

BOOK REVIEWS

A Disability History of the United States

by **Kim E. Nielson**

2012 Paperback

183 pages \$16.00

ISBN 9780807022047

Published by Beacon Press, Boston

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Kim Nielsen's analysis in *A Disability History of the United States* intertwines race, class, gender, socio-economic status, gender, sex, sexuality and citizenship in the historically nebulous concept of disability within the framework of US history. She does this from the perspective of a historian, educator, mother and advocate. Nielsen successfully avoids the use of academic and educational jargon that often scares away casual readers. Instead she offers a chronological history of descriptive stories sharing the pain, triumph, joy, struggle, and progress of individuals who live with an intellectual, physical, or psychological disability within the context of the American story. In short, this book should be required reading for educators who advocate for others with a disability.

Within the prologue, Dr. Nielson briefly describes the circumstances in which her daughter came to live with her own disability, after years of living as a non-disabled adolescent. She depicts her family as living through a profound change in their day-to-day life, while remaining fundamentally the same at the core. This paradox of change and permanence existing simultaneously reoccurs throughout the book. Examples of this include the changing definition of disabilities, rights and governmental protections, language and stigma associated with disability, and the forced interaction of society and disability through war and disease, all while still remaining "American."

Reminiscent of the seminal work in advocacy for individuals with disabilities, *Christmas in Purgatory* (Blatt & Kaplan, 1966), Nielson tells the personal stories of hundreds of individuals, from a wide cross section of American experiences through vignettes, in place of a photographic ethnography. However, the two works share a similar power in showcasing the often ugly history of the treatment of individuals with disabilities in the United States and the continued need for advocacy. Although all of the individual narratives in this text possess validity, a

specific few stand out. A few of the more difficult stories to read include the treatment of enslaved Africans being brought to Americas, the acceptance or denial criteria of citizenship for immigrants coming into the United States, and descriptions of the forced sterilization of women in the early 20th century. As a former special education teacher, and current educator of pre-service special education teachers, I cannot stress enough the importance of retelling these stories as a reminder of the dangers of dehumanization and oppression in our field.

Not surprisingly, prior to the arrival of Europeans to the Americas, individuals were born with physical and mental characteristics that differed greatly from the majority. Through oral histories and archival records, Nielsen reproduces the social construction of “disability” from an indigenous perspective. This task is important for many reasons. Primarily, it is a reminder that what a society considers “normal” or typical is often a reflection of our culture and values. Secondly, hopefully it empowers educators and advocates challenging the current understandings of the concept of disability within a cultural context while still remaining cognizant of the obstacles and challenges of others. It seems apparent, through the author’s argument, that the nature of assessing, legislating, educating, and advocating for those with a disability is a fluid, ever-changing space.

As mentioned, throughout the body of this text, the author describes the intersection of gender, race, class, sex, sexuality, citizenship, socio-economic status, poverty, personal liberty, economic and social mobility in regards to physical, intellectual, and psychological disabilities. An easy criticism for the broad overview of topics in this book would focus on the lack of depth the author invests in each of these areas. However, the author’s purpose appears to illuminate how individuals with disabilities and the concept of disability have intertwined around and within all of the aforementioned categories over the course of US history. Again, this method of investigating the whole, as opposed to specific parts, allows the reader a clearer understanding of the progress and limitations of the movement in working toward a full inclusion of citizenship for individuals with disabilities.

As a former special education teacher of secondary students, I am well aware of negative long-term outcomes for many students with disabilities, particularly those with mental health issues. Within the final chapters, the author describes the modern civil rights and advocacy movement in passing legislation aimed at supporting people with disabilities (generally physical in nature) in accessibility to education and employment. Furthermore, Nielsen incorporates not only the affects of living with a disability in the work place, but some of the causes that create debilitating health issues for employees. I look forward to using her narrative of the coal miners in Appalachia as a vehicle to discuss the overlap of poverty, disability, corporate responsibility, and the legislative protection of workers in a future group discussion with pre-service special education teachers. Furthermore, the author depicts the connections and progressions between the movement of rights for

individuals with disabilities and the civil rights movement, women's rights movement, and the LGBTQ movement beginning in the mid 1960s. Again, this creates an opportunity for educators in the social studies to discuss the causes of and effects of marginalization of groups within the American story. Briefly put, this book lends itself to educators wishing to discuss current civil right frictions in the United States through stories of our past experience.

The author concludes her text in discussing relatively recent legislative measures designed to impact all ages, creeds, and colours of people with a disability. These include the Education for all Handicap Children Act (EHA, 1975) American with Disabilities Act (ADA, 1990), Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 1990), alterations to welfare, Medicare, and accessibility to public transportation. In telling the tales of the passage of legislation designed to promote inclusion, protection, and support, Nielson depicts the agents as ordinary people doing extraordinary things. Ultimately, these stories serve as a reminder to those of us that work in fields associated with advocacy for individuals with disabilities and those who do not, that our collective history has many instances of exclusionary practices geared toward the preclusion of full citizenship for all citizens.

At times the motivation for these practices are seasoned with malice, but more often it seems, many of these practices continue due to a lack of understanding and information regarding the obstacles of others. As Atticus Finch said, "You never understand a person until you consider things from his point of view...until you climb into his skin and walk around in it" (Lee, 1960). The importance of this book lies in its effort to crawl into another's skin to humanize this sliver of the American story.

References

- Blatt, B., & Kaplan, F. (1966). *Christmas in purgatory: A photographic essay on mental retardation*. Scituate Harbor, MA: Allen & Bacon.
- Lee, H. (1960). *To kill a mockingbird*. Philadelphia, PA: Lippincott.

Reviewer details

Matthew Miller received his Ph.D. at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in the Early Childhood, Special Education, and Literacy (ECSEL) program. Prior to his graduate school studies, he worked in special education with secondary students with an emotional/behavioral disorder (EBD) in self-contained settings and as a secondary algebra inclusion teacher. Contact Email: matmil@live.unc.edu



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