

Book Review

Title: *Writing Disability: A Critical History*

Author: Sara Newman

Publisher: Boulder, CO: FirstForumPress, www.firstforumpress.com, 2013

Hardcover: ISBN: 978-1-935049-54-8

Cost: \$59.95, 203 pages

Reviewer: Dax Garcia

Sara Newman's *Writing Disability: A Critical History* begins with an explanation of the genesis of the project: Newman, a professor of English at Kent State University, was interested in the lack of awareness, both public and academic, of autobiographical works by writers with mental and physical disabilities, works Newman refers to as disability life writing. Newman found scant examples in Western literature, from ancient Greece until Helen Keller's fame in the early 1900s: "Thus, this study was born, a response to the following prompt: when, how, and under what circumstances have individuals with disabilities written from their own perspectives before 1900?" (p. 2). Newman presents disability across history as socio-historical, illustrating how individuals shift their representations of themselves and their disabilities based on societal standards. The book is an investigation of why and how members of different cultures have understood disability in different ways.

Writing Disability contains an introduction and eight chapters that represent different eras, illustrating major societal shifts in relation to disability: Ancient Greece and Rome, the Medieval period, the early modern era, the 18th century, the 19th century, two chapters on the 20th century, and a reflective final chapter. Each chapter examines from two to seven authors of an era, and explores society's changing relationship with disability, expectations of its members, and shifts in writing styles.

Newman assigns different models of disability through the eras. For example, in Ancient Greece and Rome, the writers examined adhered to a civic model of disability. Newman writes:

"According to this model, ancient societies evaluated disability against the ideal, balanced body and the participatory practices expected of the Athenian or Roman citizen; that civic, institutional model permeated their cultural understanding of who was a full-fledged citizen. To make decisions about particular disabilities, a person's condition was evaluated on an individual basis against the group norm. In this way, an individual literally embodied his civic status (p. 22)."

Disability through the civic model was based upon the ability of citizens to perform their roles. A mother capable of raising her children and maintaining her home despite a missing limb may not have been considered disabled. However, a soldier with a missing limb that rendered him incapable of fighting certainly would have been.

Newman attributes changing models of disability to historical shifts in society, such as Church doctrine in the Middle Ages and the advancement of printing and adherence to the newly

embraced Scientific Method of the Enlightened Age. The five high medieval women Newman examines wrote of their lives and disabilities in a religious context. During this period, many physical problems were commonplace and not considered disabilities. However, they were viewed as imperfections of both body and soul, and disability only “emerged when the individual recognized and discussed physical problems as barriers to achieving salvation and problems to be remedied” (p. 59). Disability for these medieval women existed as part of their relationship with God.

Newman’s chapter “The Long Eighteenth Century: Reason and Logic in an Enlightened Age” details two writers who lived between 1695 and 1830, during an era that saw disability move toward a secular model that favored objectivity and rational logic: “During this period, the presumably objective Scientific Method displaced earlier concepts of and practices in natural history... The resulting method and mentality sought to induce universal truths by objectively observing, measuring, and documenting the world’s myriad phenomenon” (p. 81). This shift represents the birth of the medical model of disability that treats disabilities as imperfections to be cured. The selected authors in this chapter, one blind and one born with a hunchback, write not of spirituality or a quest for perfection, but for cultural awareness and tolerance.

Writing Disability brings deserved attention and respect to disability life writing through Western history. *Writing Disability* is wonderful for anyone interested in disability life writing or the Western history of disability. It is an important text for the extensive historical knowledge it provides about how disabled persons and their disabilities have been recognized in societies. The book has applications for history, life writing, disability studies, sociology, and more, and will aid in the conceptualization of different social models of disability for both undergraduate and graduate students.

Dax Garcia, MA, is a doctoral student in English at the University of Hawai‘i and a graduate assistant at the Center on Disability Studies. He may be contacted at daxg@hawaii.edu.