

Reexamining an “Inspirational” Movie

An IMDb review says it “handles tough issues with flair.” Another calls it “heroic, realistic, and truly inspiring.” It’s the recipient of two Young Artist Awards, a Teen Choice Award, and a Women Film Critics Circle Award. *My Sister’s Keeper*, directed by Nick Cassavetes, touched a lot of hearts with its emotive and melancholy storyline riddled with poignant moments that hit close to home for many families. An ostensibly idyllic life. A suburban White family. Parents happily married. Mom’s a lawyer. Dad’s a firefighter. Three beautiful children. Except, nothing is ever *that* seamless. One of the children, 15 year-old Kate, is suffering from leukemia. To ensure she’d be a perfect match for Kate, her sister, 11 year-old Anna, was deliberately engineered via IVF to be the vessel for all the organs, marrow, and blood that Kate may need throughout her treatment process. Anna is suing her parents for medical emancipation of her own body. The catch is that she is suing not because she wants control over her own body but because Kate told her she’s ready to die. Anna’s mom Sara comes back into the law field (after having quit to take care of Kate) to defend herself against her own daughter. And, well, the third child, Jesse, has dyslexia, but we don’t see very much of him in the movie.

Honestly, I used to watch this movie a lot when I was younger. I found myself mechanically and blindly simmering in the movie’s pull-at-the-heartstrings quality. Presently, dissecting it from a disability perspective allows us to reveal where it goes wrong. While the movie appears to explore themes of love, pain, hope, and courage— *mostly* to no avail— it glances over the “pro-life” vs. “pro-choice” issue that impregnates (pun intended) the entire plotline. Most importantly, it seems to rely on its myriad employment of what Jay Dolmage refers to as “disability tropes”— all of the stereotypical, one-noted ways in which disabled people are

depicted, especially in cinema and literature. Let's also keep in mind that many of these tropes do not exist on their own and are entangled in an inextricable web with others.

Now, before we dive into the movie, we have to keep a couple of things in mind. First: having cancer is *very* different from, for example, being in a wheelchair. While many disability activists remind us that being in a wheelchair does not necessitate a “cure,” being told your child may die from leukemia is a wholly different story, and most parents would do anything in their power to “cure” their child. It is difficult to try to imagine cancer as a “disability.” However, I think it's very safe to say that cancer can certainly be *disabling* with all of its strenuous and exhausting symptoms. Terminal illness also clings very closely to the medical model of disability; doctors and other professionals provide textbook-like descriptions of the illness, its symptoms, and its physiological impacts, and this runs the risk of diminishing one's personal experience with the illness. We have to expand our definition of what we're predisposed to think of as “disability.” Dolmage's myths unequivocally abound in the movie. We must remember—biology never exists on its own; society always infuses it with more meaning.

Second: we have to remember all of this family's privileges. Right off the bat, an egregiously impractical storyline is created. Most lower-class and even middle-class families could not afford to put their child through cancer treatment without suffering fatal blows to their financial situation. Additionally, most families do not have the money to undergo IVF, which could cost anywhere from \$10,000-\$15,000 per cycle (Gurevich). If a family can't afford IVF, well, it probably can't afford to literally genetically engineer a child, which entails excluding the embryos that have inherited a mutation/an unwanted trait. This can range from around \$20,000-\$30,000 (Hercher). The intersection of disability and class is vital to what goes on in this movie.

If we took away the Fitzgeralds' privileges, Kate likely would not have lived for as long as she did, and Anna might not even have been brought into the world in the first place.

