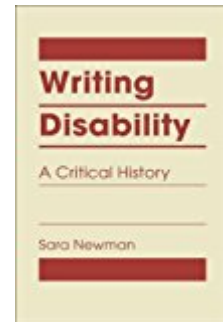




Sara Newman. *Writing Disability: A Critical History*. Disability in Society Series. Boulder: FirstForumPress, 2013. vii + 207 pp. \$62.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-935049-54-8.



Reviewed by Jane Buckingham (University of Canterbury)

Published on H-Disability (April, 2017)

Commissioned by Iain C. Hutchison

Although it was published a few years ago, Sara Newman's book remains current, thought provoking, and insightful. The book is a creative integration of literary and historical approaches to the study of disability. It is as much about life writing and the power of such articulations as sources in the investigation of individualized, felt disability as it is about the historicized nature of disabled experience. Rather than prioritizing analysis of personal experience or the changing understandings of disability, Newman foregrounds life writing sources as the fundamental materials from which personal and collective notions of disability are constructed throughout Western history. By doing this, she lays bare the mechanisms and patterns of language that construct the experience of disability in the Western tradition. This technique allows for qualitative and quantitative analyses of texts in different historical periods to demonstrate both the individual articulation of disability and the patterns emerging within particular historically contingent political and cultural environments.

A strength of this book is its broad historical reach from the ancient Greek and Roman worlds to the twenty-first century, with each chapter focused on a particular historical period. The chronology functions structurally to allow in-depth analysis of an impressive range

of life writing materials. Chapter 1, for example, draws on Greek philosophy, ancient Roman court records, and the writings of Seneca and Aristides to develop a "civic" model of disability. This chapter is of particular value in demonstrating within classical society the functioning of a social model of disability in which not impairment but the limitation on participation in society was disabling. In doing this, the chapter provides a valuable corrective to arguments in disability history that identify the Industrial Revolution and the notion of the "fit for purpose" body as foundational to Western models of disability. Here, as Newman shows, incapacity to work, and consequent exclusion from participation in civic life, was the marker of disability rather than any specific impairment.

Newman uses chronology not just to historicize but also to allow thematic variation to emerge through discrete sets of life writing. Chapter 2 emphasizes the female experience of disability in the medieval period and questions the stereotypical view that, in medieval thought, disability is a manifestation of evil/sinfulness. Rather, Newman argues, physical weakness and human frailties were everyday experiences in the medieval world. In the life writing of the five female mystics analyzed, disability was something that could become an opportunity for

a redemptive encounter with God. In this chapter, Newman uses the “Corpus Linguistics” method to quantify tropes of disability in the writing of five medieval women. Though technically sophisticated, the analysis tends to broaden the category of disability to include any condition of human frailty that separates human kind from God, including the frailty and imperfection of being female. The analysis is given some specificity by the identification of “disabling moments” in the sources (p. 59). However, the chapter highlights the challenge of demarcating where disability as a distinctive discourse begins and ends. Are gender, race, and other markers of difference all forms of disability? Or is the emerging discussion of disability theory and experience carving out recognition for separate experiences of marginalization?

In Newman’s discussion of the nineteenth-century asylum in chapter 6, the linguistic analysis is more firmly embedded in familiar histories of institutionalization and draws on a larger grouping of sources. The analysis is more convincing, perhaps because there is a complementarity between the classificatory legal and clinical language of nineteenth-century North American “Insane Hospital Reports” and the structural form of the analysis. Newman reveals a strong collocation of terms describing inappropriate movement and habits with other terms characterizing patients as extreme, violent, and abhorrent in behavior, and then challenges these representations with extracts from the life writing of individuals who protested their incarceration. This combination of sources shows the strength of Newman’s method. By prioritizing the personal life writing source, she shows how a personal textuality can question the dominant official narrative of abnormality constructed across North American institutions. The individual experience of institutionalization undermines the authority of clinical-legal texts, which identify those confined in insane asylums as abnormal and marginal. Over time, the collocations became more than notations in individual case files. Col-

lectively they became the basis for medicalizing and disabling differences in behavior and belief, taught in European and American medical schools as diagnostics for conditions requiring incarceration.

By contrast, the life narratives of former members of such asylums challenge the labeling of behaviors and emotions as requiring their separation from society. From the individual perspective, the lived experience of difference is embedded in wider social and cultural impediments. Gender and religion, which figures so strongly in chapter 3, are seen in these writings as conditions that challenge normative codes of behavior. For the middle-class woman in nineteenth-century North America, ecstatic religious experience was not a reason to celebrate God’s love and favor; it was a condition to be remedied and even punished. As Newman notes, “love,” so much part of elite medieval mystical life writing, had disappeared from the writing of those separated from society in nineteenth-century institutions. The disability of human flesh was no longer part of every man’s and woman’s journey to redemption. It was something to be disciplined and reformed within the walls of an earthly institution.

Newman’s book achieves its ambition of exploring life writing as an aspect of disability experience. With Helen Keller’s work acting as the pivot, it shifts disability perspectives from the margins into Western public domains. It is an ambitious and entirely relevant book. The closing chapters on disability in the twentieth century show how humanity and a sense of self become merged with hero narratives for war veterans injured in an age of technological warfare and biomedical solutions to physical impairment. This book opens up new ways of engaging with disability experience while reminding us that disability is an ordinary and everyday occurrence at all points in human history. More importantly it shows that humanity is not limited to those deemed “able.”

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-disability>

**Citation:** Jane Buckingham. Review of Newman, Sara, *Writing Disability: A Critical History*. H-Disability, H-Net Reviews. April, 2017.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=40402>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.