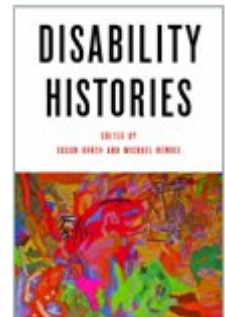


**Susan Burch, Michael Rembis.** *Disability Histories*. Disability Histories Series.  
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Since the emergence of disability studies in the 1980s, and particularly since the development of the field's first university courses, programs, and publications in the 1990s, the experiences of people with disabilities have been put on the map. The field grew rapidly during the last years of the twentieth century, and this growth has continued throughout the 2000s. In parallel with this development of disability studies, the field of disability history emerged, producing some interesting publications, particularly the collection edited by Paul K. Longmore and Lauri Umansky, *The New Disability History: American Perspectives* (2001), which had a positive reception among scholars of history, history of medicine and technology, and sociology, among others. Readers widely considered that this collection opened up a new field and served as a basic text on disability history, providing theoretical, methodological, and topical frameworks, and serving as a model for scholars across a variety of disciplines. The field grew rapidly during the first years of the twenty-first century with very good results.

The latest fruit of disability history is this interesting collection edited by Susan Burch (associate professor of American studies and director of the Center for the Comparative Study of Race and Ethnicity at Middlebury College) and Michael Rembis (director of the Center for Disability Studies and an associate professor of history at the University at Buffalo), which takes advantage of their backgrounds as researchers and teachers in the field of history. Burch has paid particular attention to the historical impact of disability, gender, race, material culture, and ethnicity on lived experiences in America, Russia, and beyond. Sharing several of these topics and perspectives, Rembis's research also includes the history of eugenics, mad people's history, and the history of institutionalization, as well as important work on the history of defining "deviance" with reference to the lived experience of delinquent girls.

This collection of nineteen essays is a good example of the great evolution in the field of disability history over the last decade. Following the path initiated by Longmore and Umansky, the

contributors investigate four crucial areas of disability history in each of the four sections of the volume: "Family, Community, and Daily Life," "Cultural Histories," "Bodies, Medicine, and Contested Knowledge," and "Citizenship and Belonging." They highlight the complexity of disability experiences and the central importance of disability in understanding history.

*Disability Histories* deals with a great variety of additional themes, such as activism, labor, law and policy, media, slavery, technology, and war, focusing on diverse peoples and geographical contexts. The essays move beyond the United States and Western Europe to study situations arising in Asia, Africa, and South America. In addition, in certain cases the authors also extend their time frame to include the first decade of the twenty-first century. Through incorporating these diverse perspectives, they overcome some of the limitations of earlier historical edited collections in disability studies, such as William O. McCagg and Lewis H. Siegelbaum's *The Disabled in the Soviet Union: Past and Present, Theory and Practice* (1989), David A. Gerber's *Disabled Veterans in History* (2000), Katherine Ott, David H. Serlin, and Stephen Mihm's *Artificial Parts, Practical Lives: Modern Histories of Prosthetics* (2002), Stephen Noll and James Trent's *Mental Retardation in America: A Historical Reader* (2004), and John Vickrey Van Cleve's *The Deaf History Reader* (2007), among others. Although these earlier collections deal with disability history, they are centered on very specific populations and are limited to the sphere of Western countries, over shorter timescales.

Another strength of *Disability Histories* is its interdisciplinary nature. This clearly responds to the interdisciplinarity of the contributors, who belong to different fields: from various areas of history, sociology, social anthropology, occupational therapy, history of technology, psychology, and political science, as well as from the field of curatorship, but who all share their interest in disability

studies. Some of the contributors have direct disability experience. The result is an excellent and intriguing interdisciplinary history of disability, which was previously lacking in this field. Earlier interdisciplinary anthologies have paid limited attention to the history of disabilities, such as Gary L. Albrecht, Katherine Delores Seelman, and Michael Bury's *Handbook of Disability Studies* (2011), Bonnie G. Smith and Beth Hutchinson's *Gendering Disability* (2004), Susan Burch and Alison Kafer's *Deaf and Disability Studies: Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (2010), and Lennard J. Davis's *Disability Studies Reader* (2010), among others. Rosemarie Garland Thomson's monograph, *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body* (1996), is likewise limited in scope. It is also important to stress the great wealth of resources used, principally manuscripts and archival accessions, government documents, memoirs, interviews, organizational reports, and serials, together with legal and medical documents, plays, literature, visual materials, speeches, art, artifacts, and labor history evidence. The critical analysis of the historical context, race, gender, and other factors involved in disability history is commendable for putting forward new interpretative models that diverge from the traditions that still dominate the field.

The editors are to be congratulated for their excellent idea of prefacing each of the four thematic sections of the book with an introduction and some guiding questions to stimulate active and critical reading, most helpful for use in the classroom. Another interesting tool is the keywords that accompany each chapter and that appear in a list following the table of contents. I agree with the editors that "providing these cross references highlights the relationships among all the essays," while at the same time they clarify the "methodological approaches, sources, geographical and temporal boundaries, and topics," as well as the innovations introduced (p. 9).

With these ingredients, the result is a formidable collection of essays. The contributions show that disability is a construct central to society. They invite us to carry out further research in disability history using some of the new methods and sources proposed in order to approach historically more experiences of disabled communities outside North America and Western Europe, such as, for example, the experiences of people contracting poliomyelitis and their sequelae in cultural backgrounds as different as those of Asia and Africa. The contributors thus help to lay new stepping-stones in the field.

*Disability Histories* will be welcomed by disability historians, historians of medicine and technology, social scientists, disability scholars, disability rights advocates, scholars in the humanities, creative writers, and teachers engaged in all facets of disability studies within and across disciplines, as well as others concerned with issues familiar to people with disabilities.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-disability>

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