

## Book Review

**Title:** *Blind Man's Bluff*

**Author:** Geri Taeckens

**Publisher:** Accessibilities, Sault Ste Marie, MI

**ISBN:** 978-0-9774546-1-7

**Soft Cover:** \$19.95, 445 pages

**Reviewer:** Beth Omansky

Organized across specific points in time from 1957-1993 -- from early childhood through adolescence, college years, and young adulthood, *Blind Man's Bluff* chronicles Geri Taeckens' journey into blindness. Her first memory of an encounter with a blind person defined her life in many ways as it taught her how society thinks about blind people as incapable objects of pity, charity, helplessness, and hopelessness.

After buying two pencils from a blind vendor outside their local five-and-dime store, Taeckens' father explained:

I know we don't really need his pencils, Geri, but—it's just that—I mean, blind people, they can't work, you know? They aren't able to really take care of themselves, so it's up to people like you and me to help them out when we can. Understand? ... "[w]hat I mean is, the man would feel so bad about not working for his money that he maybe wouldn't want to live at all (pp. 9-10).

Taeckens uses this seminal recollection to frame her fall into substance abuse, high risk-taking behavior, and attempted suicide as the strain of trying to "pass" as "normal" became too much for her. She chose the book title from her ironic experience of being superior at the game of "Blind Man's Bluff" despite (or maybe because) her failing vision caused her to lag behind or drop out altogether of tag, kickball, jump rope, and hopscotch. She "appreciated the level playing field" (p. 50) of *Blind Man's Bluff* in which one child puts on a blindfold, the other players hide, and the blindfolded child seeks and "tags" them.

Eventually, she was transferred from "normal" school to a school for the blind where students were subjected to visits from charity representatives and were put on display in "feel-good" stories at Christmastime. Taeckens recalls the atmosphere among the children "moved from enthusiastic griping to oppressive defeat" (p. 68).

Taeckens successfully incorporates cultural elements indicative of each decade and how some influenced her behavior, such as falling into a "hippie freak" drug-taking scene, and her narrative voice changes nimbly and appropriately through each life stage.

I would have enjoyed this self-published book more if it were edited down by 150 pages. Dialogues between characters seemed awkwardly invented, and multi-page length descriptions of minute detail ran from tedious to florid. As one among numerous examples, she describes a kiss, "like a parched desert traveler, thirsty from days of drought, I began to drink from his moist

lush lips” (p. 365). Also, many passages of dialogue and description were too lengthy, and failed to move the story forward. Perhaps if the book were marketed as a “fictionalized memoir” rather than an “autobiographical account,” my expectation would have been different.

My favorite message in this book is Taeckens’ observation that advocacy work in the disability community failed to provide a safe place for her to express her feelings about the prospect of encroaching blindness. This insight points up the need for members of the organized disability community to drop the “disability is cool” stance that is required of them to do successful advocacy in the nondisabled world, and support each other’s expression of their phenomenological and emotional experiences.

This memoir is a story of a woman with a wealth of inner strength and resolve who sometimes took the easy road, who discovered “easy” was ineffective and self-defeating, who struggled to find self-acceptance, self-love, and a successful social work career. Despite the book’s failings, I appreciate the author’s candor, self-knowledge, and inspirational intent. This memoir could be used in disability studies to analyze and critique stories rooted in the medical model of disability, as a book that fails to challenge the concept of “normal.” However, I would not consider it a disability studies book per se as evidenced not only by its content but by the author’s marketing on the back cover, “traveling under the cloud of impending tragedy...threat of impending loss...battling an unknown darkness.”

**Beth Omansky, Ph.D.**, is an activist and disability studies scholar in Portland, Oregon. Her book, *Borderlands of Blindness*, will be published by Lynne Rienner Publishers in April, 2011.