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About us: essays from the New York Times' Disability series (book review)

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Perspectives on Disability

About Us: Essays from the *New York Times' Disability Series.*

Liveright: Norton. Sept. 2019. 304p. ed. by Peter Catapano & Rosemarie Garland-Thomson. ISBN 9781631495854. \$27.95; ebk. ISBN 9781631495861.

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In this expansive volume, Catapano (opinion editor, *New York Times*) and Garland-Thomson (English, bioethics, Emory Univ.; *Extraordinary Bodies*) present 60 selections from the *New York Times'* weekly "Disability" series, in which people discuss living with disability. This collection proves disability knows no boundaries, as the pieces chosen (grouped by thematic topics such as family, love, coping, work, and joy) represent a range of ages, genders, sexualities, professions, and classes, from individuals with disabilities physical or mental or a combination of both that might have been with them since birth or occurred through chance or accident. While it upholds the value and dignity of people with disabilities, this is no easy read of purely "inspirational" tales, as frustration, worry, and anger sit beside happiness, confidence, and reflective grace. The one notable flaw may also be a strength: by eschewing any larger sociopolitical theme and focusing on individual voices, it reinforces its message of disability as a complex aspect of the individual rather than a monolithic identity.

VERDICT A well-edited, thoughtful volume and a multifaceted glimpse into some of the experiences of the largest minority

group in the world.—Kathleen McCallister, William & Mary Libs., Williamsburg, VA

Brown, Keah. *The Pretty One: On Life, Pop Culture, Disability, and Other Reasons To Fall in Love with Me.* Atria. Aug. 2019. 256p. ISBN 9781982100544. pap. \$17; ebk. ISBN 9781982100551. MEMOIR

Journalist/activist Brown begins her coming-of-age story by outlining how her Twitter hashtag, #DisabledAndCute, changed the course of her life and brought her a book deal, along with other successes. This frankness may feel overly confessional at first, but readers will come to appreciate the author's voice, as a young black woman living with disability. Brown's narrative is a bright and delicious exercise in transparency. Her desire to be beautiful, her angst about not yet knowing romantic love, and her longing for designer clothes intermingle with stark stories about life with cerebral palsy. By collaging pop cultural dictums alongside experiences of physical pain and encounters with the world's disregard for her disabled body, Brown presents herself for what she is—a radical amalgam of vulnerable girlishness and wizened strength. All in all, this title details lovingly and unsparingly how Brown's life has sputtered and roared along the way to result in the budding author she is today.

VERDICT Readers with lives like Brown's

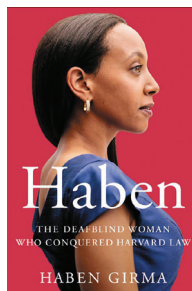
will find solace in this debut; others will be similarly moved by her honesty and carbonated wit.—Sierra Dickey, Ctr. for New Americans, Northampton, MA

★ **Girma, Haben. *Haben: The Deafblind Woman Who Conquered Harvard Law.*** Twelve: Grand Central. Aug. 2019. 288p. ISBN 9781538728727. \$27. BIOG

Born with deaf-blindness, Girma grew up with enough vision to know when someone was in front of her and enough hearing to know when someone close to her was talking. However, she had difficulty reading

facial features or distinguishing people in group conversations. Relying on her own problem-solving skills, Girma overcame roadblocks while simultaneously obtaining her undergraduate and then law degree. In the process, she developed new methods of communication and found her calling in advocating for the deaf and blind communities in

more accessible communication, education, and employment opportunities. As a lawyer and advocate, Girma shares a collection of vignettes illustrating the defining points in her life. She peppers her writing with a witty sense of humor and showcases her strength in facing obstacles, along with challenging antiquated societal beliefs about people with disabilities, whether describing her experience climbing



this newly translated work by Nobel laureate in literature Alexievich (*Secondhand Time: The Last of the Soviets*) highlights the wartime experiences of children in the Soviet Union during World War II. Alexievich has noted that the preferred label for her genre is "documentary literature," while a more mundane category might be "oral history." Within are stories from 100 people—short glimpses into their childhood that last only a few pages—with each vignette stating the age of the person during the story as well as their adult occupation. The myriad themes cover topics such as family relations, perceptions of war, death, food shortages, poverty, travel, schooling, entertainment, and how their childhood experience impacted their adult lives.

VERDICT These stories are at once poignant and gut-wrenching, and given their scope within the longer interviews conducted by

Alexievich, the author's overall literary intent becomes clearer throughout. Readers with an interest in World War II, oral history, 20th-century history, Russian and/or Soviet history would find this well worth reading. [See Prepub Alert, 1/7/19.]—Crystal Goldman, Univ. of California, San Diego Lib.

★ **Blackburn, Julia. *Time Song: Journeys in Search of a Submerged Land.*** Pantheon. Aug. 2019. 304p. illus. by Enrique Brinkmann. maps. index. ISBN 9781101871676. \$27.95; ebk. ISBN 9781101871683. HIST

Award-winning author Blackburn (*Old Man Goya*) brings her creative energy to the lost prehistoric worlds of northwestern Europe. Doggerland, a region now submerged beneath the North Sea, once connected Britain to continental Europe. Prehistoric humans, mammoths, and other Ice Age denizens once roamed over a landscape that appeared and

disappeared over hundreds of thousands of years. In addition to the content, which itself is unique and rarely explored, the book's presentation is extraordinary. There are poems about natural processes and human evolution; seemingly tangential, personal narratives that arrive at an illuminating point; and informational yet highly readable scientific discussions, such as a vivid description of a Netsilik Eskimo hunting party. The text flows like water, almost dreamlike. Brinkmann's stylistic drawings, scattered throughout, resemble cave art. A series of Doggerland maps follows through the work, a chronological presentation illustrating the unrecognizable topography of 18,000 years ago up to the more familiar territory of 7,000 years ago. Those seeking a more straightforward work on the Ice Age may prefer Jamie Woodward's *The Ice Age*, but Blackburn offers a visionary, memorable account.

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