Aimee Mullins (b. 1976) is an athlete, model, and actor. At the age of one, she needed to have both of her legs amputated below the knee. Mullins learned how to walk and run with prosthetics, enabling her to participate in the 1996 Paralympic Games, where she set three world records in running and jumping events.

A Work in Progress

Concept Vocabulary

As you perform your first read of “A Work in Progress,” you will encounter these words.

- accomplishments
- extraordinary
- celebrate

Context Clues If these words are unfamiliar to you, try using context clues to help you determine their meanings. To do so, look for clues given by other words in the text that surround the unfamiliar words. There are various types of context clues that you may encounter as you read.

- Synonyms: His aberrant behavior was unexpected. It is strange for him to be impolite.
- Restatement of an idea: Because of a rare bone disease, her bones are delicate and more likely to break.
- Contrast of ideas and topics: James will not eat foods made with artificial ingredients; he shops only at organic food stores.

Apply your knowledge of context clues and other vocabulary strategies to determine the meanings of other unfamiliar words you encounter during your first read.

First Read NONFICTION

Apply these strategies as you conduct your first read. You will have an opportunity to complete a close read after your first read.

- NOTICE the general ideas of the text. What is it about? Who is involved?
- ANNOTATE by marking vocabulary and key passages you want to revisit.
- CONNECT ideas within the selection to what you already know and what you have already read.
- RESPOND by completing the Comprehension Check and by writing a brief summary of the selection.
BACKGROUND

A prosthetic is an artificial substitute for a missing body part. Over the past few decades, prosthetic technology has advanced greatly. Modern prosthetics can often fully replace the function of a missing limb due to the invention of lighter materials and more sophisticated designs.

1. So two weeks ago I was a bridesmaid, and the reception was actually here at the New York Public Library, and I will never forget this wedding. Yes, it was very beautiful. But more importantly, I survived the slick marble floors that are all over this building. Tile and marble floors are public enemy number one to a stiletto-loving girl like me. And I had five-inch heels on that night.

2. Most people learn to walk in very high heels. They bend their ankle so that the ball of the foot touches the ground first; you have more stability.
I don’t have ankles, so I hit each step on the stiletto, which makes the possibility of the banana peel wipeout very likely. But given the choice between practicality and theatricality, I say, “Go big or go home, man. Go down in flames if you’re gonna go.”

I guess I’m a bit of a daredevil. I think that the nurses at DuPont Institute would agree. I spent a lot of time there as a child. Doctors amputated both of my legs below the knee when I was an infant, and then when I was five, I had a major surgery to correct the wonky direction in which my tibia was growing. So I had two metal pins to hold that—full plaster casts on both legs. I had to use a wheelchair because I couldn’t wear prosthetics.

One of the best things about getting out of the hospital is the anticipation of the day you return to school—I had missed so much class, I just couldn’t wait to get back and see all my friends. But my teacher had a different idea about that. She tried to prevent me from returning to class, because she said that in the condition I was in, I was “inappropriate,” and that I would be a distraction to the other students (which of course I was, but not because of the casts and the wheelchair).

Clearly she needed to make my difference invisible because she wanted to control her environment and make it fit into her idea of what “normal” looked like.

And it would’ve been a lot easier for me to fit into what “normal” looked like. I know I wanted that back then. But instead I had these wooden legs with a rubber foot that the toes broke off of, and they were held on with a big bolt that rusted out because I swam in the wooden legs.

You’re not supposed to swim in the wooden legs, because, you know, the wood rots out.

So there I was in second grade music class, doing the twist, and mid-twist I hear this [makes loud cracking sound]. And I’m on the floor, and the lower half of my left leg is in splinters across the room. The teacher faints on the piano, and the kids are screaming. And all I’m thinking is, My parents are gonna kill me. I broke my leg! It’s a mess.

But then a few years later, my prosthetist tells me, “Aimee, we got waterproof legs for you. No more rusty bolts!”

This is a revelation, right? This is gonna change my life. I was so excited to get these legs . . . until I saw them.

1. amputated (AM pyoo tayt ihd) v. removed surgically.
2. prosthetist (PROS thuh tihst) n. professional who fits and designs prosthetic limbs.
They were made of polypropylene, which is that white plastic “milk jug” material. And when I say “white,” I’m not talking about skin color; I’m talking about the color white. The “skin color” was the rubber foam foot painted “Caucasian,” which is the nastiest shade of nuclear peach that you’ve ever seen in your life. It has nothing to do with any human skin tone on the planet. And these legs were so good at being waterproof that they were buoyant. So when I’d go off the high dive, I’d go down and come straight back up feet first. They were the bane of my existence.

