

Lauren Abbott

D.Rose

ENG170-24

28 February 2022

### Sizing Up “Tall Girl” and Its Take on Height

The portrayal of the protagonist Jodi, in the Netflix film *Tall Girl*, and the stigmatization of her above average height, is similar to the stigmatization of disabled people. The hyperbolic nature of the film and the sense of pity invoked for Jodi throughout mimic tropes common in films depicting disabled characters. This makes the film relevant as far as normalizing the presence and portrayal of individuals who fall outside preexisting social expectations. In the case of *Tall Girl*, Jodi defies the social norm that women are not tall, and that femininity and attractiveness is connected to a woman’s height. Jodi’s limited ability to attract romantic partners, social expectations demonstrated by characters who pity or pursue her, make *Tall Girl’s* representation of height inaccurate and reinforces negative stereotypes about tallness.

Camerawork at several points in the film create an exaggerated effect, blowing Jodi’s height out of proportion. This distinguishes her from all other characters and adding a visual truth to the stigma placed on her height. In her daily life at school, Jodi encounter peers who mock and bully her, saying things like, “how’s the weather up there?”, (00:03:59); which perpetuates the stigma surrounding her tallness. It can be assumed that since these characters are in high school, they have likely been around Jodi her entire young life which includes her always being a tall girl. This raises the question of why Jodi’s height would not be normalized in a sense, after so many years of her peers seeing it. These questions and instances of social behavior

parallel the social model for disability, which argues rather, that disability is based on the behavior and limitations inflicted upon the individual by a society designed for the able. The book, *Keywords For Disability Studies*, is an anthology of essays which discuss several different topics regarding disability. On such essay, entitled *Stigma* says, “the stigma attached to sexual or social deviance such as HIV infection or drug addiction is powerful, all the more because,” as Goffman argues, “stigmatized people may internalize rather than contest the norms by which they are judged inferior,” (Love, 174). Made evident by her slouched body language, self-deprecating voice overs, and overall lack of confidence, in *Tall Girl*, Jodi inflicts the same social stigma on herself that her peers inflict upon her because of her stature.

Within the first fifteen minutes of the film, Swedish exchange student Stig enters the plot after a conversation about criteria for a perfect boyfriend between Jodi and Jack. Stig’s main appeal to Jodi is the fact that he is tall, and therefore her equal. The film is set up in a way that makes it seem as if they are meant for each other since they are around the same height. This suggests that only people who are alike can be loved by each other romantically. At the same time, the emphasis on height differences in romantic relationships reinforces gender roles and binaries. While women are expected to be petite, fragile, and conventionally attractive, men (under the assumption of only two genders), are expected to be tall, muscular, and unemotive. As a result of these gender norms, Jodi is characterized as less than feminine, and therefore not an typically attractive heterosexual partner .

Jodi’s father is concerned with her height from a young age, worrying about her being “othered”, her potential inability to conform to typical gender standards, social conventions, and health effects if they do not attempt to stunt her growth. He establishes this early on in the film asking a doctor, “Can’t we give her hormones?”, (00:02:26). Out of pity later in the film, Jodi’s

father uses their home to host a meeting for the “tall people club”, which consists of mainly adults who have had a similar life experience to Jodi. All under her family’s assumption that she has no community or ability to find it herself because of her abnormality. While her sister does not actively or consciously reinforce stigma towards Jodi’s height, she is used as her visual opposite: she is a petite, conventionally feminine, beauty queen who wears her hair down. Her parents dote on her sister and spare guilty glances at Jodi. This effect is meant to be a stark contrast for viewers, placing them in Jodi’s men’s size thirteen shoes, wishing she were like her sister.

Jodi has to be dragged out of bed just before the film’s turning point at the big dance. Her friend Jack Dunkleman lures her out and becomes the vehicle for her “overcoming” her height. She attends the dance but only after Jack’s insistence, posing the question of whether her character actually developed. Jodi boldly wears a suit to the dance accompanied by a pair of heels (which are designed for drag queens), a costume choice which implies that clothes are not generally designed to suit a body like hers. Although this is true in some cases, it emphasizes that she is not normal and the world is not designed to accommodate her body. It also suggests that tall women face additional challenges to being perceived as feminine or lack the ability altogether if they wanted to present that way. The filmmakers’ choose to dress her in athleisure and exclusively ponytails for much of the film. This too suggests that her height hinders her from exploring traditional femininity if she so chose. Since height and masculinity are often linked in this society, tall women reside in an awkward place, and the costuming choice only draws that concept out further.