Let's start at the movie's inception. Our first clear trope. We instantly see Kate blowing bubbles, laughing, and watering flowers. This is what Jay Dolmage calls "Disability as Good" in his book *Disability Rhetoric* (42). There is never a moment in the movie when Kate is portrayed as "bad" or "ungrateful" or "bitter" unless it has to do with her cancer symptoms, whether that be throwing up, losing her hair, or bleeding from the nose. The movie's objective is just that: the more we tell ourselves that Kate doesn't "deserve" what she must endure *because* she is so "good," the better the film's reputation as "moving" and "touching" becomes. This leads into the "Disability as Object of Pity and/or Charity" trope, for this myth definitely goes hand in hand with the "Disability as Good" trope. The movie never really takes the opportunity to construct Kate as a well-rounded character. Her "pure" heart makes it easier for viewers to pity her. Now, this is not *at all* to say that Kate's leukemia doesn't envelop a big part of her life, and it's very fair to say that much of her life *does* revolve around her cancer. However, we seldom see any external or familial conflicts attributed to the everyday teenage kid (such as Kate getting into a fight with her siblings or parents, her being a "bratty teenager," losing her temper, etc.). Instead of taking advantage of the chance to develop Kate as a character with profundity and rich tones, the movie capitalizes on her illness to create the "sad" and "pitiable" aspect of the movie.

For me, one of the most glaring issues of the movie is that Kate is exploited as what Dolmage calls an "Ethical Test"—one in which "the disability often 'acts as some form of ethical background to the actions of other characters...as a means of testing or enhancing their moral standing'" (42). Kate revolves around her family members, thus allowing viewers to judge them

based on how they treat Kate and her situation. Kate acts as a neutral, passive party; even in the most heightened situations in the movie, she doesn't function as an active participant.

The way in which Sara never asks or considers what *Kate* wants to do with her body allows us to judge Sara as a melodramatic mother with misplaced, sometimes ridiculous fixations. I'd like to provide an example. Toward the end of the movie (when we can infer Kate is in her final moments), Kate requests to go to the beach, requiring her to temporarily leave the hospital. The doctors say it's best that Kate is comfortable and comply with her request to discharge her for the day. Right as Kate's father and siblings are entering the car, Sara comes and throws (what looks to me as) a temper-tantrum, pounding on the car and demanding that her husband drive Kate back to the hospital, stipulating that if he doesn't, she'll divorce him. Now, upon first glance, Sara ostensibly comes off as a deeply-caring mother. But I think we can all agree that she's turned this situation into an unnecessary spectacle. If Sara would've just shut up for one second and listened to Kate's wishes, Kate wouldn't have been used as an ethical test for her mother's insolent behavior. In summary, it's expected that the disabled/sick person will unobtrusively stand aside so that the abled characters can be developed in a dynamic fashion. This is an unfortunate, missed opportunity of the film. Rather than elaborate on the fact that "disabled" people *do* and *should* have a say in their own situations, the movie takes a very backassward, inane path *through the abled characters* to get there (I will get to this later).

If we consider the "pro-choice" vs. "pro-life" argument, we are prone to think of it all having to do with Anna's choice of what she wants to do with her body (as illustrated through the lawsuit). If we think about this, it's absolutely devastating because the movie doesn't allow us to consider *Kate's* choice. Her fight for autonomy over her own body is shoved aside and not genuinely captured (at least not directly— I am almost at this point). Let's continue on with the

“Ethical Test” trope. Arriving at our most conspicuous example, we can see how Kate is put to use as a means of judging Anna’s character.

Hold up— you might be wondering, “Well, isn’t Anna acting on behalf of Kate throughout the entire movie, even if indirectly?” If this is what you’re thinking, you’re not wrong, but what’s gravely problematic is the “*indirectly*” portion. I’ll clarify. How do her parents find out Kate really wants to die? Through her brother, Jesse. Kate’s angry (rightfully so!) and sick of being put through all of these procedures and treatment that she doesn’t want. I would have loved for the movie to have *Kate* lash out at her parents, specifically her mom, since they never overtly ask her opinion. Or, even better, I would have loved for Kate to be the protagonist of this movie! If the plot is going to be preoccupied with autonomy over one’s body, terminal illness, and death, then it only makes sense that the terminally ill person (the one facing death and undergoing the treatment) is the primary voice we hear from. Nonetheless, this isn’t the case. It goes without saying that Anna should have autonomy over choices such as this; because we know she’s acting on behalf of Kate, we could’ve flipped the narrative, made Kate the protagonist, had her testify in court, and had *her* tell her parents how she was feeling. Even if Anna was still wrapped up in the lawsuit, I’d have loved to see her and Kate cooperating together to decide what’s best for the both of them rather than everything being so separate. Viewing the movie from Kate’s outlook would have warranted a much greater source of disabled/sick representation, strengthening the fact that just because one is disabled or ill does NOT mean they don’t know what’s right for themselves.

