

Book Review

Title: *Elegy for a Disease: A Personal and Cultural History of Polio*

Author: Anne Finger

Publisher: New York: St. Martin's, 2006

Cloth, ISBN – 0-312-34757-x, 287 pages

Cost: Cloth: \$25.95

Reviewer: Steven E. Brown

I always look forward to Anne Finger's work and this was no exception. *Elegy* might be viewed as a memoir primarily of Finger's early years. This would be accurate, but incomplete.

The bulk of the personal narrative is a remembrance of a full, but not very happy childhood. Finger's bout with polio and its aftermath was partly responsible for this, but so too was an abusive family situation. There are interesting parallels between the violence Finger experienced as a child with a disability in her family, as a patient in the medical system, and as a person with a disability growing up in an ableist society in the 1950s and 60s in the eastern part of the United States. The most obvious commonalities are that in all situations she was the person who was powerless. She constantly rebelled against the family and medical situations, but could do very little about either one until she chose to leave her family home during her senior year in high school. She did not rebel against social norms related to disability until much later in her life.

Finger discusses the disability rights movement and disability studies and how they did and did not impact her life. Like many of us who grew up with a disability in the time period she discusses, Finger consistently and purposely did all she could to avoid even being seen with other individuals with disabilities because she did not want to be labeled in that way.

Finger also threads discussions about, and the history of, polio itself throughout the book. There is quite a lot about Sister Kenney, her background, methods, and persona. There is also a fascinating section toward the end of the book in which Finger explores polio's potential effects on the brain. She also discusses how the nature of disease itself has evolved, particularly from the nineteenth to the twentieth centuries. One result of this changing perception was that those who had polio in the twentieth century were, like many of us with varying disabilities, expected to overcome our "deficiencies."

Elegy is a book packed with personal and social information and will be an excellent addition to libraries and to graduate classes in medicine, disability studies, history, and sociology, among other disciplines.