But then we’re at the Jersey Shore one summer. By the time we get there, there’s three hundred yards of towels between me and the sea. And I know this is where I first honed my ability to run really fast. I was the white flash. I didn’t wanna feel hundreds of pairs of eyes staring at me. And so I’d get myself into the ocean, and I was a good swimmer, but no amount of swimming technique can control buoyant legs.

So at some point I get caught in a rip current, and I’m migrating from my vantage point of where I could see my parents’ towel. And I’m taking in water, and I’m fighting, fighting, fighting. And all I could think to do was pop off these legs and put one under each armpit, with the peach feet sticking up, and just bob, thinking, Someone’s gotta find me.

And a lifeguard did. And I’m sure he will collect for therapy bills. You know? Like, they don’t show that on Baywatch. And they saved my life, those legs.

And then when I was fourteen it was Easter Sunday, and I was gonna be wearing a dress that I had purchased with my own money—the first thing I ever bought that wasn’t on sale.

Momentous event; you never forget it. I’d had a paper route since I was twelve, and I went to The Limited, and I bought this dress that I thought was the height of sophistication—sleeveless safari dress, belted, hits at the knee.

Coming downstairs into the living room, I see my father waiting to take us to church. He takes one look at me, and he says, “That doesn’t look right. Go upstairs and change.”

I was like, “What? My super-classy dress? What are you talking about? It’s the best thing I own.”

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3. Baywatch popular television show from the late 1990s about the lives of fictional lifeguards.
He said, “No, you can see the knee joint when you walk. It doesn’t look right. It’s inappropriate to go out like that. Go change.”

And I think something snapped in me. I refused to change. And it was the first time I defied my father. I refused to hide something about myself that was true, and I refused to be embarrassed about something so that other people could feel more comfortable.

I was grounded for that defiance.

So after church the extended family convenes at my grandmother’s house, and everybody’s complimenting me on how nice I look in this dress, and I’m like, “Really? You think I look nice? Because my parents think I look inappropriate.”

I outed them (kinda mean, really).

But I think the public utterance of this idea that I should somehow hide myself was so shocking to hear that it changed their mind about why they were doing it.

And I had always managed to get through life with somewhat of a positive attitude, but I think this was the start of me being able to accept myself. You know, okay, I’m not normal. I have strengths. I’ve got weaknesses. It is what it is.

And I had always been athletic, but it wasn’t until college that I started this adventure in Track and Field. I had gone through a lifetime of being given legs that just barely got me by. And I thought, Well, maybe I’m just having the wrong conversations with the wrong people. Maybe I need to go find people who say, “Yes, we can create anything for you in the space between where your leg ends and the ground.”

And so I started working with engineers, fashion designers, sculptors, Hollywood prosthetic makeup artists, wax museum designers to build legs for me.

I decided I wanted to be the fastest woman in the world on artificial legs, and I was lucky enough to arrive in track at just the right time to be the first person to get these radical sprinting legs modeled after the hind leg of a cheetah, the fastest thing that runs—woven carbon fiber.

I was able to set three world records with those legs. And they made no attempt at approximating humanness.

Then I get these incredibly lifelike silicon legs—hand-painted, capillaries, veins. And, hey, I can be as tall as I wanna be, so I get different legs for different heights. I don’t have to shave. I can wear open-toed shoes in the winter. And most importantly,
I can opt out of the cankles\textsuperscript{5} I most certainly would’ve inherited genetically.

And then I get these legs made for me by the late, great Alexander McQueen, and they were hand-carved of solid ash with grapevines and magnolias all over them and a six-inch heel. And I was able to walk the runways of the world with supermodels. I was suddenly in this whirlwind of adventure and excitement. I was being invited to go around the world and speak about these adventures, and how I had legs that looked like glass, legs covered in feathers, porcelain legs, jellyfish legs—all wearable sculpture.

And I get this call from a guy who had seen me speak years ago, when I was at the beginning of my track career, and he says, “We loved it. We want you to come back.” And it was clear to me he didn’t know all these amazing things that had happened to me since my sports career.

So as I’m telling him, he says, “Whoa, whoa, whoa. Hold on, Aimee. The reason everybody liked you all those years ago was because you were this sweet, vulnerable, naïve girl, and if you walk onstage today, and you are this polished young woman with too many accomplishments, I’m afraid they won’t like you.”

For real, he said that. Wow.