While the beginning of the romance in *Tall Girl* can be judged negatively for reinforcing stereotypes in height difference and its value in heterosexual relationships, the film also flips the

idea on its head when Jodi and Stig do not end up together. In fact, the film's attempt to subvert height stereotypes pervades throughout. Jack Dunkleman consistently treats Jodi normally, even praising her height unlike their peers. Even though he himself is shorter, he is the only boy who ever showed persistent romantic interest in Jodi, and at the climax of the film they get together. By doing this, audiences can tell the intention behind the filmmakers to subvert stereotypes; since "the tall couple" did not end up together, they defied the expectation that they would based on their height similarity.

In the finale, Jack takes a milk crate to stand on in order to kiss Jodi. This act, however romantic as it is depicted to be, is counterintuitive since it suggests that in order to be a socially acceptable boyfriend, and good enough for someone tall like Jodi, Jack too, must be tall. This concept undermines the filmmakers' attempts to subvert height stereotypes; instead emphasizing for a final time that it is embarrassing for men to be shorter than the women they date, and that women who are that tall are extraordinary. Despite the prominent negative representation, a sequel to *Tall Girl* was produced and released on Netflix recently. This begs the question of how well the film was received by audiences. If it portrayed tallness so negatively, why was there a budget to see more? Well, since it is a Netflix film, it is no surprise that the leads of the cast happen to be popular actors amongst the demographic of teens and young adults the film is geared towards. Sabrina Carpenter and Ava Michelle were both featured cast members on widely known television shows ("Girl Meets World" and "Dance Moms"), which tends to draw in a greater number of audience members. The more views a film or show on Netflix receives, the more likely it is to be renewed, regardless of quality or deeper thought into its content.

Although the intended demographic is anywhere from preteens to young adults, the larger audience should not be overlooked. Perhaps the most detrimental effect the film could have on

its viewers is towards those it attempted to portray: tall women, especially those who are in their formative years. In her interview with *The New York Times*, concerning representation after the release of her new film, disabled actor Keira Allen expressed, “I feel like I’m representing an entire community because of this lack of visibility,”(3). A key to the point Keira makes here, is that her performance and portrayal of her role is responsible for how people continue to see a certain group of people; she is an “entire community” reflected in an individual. In a way, Jodi’s character is similar to Allen in that she is an individual portraying an entire community of tall girls. That is what is concerning about *Tall Girl* overall.

Viewers who are similar to the protagonist may potentially find themselves grappling with insecurities that otherwise would not have occurred or resurfaced. In the film, Jodi’s level of agency in who she chooses to love is determined by her height. They may ask whether they are pitiful themselves or capable of being loved by people who are different than them. For those who do not internalize these thoughts, they may be offended by the film’s portrayal of self-confidence in tall women as inspirational. Being comfortable with one’s height is seen as unusual and worthy of recognition and celebration, rather than something that is mundane and normalized. Audience members for *Tall Girl* just might internalize these harmful expectations instead of opposing them (Love, 174). The feelings the film is capable of inspiring in viewers has the potential to continue stigma and reverse progress towards the normalization of all people. Tall women exist and *Tall Girl* treats them as a rarity or freak of nature. This reinforces traditional standards for gender, implying that women are not supposed to be tall. Despite the filmmakers’ many attempts to subvert these ideas, the film *Tall Girl* failed overall to do just that.

Works Cited:

Leiderman, Deborah. "Kiera Allen of 'Run' on Upending Disability Stereotypes." New York Times, Late Edition (East Coast); New York, N.Y. [New York, N.Y.] 20 Nov 2020

Love, Heather. "*Stigma*", *Keywords for Disability Studies*. New York University Press, 2015.

Stewart, Nzginga, director. Tall Girl, Netflix US, 13 Sept. 2019.