

Able-bodied: a memoir

By Leslie Swartz

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Reviewer: Laila Asmal

Consultant Psychiatrist, Stellenbosch University, Stellenbosch, South Africa

Nancy Mairs, a feminist writer with multiple sclerosis writes in a collection of essays that "to view your life as blessed, does not require you to deny your pain. It simply demands a more complicated vision, one in which a condition or event is not either good or bad but is, rather, both good and bad, not sequentially but simultaneously. The more such ambivalences you can hold in your head, the better off you are, intellectually and emotionally."

Leslie Swartz, Professor of Psychology at Stellenbosch University, has published prolifically in a range of mental health topics but his personal experience with disability has fueled his passion to become one of South Africa's leading academics in disability research. In his memoir, *Able-bodied*, Leslie Swartz uses a richly detailed portrait of the complexity of being the son of a disabled man (a difficult, conflicting but loving relationship) to weave a thumbnail outline of the modern disability movement.

The narrative core of the book is a deeply felt, closely observed account of the author's relationship with his father, and other key personal relationships with people with disabilities. Prof Swartz has a novelist's gift for conveying character, and his story has many characters worth conveying. These include his determined father with a misshapen foot and hip, fearsome matriarchs with all manner of physical and emotional difficulties and a self-reflection of being a "97 pound weakling". In effect, the very familiarity of the language and the scrupulously honest voice enhances what is unique about this work: this is not a medical textbook nor is autobiography the author's main intent. His aim is to challenge responses to disability that prevail today by portraying how our personal experience of differences between people colour how we approach disability.

Early in the book, he talks of the 'social model' of disability proposed by disability theorists in the 1970's who argued that the key to disability was not intrinsic to the impairment itself but rather was constructed by society. They proposed that what was 'bad' about disability could be eliminated by eradicating intolerance and breaking down social barriers. An illustration of this from the book would be that despite how fiercely the author's father discarded the "disabled" label (he would not let his crippled foot prohibit him from openly lounging on the beach or playing his regular round of golf), a story emerges of social and occupational prejudice, subtle but

ultimately soul-destroying.

However, by describing the complexity of disability advocacy and disablist oppression, *Able-bodied* proposes a more nuanced insight into disability theory. The tenets of the social model of disability that has shaped much of disability activism in practice today may reinforce the impression that disabled people are a homogeneous group without gender, race, culture, economic or other significant social distinction. Every person (and every disabled person) grows up in a particular context, shaped by their upbringing and by numerous enabling and disabling factors. Our experience colours how we see others, and disabled people can be typecast in particular roles such as vulnerable, oppressed or courageous.

Little heed is paid to the diversity among disabled people within the community and their right to define their own identity, to discuss and re-define impairment and place the disabled body in a personal context. It can be psychologically complex for people to represent their own groups and as a result, the author proposes, the price of solidarity within disability activism may in fact be conformity.

Indeed, life with an impairment is not equal to an ordinary life with physical limitations. It is a different life. The author argues that the denial of a difficulty can be more damaging than recognising it and its power. He describes his father's pain and physical difficulties as having "never been his own; they were never allowed to be" and argues that by not acknowledging the complexities that arise from having an impairment, we disavow the reality that disabled people have to live with everyday.

"*Able-bodied*" is a deeply personal book for the author and though at times it feels as if the prose flows from a pent-up and impassioned surge, it is the same emotion that makes the book raw, real and keenly felt. In a direct and honest voice, Prof Swartz acknowledges that his book poses provocative questions that stop short of being fully answered. The ending feels unfinished and uncertain largely because the book does not pretend to offer answers to the difficult questions posed by living with disability, disability activism and disability research. Rather, the author suggests that "as we think about and process things, we may get things right more often" so that by asking the right questions we ultimately move forward.