

Book Review

Title: *Too Late to Die Young: Nearly True Tales from a Life*

Author: Harriet McBryde Johnson

Publisher: Picador, 2005

Paper, ISBN: 0-312-42571-6, 261 pages

Cost: \$14.00 USD

Reviewer: Steven E. Brown

Too Late to Die Young is one of the best entries in the growing field of autobiographies published by disability rights activists. Johnson may well be the best-known activist in the country to the mainstream public because of her articles in *The New York Times Magazine*. The first of those articles is, "Unspeakable Conversations," about her fascinating interactions with philosopher, and proponent of killing babies with disabilities, Peter Singer, forms one book chapter. Just as fascinating is the following chapter, "Art Object," which is a narrative of how the pictures accompanying the preceding chapter came to exist.

I confess to prior knowledge of both these chapters. Harriet is a longtime contributor to a media listserv on which she has regaled us with her publishing exploits as they developed. This almost led me to skip "Unspeakable Conversations" in this book because I had read it before, both in some draft forms that she shared on the listserv and in *The New York Times Magazine*. I am glad I did not. There is a difference in reading these pieces in the context of this book. There is also the joy of reading the writing of a true Southern storyteller, who wraps her words around her topics, and visa-versa; who sometimes meanders, but never pointlessly, and always takes the reader back to her particular worldview.

Johnson is an attorney. She is also someone born with, as she puts it, a neuromuscular disability. Like many children with disabilities she feared she would never see adulthood because she did not see adults with disabilities like hers. This is one reason she became an early protester against telethons. She describes these protests with relish and the reader almost feels like they are in Charleston, South Carolina, her home and one of her loves.

This is a book full of drama, on both the large and small stage. Johnson talks about her childhood, her use of and interactions with personal assistants, a political race she lost, and many other topics of a life. And that is her BIG point: With or without a disability, we all have lives of many parts. One of the descriptions I liked best was of a quiet moment:

"Geneva brings me my breakfast and then gives me a bedpan and then washes me, starting with the nighttime crusts in my eyes, all the way down to the spaces between my toes, and everything in between. It's a daily necessity, entirely practical and matter-of-fact. I sometimes think how strange it would be to do these morning things in solitude as nondisabled people do, and to regard, as many of them do, a life like mine as a dreadful and unnatural thing. To me it is so natural to feel the touch of washcloth-covered hands on flesh that is glad to be flesh. (p. 251)

There is so much to read these days I usually plow through whatever I can. But this is one of those books so compelling I can foresee going back to it again and again. It belongs in every library, every disability studies program, and beyond. Find a copy; read it!