So yes, Kate’s choice *is* present in the movie, but we only view it from the lens of her abled counterparts, solidifying the notion that abled perspectives are an appropriate replacement for disabled voices. Like I said earlier, it’s revealed to us that the reason Anna is filing suit

against her parents is because Kate told Anna she's ready to die; consequently, Anna wouldn't have to undergo any more procedures to "save" her sister. Anna is painted as heroic for "allowing" Kate to die. "Sacrificing" her choice for Kate, Anna is crafted as courageous. Kate's death at the end of the movie leads us into our final trope: "Kill or Cure."

Dolmage outlines this myth for us in his book: "a disabled character will either have to be 'killed or cured' by the end of any movie or novel in which they appear...the death [being] sacrificial" (39). Even though nobody explicitly "kills" Kate, the trope unquestionably applies. Kate's death is absolutely sacrificial. She *has to* die so her mom can go back to work. She *has to* die so her dad can take an early pension. She *has to* die so her brother Jesse can take an art scholarship in New York. Fundamentally, she *has to* die so Anna's medical emancipation suit can mean something (and of course so the movie can wrap up nicely). I want to delve a bit more into this myth. Kate functions as a martyr, meekly "removing" herself from the equation for the sake of her family. I am not at all trying to undermine the fact that death is more comforting than life for people suffering from a terminal illness, but in the movie, her death functions as much more than solely the desire to die. Her death is *necessary* for the other characters' futures and of course to wrap up all the movie's loose ends. Anna's "allowing" her sister's death sculpts Anna as humble and brave while Kate merely operates as a propellor of the plot, which centers completely around her sister. *My Sister's Keeper* fortifies the terribly binaristic idea that "disabled" people have to be either cured or killed for life to go on feasibly.

I promise that I am not trying to be cynical. There's a positive facet to the movie worth bringing up. Kate does end up becoming romantically involved with another fellow leukemia sufferer, Taylor, whom she meets at the hospital. She falls in love and has sex with him, vitally destroying the myth that disabled people cannot be sexual beings. Our movie simultaneously and

directly counteracts Dolmage's "Disability as Isolating and Individuating" trope, which states that "people with disabilities...rarely have romantic relationships...and are often left alone at the end of the narrative" (35). The reasons as to why the movie does not choose to include this myth are ambiguous. My inference is that after Taylor's death, Kate becomes more assured in her decision to want to die; she views her life as void of purpose and meaning without Taylor in it. The movie needed an event to make Kate's life less bearable so that the rest of the plot could continue as it did (i.e., to satisfy the "Kill or Cure" trope). Nevertheless, even after Taylor's death, Kate continues to be surrounded by family and friends. Props to the movie for following through with avoiding this myth.

I hope that by examining *My Sister's Keeper* from an evaluative lens, we were able to deconstruct some of the stereotypes and shallow ways in which disabled and terminally ill people are represented in film. We obviously know the movie is fictitious, but it's *especially* fictitious in the sense that it evokes a privileged perspective that most people could never relate to. This is an opportune time to remember that intersectionality never fades. The Fitzgeralds must endure a lot, but imagine if they were poor, a family of color, or if one parent was out of the picture. Please don't feel guilty enjoying this movie's emotional foreground; not even I can say that this movie didn't make me tear up a bit. In spite of that, we have to be able to draw the line between what's realistic and the mawkish moves made by the producers to engross viewers in melodrama and sappiness. How do we fix these issues? It's obvious that we need more disabled voices in these far-reaching industries, but much of the responsibility lies with us. To distinguish between what's practical and what's superficial is a powerful tool, allowing us to dismantle the collective stereotypes we tend to hold onto. Let's remember one thing: "inspirational" only goes so far before it becomes flat out cringey.

Works Cited

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