He apparently didn’t think I was vulnerable enough now. He was asking me to be less than, a little more downtrodden. He was asking me to disable myself for him and his audience.

And what was so shocking to me about that was that I realized I had moved past mere acceptance of my difference. I was having fun with my difference. Thank God I’m not normal. I get to be extraordinary. And I’ll decide what is a weakness and what is a strength.

And so I refused his request.

And a few days later, I’m walking in downtown Manhattan at a street fair, and I get this tug on my shirt, and I look down. It’s this little girl I met a year earlier when she was at a pivotal moment in her life. She had been born with a brittle bone disease that resulted in her left leg being seven centimeters shorter than her right. She wore a brace and orthopedic\textsuperscript{6} shoes and they got her by, but she wanted to do more.

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textbf{cankles (KANG kuhlz)} \textit{n.} informal term for thick ankles.
  \item \textbf{orthopedic (awr thuh PEE dihk)} \textit{adj.} designed to treat a muscular or skeletal problem.
\end{itemize}
And like all Internet-savvy kindergarteners, she gets on the computer and Googles “new leg,” and she comes up with dozens of images of prosthetics, many of them mine. And she prints them out, goes to school, does show-and-tell on it, comes home, and makes a startling pronouncement to her parents:

“I wanna get rid of my bad leg,” she says. “When can I get a new leg?”

And ultimately that was the decision her parents and doctors made for her. So here she was, six months after the amputation, and right there in the middle of the street fair she hikes up her jeans leg to show me her cool new leg. And it’s pink, and it’s tattooed with the characters of High School Musical 3, replete with red, sequined Mary Janes on her feet.

And she was proud of it. She was proud of herself. And the marvelous thing was that this six-year-old understood something that it took me twenty-something years to get, but that we both did discover—that when we can celebrate and truly own what it is that makes us different, we’re able to find the source of our greatest creative power.
Comprehension Check

Complete the following items after you finish your first read. Review and clarify details with your group.

1. Why does the author, Aimee Mullins, have difficulty walking across the marble floor of the library?

2. What happened between Mullins and her father that caused her to be grounded?

3. What does Mullins do to become more involved with the quality of her limbs?

4. According to the author, what is the source of the “greatest creative power”?

5. Notebook Confirm your understanding of the selection by briefly summarizing key events.

RESEARCH

Research to Clarify Choose at least one unfamiliar detail from the text. Briefly research that detail. In what way does the information you learned shed light on the selection? Share your findings with your small group.

Research to Explore Choose something from the text that interested you. For instance, you might want to learn more about the newest kinds of prosthetic limbs. How does this information deepen your understanding of the personal narrative? Share your findings with your small group.
Close Read the Text
With your group, revisit sections of the text you marked during your first read. What do you notice? What questions do you have? What can you conclude?

Analyze the Text

1. **Review and Clarify**  With your group, reread paragraphs 5–6. What reason did the narrator’s teacher give for not wanting her to return to class? What do you think might have been the real reason?

2. **Present and Discuss**  Now, work with your group to share the passages from the text that you found especially important. Take turns presenting your passages. Discuss what you noticed in the text, the questions you asked, and the conclusions you reached.

3. **Essential Question: How do we overcome obstacles?**  What has this selection taught you about facing adversity? Discuss with your group.

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**WORD NETWORK**

Add interesting words related to facing adversity from the text to your Word Network.

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**STANDARDS**

**Reading Informational Text**

- Analyze the interactions between individuals, events, and ideas in a text.
- Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative, connotative, and technical meanings; analyze the impact of a specific word choice on meaning and tone.
- Determine an author's point of view or purpose in a text and analyze how the author distinguishes his or her position from that of others.

**Language**

- Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases based on grade 7 reading and content, choosing flexibly from a range of strategies.
  - Use common, grade-appropriate Greek or Latin affixes and roots as clues to the meaning of a word.

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**Concept Vocabulary**

- accomplishments
- extraordinary
- celebrate

**Why These Words?**  The concept vocabulary words from the text are related. With your group, determine what the words have in common. Write down your ideas, and add another word that fits the category.

**Practice**

Confirm your understanding of the concept vocabulary words by using them in a discussion with your group in which you address the following question: *What makes a person extraordinary?*

**Word Study**

**Latin Prefix extra-**  The Latin prefix *extra-* means “beyond the scope of” or “in addition to what is usual or expected.” At the end of the selection, the author realizes that what makes her different also makes her *extraordinary*, or beyond what is ordinary or expected. With your group, identify and define two other words you know that include this prefix.