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**Review of *Barriers and Belonging: Personal Narratives of Disability*. Michelle Jarman, Leila Monaghan and Alison Quaggin Harkin. Reviewed by Iain Hutchinson.**

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## Book Reviews

Michelle Jarman, Leila Monaghan and Alison Quaggin Harkin, *Barriers and Belonging: Personal Narratives of Disability*. Temple University Press (2017), 296 pages, \$39.95 (paperback and e-book), \$94.50 (hardcover).

The subtitle of *Barriers and Belonging* states that it is a collection of personal narratives of disability. However, we have to dig a little deeper to appreciate the specific scope of these narratives. They actually come from quite a focused group of contributors, the introduction informing readers that the essays reflect the disability experience of contemporary students in the United States and Canada. The thirty-seven narratives that follow reflect the very recent past, showcasing student perspectives, particularly of those guided by disability studies in formulating new outlooks to their lives. Indeed, a notable aspect of these offerings is that they are from students and young academics with a wide range of impairments. Many have experienced marginalization in childhood and adolescence, times when their worth was challenged by a medical model of disability and ableist attitudes. It is perhaps not surprising that many of the contributors have gone on to develop proactive roles such as advocacy and counseling in disability circles.

A recurring theme arises in several of the reflections, where contributors freely admit that they are addressing and describing for the first time in an open forum their very personal challenges and hurts. For many, entrance to university education and consequent exposure to disability studies has proven to be a cathartic, revolutionary moment, leading them to reappraise their own experience of disability in a new light. Emily Michael describes this process succinctly when she writes, "I offer others a new perspective of me as I accept a different vision of

myself" (p. 156). Similarly, Adena Rottenstein reveals that "... the idea that there was nothing inherently wrong with being disabled was a profound challenge to the way I saw the world" (p. 226). Likewise, Allegro Heath-Stout asserts that "... there is no universal disabled experience" (p. 183).

The collection reflects the great diversity of impairment experiences and indeed stimulates fresh thought, not only on the wider concepts of what constitutes impairment and disability, but also on the ways different individuals chose to express themselves and interact with those around them. Contributors range from those who have to counter presumptions that arise from a very visibly apparent impairment, to those with less visible impairments that result in responses such as that expressed by Catherine Graves: "If you don't look sick, you must not be sick" (p. 108). Nancy La Monica challenges those who endeavor to 'pass' as engaging in a form of denial, while Suzanne Walker shows that being encouraged by her college to self-identify highlights the challenges of 'coming out.' (p. 211) There are also justified attacks on groups that intervene in disabled lives while largely excluding disabled people from their governance and intervention strategies. Lydia Brown, for example, provides a detailed explanation of how the Autism Self Advocacy Network was a direct response to frustrations experienced among people with autism with Autism Speaks.

The stories are presented in six loose groupings. Each of these sections is preceded by an overview from the editors. Narratives are given context by inclusion of a brief biography of the writer, excepting those preferring to preserve their privacy. As a disability studies tool, each section concludes by suggesting themes to provoke thought and discussion, and offering guidance for links between stories within and across sections. This cross-sectional linkage gives the collection fluidity and encourages students to consider the complexities surrounding diverse experiences on a wide range of levels.

One of the greatest strengths of *Barriers and Belonging* is the way we are stimulated to reflect upon what society considers to be disability, not least because many of the writers express how they have gone through often complex journeys in their own evaluations of disability. As Leila Monaghan writes in the concluding afterword, "... not only are there differences between

disabled and nondisabled people, but there is variation among disabled people as well" (p. 277). She also reinforces the startling notion that "ablebodied is a temporary state" (p. 275). These narratives serve to inform presently ablebodied people, as well as those already familiar with living with an impairment. They will serve a broad and multi-faceted audience.

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Lenette Azzi-Lessing, *Behind from the Start: How America's War on the Poor is Harming Our Most Vulnerable Children*. Oxford University Press (2017), 248 pages, \$29.95 (hardcover).

The number of people in poverty in the United States is among the highest of the developed nations. Children are the largest group affected and often remain invisible. Presently, 21% of children live in families with incomes below the poverty line, with the highest rates among Black, Latino, and Native American families. Despite decades of anti-poverty programs, the proportion of children in poverty remains unchanged. *Behind from the Start* explores the issue of child poverty in detail. Azzi-Lessing exposes the interconnected circumstances that keep children in poverty. She aids readers in understanding why the poverty rate in the United States remains highest among similarly developed but less wealthy countries, the detrimental effects of poverty on children under six, and of how our responses to families in poverty are often harmful, perpetuating the cycle of poverty.

The book opens with a heart-wrenching story about Azzi-Lessing's own experience cuddling a severely neglected and affection-starved three-year-old boy in a rundown local shelter. The following chapters then set the context by providing an overview of poverty in the United States. Azzi-Lessing discusses the relationship between structural racism and poverty that contributes to higher rates of poverty among African Americans and Latinos, and she provides a comparison between the poverty levels of United States and other developed countries. Azzi-Lessing then debunks common myths about