to assistive tools, patient teachers, and caring friends who help her succeed. Through Anna's journey, the novel shows that when society changes its attitude and provides the right support, people with disabilities can thrive and live with confidence.

Keywords: Disability, Inclusion, Assistive Technology, Empathy, Social Attitude

Submitted: 15.10.2025

Accepted: 16.12.2025

Published 30.12.2025

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Modern disability studies emphasise that disability arises not from individual deficits alone, but from the environmental, attitudinal, and institutional structures that shape social experience. Literature plays a significant role in reflecting and reshaping societal perceptions of disability, offering readers insight into the lived realities of individuals who navigate these challenges. Jean Little's *Listen for the Singing*, the sequel to *From Anna*, provides a compelling narrative that portrays the life of Anna Solden, a visually impaired young girl whose experiences highlight both the struggles and the possibilities within inclusive educational and social settings. Despite her impairment, Anna makes significant efforts to pursue inclusion and education. The novel acknowledges Anna's visual disability, which poses learning difficulties. Nevertheless, the book highlights how Anna's challenges are effectively addressed by providing her with assistive devices to facilitate her learning. The objective of this research is to gain insight into the experiences of individuals with disabilities, and to examine the impact of supportive environments and assistive technologies on their educational and social inclusion.

Compared to Anna's siblings, she learns more slowly due to her visual impairment, "It was at one of those pre-school examinations that he discovered how poor Anna's eyesight was" (Little 27). Dr. Schumacher advised her to wear glasses; she has been wearing them for almost five years. He is unsure whether Anna will still be able to see clearly even with the glasses, but she did notice, "The World around her, a blurred, unreal place before, sprang into sharper focus as she looked at it through the lenses" (Little 28). Therefore, on Dr. Schumacher's advice, Anna's parents enrolled her in the Sight-Saving class.

Mrs. Schumacher, a teacher at the school for the visually impaired where Anna attends and is also married to Dr. Schumacher, shows exceptional care and devotion towards Anna. This indicates that Anna holds a unique place in her heart, as evidenced by her statement, "You're a joy to teach" (Little 29). Despite her fondness for Anna and desire to continue teaching her, Mrs. Schumacher urges Anna to attend an integrated school to ensure she receives an equal education and opportunities:

you're ready to leave the nest. Right now, hundreds of students your age are facing the uncertainty of beginning high school tomorrow. If you go now, you'll be one of them and you'll learn to fit in along with everyone else. If you wait, the way Isobel did, till you've finished grade ten in a special class, the others will have already made their adjustment and their friendship too. (Little 29)

Mrs. Schumacher urges Anna to consider enrolling in an inclusive school, citing that "You have so much to learn about yourself, and you won't find it out while we keep you protected" (Little 30). As a result, Anna takes the entrance exam for an integrated school to enhance her educational experience and fully participate in the academic realm. Anna takes the test alongside her peers without visual impairments and successfully passes. Anna's learning abilities have improved at the special care school, where she feels comfortable learning from supportive and caring teachers. In contrast, in Germany, Anna is afraid to go to school because the teacher scolded

her for not doing well. Ernst admits that they unintentionally pushed Anna away, which led to her negative experiences in a regular German school. Later, it becomes clear that Anna's visual impairment caused her difficulties, not any personal shortcomings. The book *The Disability Studies Reader*, 5th ed, by Davis, argues that impairment is a normal part of life, and that the main problem is society's views. "The social model has the power to change the perception of disabled people. The problem of disability is relocated from the individual, to the barriers and attitudes which disable her. It is not the disabled person who is to blame, but society. She does not have to change, society does." (Davis 192)

Anna's educational endeavours are significantly impacted by her impaired vision. She successfully navigates these obstacles by utilising assistive technologies that facilitate her learning. Rudi, her brother, enquires about her reading techniques and discovers her use of Braille, highlights the role of assistive technologies in making education more accessible for those with visual impairments. With these tools, Anna can work towards her educational objectives on her own, and with a newfound sense of assurance. The article *Amazing Benefits of Assistive Technology for the Visually Impaired* points out that assistive technology empowers visually impaired people to gain more independence, both in their studies and in their everyday lives. Anna's reliance on Braille and a talking book machine illustrates how adaptive technologies do more than just aid reading; they cultivate independence and promote integration in the classroom. Assistive technologies are essential for individuals with disabilities, functioning to lessen or eliminate barriers to learning and participation. Anna's access to these tools is dependent on her enrolment in a sight-saving school, which provides the technological and pedagogical support necessary for her educational progress. This shift highlights the crucial role of institutional comprehension and resource distribution in fostering inclusive educational methodologies.

