

The funny, observant protagonist of this novel solves a mystery. She also has developmental disabilities.

By **CAMMIE McGOVERN**

Sally Miyake is a bold choice to narrate **SUNNYSIDE PLAZA** (Little, Brown, 208 pp., \$16.99; ages 8 and up), Scott Simon's debut as a middle-grade novelist. She's funny, observant and perceptive. She's also a 19-year-old with a developmental disability who lives in a group home where two residents have died unexpectedly. When police detectives recognize Sally's capabilities and ask for her help investigating the deaths, she makes her first outside friends.

Some readers may question the choice to put a 19-year-old like Sally at the center of a novel for younger readers. Having a cognitive disability doesn't make anyone an eternal child. But Sally's pitch-perfect, brilliantly meandering voice reminded me that I first read (and adored) "Flowers for Algernon," the story of an adult man with cognitive and developmental disabilities navigating similarly dark issues, when I was probably too young. Children are captivated by differences in others. In many

CAMMIE McGOVERN'S most recent novel for young readers is "Just Breathe."

ways, an overprotected young adult living in a group home faces the same challenges as a child testing the waters of independence. Can a fourth grader walk to school, or into a store, alone? Sally, like many of this book's presumed readers, has never done these things.

Simon, best known as the host for NPR's "Weekend Edition," based the story on his experience working in a group home when he was in college in the 1970s. He remembers — with hilarious accuracy — how conversations with this crowd can boomerang between outrageous comments and remarks that poignantly hit a nail on its head. In fact, I wish he had set this story back in the time he remembers so well. As it is, there are unfortunate anachronisms.

Today's children have been educated in classes alongside peers with every developmental disability under the sun, since it was mandated by law in 1990. Though Sally is bright enough to measure the world in mathematical equations (she tells us her age is "8 times 2 plus 3"), she has never attended school, never learned to read, never ventured too far outside the confines of Sunnyside Plaza, her group



home. Most children have seen their peers with intellectual disabilities not just in the classroom but on a bus, at a sporting event, just walking up the street.

It's important for all of us — especially we parents who sometimes question the strict laws that have been enacted around disabilities — to understand what life was like before mainstream schooling and community inclusion became the norm for people with special needs. Many were unnecessarily isolated. They, like Sally, could live on the same block as a Chinese restaurant and never have been inside it, or even eaten Chinese food. A group home for the intellectually disabled could mean, as it does at Sunnyside Plaza, five residents share a bedroom and 20 share a house. But now because of changes to federal law most are

not larger than six people.

Simon describes beautifully the toll of Sally's isolation. On her first bus ride, Sally imagines herself inside the buildings she sees. "When we rolled past a restaurant I could almost see myself sitting there. What would I order? What would I eat?" When Sally and a fellow resident are invited to a Passover Seder, where traditional stories are told about an outcast group in search of a place to belong, it's easy to make a connection to Sally herself.

The staff at Sunnyside Plaza work hard to take good care of their charges, yet the kind house manager admits that "history doesn't really happen here. . . . Who is president or mayor, what's the new music, basketball shoes or hairstyles." It's not clear why these people have to live in a world so apart from ours.

Still, Simon has given young readers a rare chance to celebrate the extraordinary courage of someone like Sally, and a chance to understand where it comes from. When Sally identifies the likely culprit in her friends' deaths, she brings three fellow residents along and ventures out unescorted for the first time, to find the detectives and tell them what she knows. Children will recognize the breath-catching bravery: "We were all by ourselves in the world outside. I was scared. I was excited. I took a step." □

This thrilling adventure fantasy has a heroine with intellectual disabilities. It's about time.

By **KAITLYN WELLS**

AT ONE POINT in Joseph Elliott's **THE GOOD HAWK** (Walker Books, 368 pp., \$17.99; ages 10 to 14), Jaime, one of the novel's protagonists, admits, "I don't feel particularly brave." A supporting character replies, "None of the bravest people do." The wisdom of these lines echoes throughout the novel, reminding readers that it's human to feel vulnerable in the face of unimaginable odds.

"The Good Hawk" tells the story of two flawed, unlikely teenage heroes in a mythical Scotland, on the Isle of Skye. Agatha, 15, is a Hawk, charged with patrolling the sea wall. Some say her duties are a pretense for keeping the community's *retarch* out of the way. That's a cruel term used to describe her congenital condition, an unnamed disability that is inspired by Elliott's work with children with Down syndrome. But what truly sets Agatha apart from her clan is her secret ability to talk to animals.

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Fourteen-year-old Jaime is an Angler, or fisherman, and his fear of the open ocean makes him inept at his job. He's forced to marry a young girl named Lileas in order to solidify an alliance, and tradition calls for the bride and groom to spend their wedding night in a rowboat at sea. But Agatha has stowed away in the vessel in an attempt to stop the wedding. It's too late to return her to land, so the three of them hunker down in the boat for the night.

They are awakened by the sound of four chimes, as Viking-ish invaders have attacked Skye in the predawn hours. Soon, they carry the survivors away to be enslaved. But our trio has avoided capture on the rickety boat.

As they embark on a quest to save their clanspeople, Jaime is forced into a leadership role. He's unsure of himself because he lacks experience and combat skills. The journey across icy waters and cursed terrain is more treacherous than they imagined, and they're left questioning decisions they made along the way. They encounter monsters: shadow creatures, called the

sgàilean, and gangly, wolflike animals known as terror beasts. Even when Agatha reveals she can communicate with animals and uses her gift to aid them, a new set of challenges emerges.

Elliott's many references to Scottish Gaelic and occasional Old Norse-inspired English fasten readers into the medieval timeline. This novel is fun to read, yet it reminded me that the world can be dangerous, dark and bloody. The allies and adversaries our virtuous heroes meet along the way only underline how out of their depth they are.

As alternating narrators, Jaime and Agatha complement each other wonderfully. Jaime is self-conscious, anxious and unsure of his place in the world. The harsh realities of their situation and the likelihood of an unspeakable outcome is a constant punch in the gut to him, and it doesn't help that he's surrounded by people who are braver and stronger. His insecurity is overwhelming, intimate and familiar. It's heart-rending to watch him lose faith in himself as he travels closer to their destination.

As for Agatha, she is courageous, stubborn and contemptuous when she doesn't get her way. Elliott has created a singular voice for her, using simpler, sometimes odd but no less expressive language. No



doubt thanks to his experience with children with special needs, Agatha never comes across as stereotypically helpless or "inspirational." With her infectious determination, it's endearing to read from her vantage point and cheer her as she blows away the naysayers.

Elliott's twist on the hero's-journey narrative reminded me that the best way to survive hardship is often by leaning on others and having faith in yourself — no matter your presumed intellectual or physical shortcomings. With its blend of unusual character development and clever exploration of ancient realms, "The Good Hawk" is a story fantasy-loving young readers may not even know they've been waiting for. □