Disability studies have thoroughly examined the needs and advantages of assistive technologies for disabled children, indicating that such tools promote cognitive development and academic achievement, alongside emotional well-being and self-sufficiency. Anna's case exemplifies this concept, the provision of appropriate assistive devices, such as Braille materials and audio book players, transforms the learning process from a difficult and isolating undertaking into one of empowerment, discovery, and independence. In the face of war and the financial hardships associated with migration, the Solden family is motivated to overcome their difficulties through the example set by Anna, a character living with a disability. Her tenacity in persevering through challenges, such as learning a new language, is especially noteworthy given her visual impairment and the additional challenges it presents during the family's migration. *The Disability Studies Reader 5th ed.*, suggesting that "focusing on the individual and their bodily and cognitive limitations can impede disabled person's ability to gain equal participation in society. A lack of self-esteem and self-confidence remains a significant hurdle in the way of disabled individuals' engagement in society" (Davis 198).

Following their migration to Canada, the Solden family endeavours to learn the English language, with Anna facing particular difficulties in the initial stages. However, her admission to the Sight-saving school for children with disabilities proved instrumental in facilitating her language acquisition process. Conversely, Anna's siblings, Rudi and Gretchen, displayed greater ease in their language learning. Sailaja Chennat's book, *Disability, Inclusion and Inclusive Education*, discusses language impediments that students with disabilities may encounter, stating that "challenges in acquiring language may encompass receptive or expressive language impairments, with the former being less noticeable than the latter and potentially creating obstacles to learning if overlooked" (Chennat 89). As such, Anna was able to surmount the linguistic challenges of adapting to a new country.

Anna's father's unwavering affection constitutes her primary emotional anchor in this unfamiliar environment. Her persistent quest for his love and attention is evident, as exemplified by her perception that this might be the very chance she had been hoping for: time alone with her father, underscores her profound emotional reliance on him and her yearning for intimacy amidst this period of transition. She enthusiastically recounts her daily activities to her father, seeking both validation and solace from him. Rudi's light-hearted remark, referring to Anna as "Papa's pet", suggests that their bond is defined by genuine affection and mutual understanding, rather than condescension or favouritism, notwithstanding his evident care for all his offspring. Notably, Anna's father does not exhibit any form of bias stemming from her disability. Instead, he actively assists her, striving to provide her with opportunities and resources intended to enhance her overall welfare. This portrayal highlights the critical significance of familial love and acceptance in fostering the self-confidence and social integration of children with disabilities.

The nascent academic institution boasts an extensive roster of instructors, including Miss Sutcliff, Mr. McNair, and Mr. Lloyd, all of whom have played pivotal roles in fostering Anna's education and assimilation into the school's community. Mr. McNair has expressed interest in having Anna perform a public reading in front of her peers. Despite her challenges with learning, Anna perseveres, as evidenced by her resolute posture and unabashed recitation, where "Holding the book so close that it nearly touched her nose, she began to read aloud" (Little 123). Anna's unflinching determination to read without any hesitation is an admirable feat, given the complexities of her situation.

Amidst the inclusive educational setting, Anna is accompanied by two fellow students, Paula and Maggie, who have proven to be valuable allies in her academic endeavours. They have taken notice of Anna's distinctive behavior in contrast to those of her peers, with Maggie remarking that "Half the time, I forget about you not being able to see" (Little 129). However, this realization is often belated, as Anna's remarkable abilities make her seem indistinguishable from the other students. Nonetheless, Anna's visual impairment remains a palpable challenge, as evidenced by Maggie's observation that Anna struggles to perceive the contents on

the board even when she is positioned in the front of the classroom, while Maggie can easily discern the same information from the back of the room. Anna relies on enlarged print resources to aid her reading comprehension, even though she still encounters significant challenges during assessments, during a test given by Mr. Lloyd, she finds it difficult to understand a small map included in the exam booklet. Demonstrating both self-awareness and assertiveness, Anna respectfully requests an accommodation. "May I use this bigger map, sir, please? I can't see to put the places in on a smaller one. And I need it drawn in black ink" (Little 131). In response to her plea, Mr. Lloyd provides her with larger print materials to complete the test. This juncture represents a crucial development for Anna, a transformative instance wherein she acquires the ability to express her requirements devoid of apprehension regarding derision or evaluation. Her interaction with Mr. Lloyd exemplifies that genuine inclusivity transcends the mere provision of resources; it necessitates that educators possess a keen awareness of their students' unique characteristics. Through her request for an expanded map, Anna assumes agency over her educational journey, thereby converting a potential impediment into a demonstration of resilience.

Assistive technology serves as a valuable and effective resource for individuals with disabilities, the complexity, expense, and requirement for specialized personnel to operate such equipment pose a significant challenge. Anna is taught through the use of assistive devices, such as talking book machines and Braille, by her teacher, Mrs. Schumacher. As per the social model of disability, outlined in Davis's, *The Disability Studies Reader 5th ed.*, assistive devices offer a means to overcome the obstacles faced by individuals with disabilities, as "sometimes, people with the same impairment require different solutions: some visually impaired people access text in Braille, others in large print, audio tape, or electronic files" (Davis 200).

Anna is aided by Isobel and Mrs. Schumacher in utilising a typewriter to complete her examination at her previous school. However, upon transferring to a new school, Anna's teacher insists that she complete her tests in the standard manner, leading Anna to express her concern and discontent, as "on regular tests, teachers had trusted Maggie enough to allow her to whisper to Anna the questions on the board" (Little 193). This decision unsettles Anna, and she becomes disheartened by her experience, even considering reaching out to Mrs. Schumacher to intervene on her behalf: "Maybe Mrs. Schumacher could phone him and tell him about the way she always typed exams out on a primer-type typewriter" (Little 194). Anna is granted permission to use a typewriter to complete her exams, as stated by the quote: "a teacher pointed out your problem at the last staff meeting and offered to type out all your examination papers on a primer-type typewriter" (Little, 194). Upon hearing this, Anna feels elated and wishes to express her gratitude to the teacher who supported her. Eventually, Anna realises that Mr. Lloyd, a teacher at her school, understands the difficulties she's facing with the standard exam. Here's how Anna expresses her gratitude: "I came to thank you," Anna said, all in a rush, her cheeks scarlet. "For typing out the exams so I can read them. I mean, I was really

worried and I didn't know what to do"(Little 196).

Anna's education serves as a means for promoting social inclusion and also equips her with the skills needed to adjust to a new environment. Mrs. Schumacher imparts valuable insights to Anna through a quote from *A Tale of Two Cities*, which Anna finds relevant to her life, "It was the worst of times, it was the best of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief..." (Little 243). Anna's disability takes a backseat due to her abilities and perseverance, and her parents provide her with unwavering support and encouragement to thrive and succeed in society. The article titled "Importance of Special Education for Special Children" on *Education Today* emphasises the crucial role of education in the lives of children with disabilities and the need to prioritise their education: The Special classes organized for these disable or gifted children have become necessity. It allows the students to enjoy the education and gain confidence due to individual learning. For the personal growth and development of the special children, it is important for all of them to receive proper education (*Education Today*). *Listen for the Singing* by Jean Little provides a vivid portrayal of the experiences of individuals with disabilities, particularly with respect to education and inclusion. The novel underscores the importance of providing a supportive environment that enables individuals with disabilities to access assistive technology and other necessary resources to pursue their educational goal, contests the notion that individuals with disabilities bear exclusive responsibility for their challenges. It underscores the necessity for society to eliminate barriers that impede equitable participation and inclusion. Highlights the experiences of Anna Solden and individuals with disabilities, the book serves as an important reminder of the need to address the barriers that limit educational and social inclusion, and to ensure that individuals with disabilities can fully participate in all aspects of society.

Through the character Anna, author represents the struggles and achievements of children with disabilities who seek education and social inclusion. Anna's story reflects the challenges and opportunities that children with disabilities face in their education, and how the support and guidance of family, friends, and educators can lead to their success. Anna's friendship with Isobel, her special relationship with her teacher Mrs. Schumacher, and the perseverance of her parents, all contribute to her personal growth and progress. Anna's learning experience highlights the importance of special education for children with disabilities and how it can lead to social inclusion and a brighter future. Anna's journey in the novel serves as a testament to the strength, resilience, and potential of children with disabilities.

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