

Book Review

Title: *The Sibling Slam Book: What It's Really Like to Have a Brother or Sister With Special Needs*

Editor: Don Meyer. Foreword by David Gallagher.

Publisher: Woodbine House, Inc., Bethesda, MD, 2005

Cost: \$15.95 USD

Reviewer: Christine Su

While academic and medical textbooks on disabilities abound, and more recently, authors have created children's books to demystify disabilities to youngsters, *The Sibling Slam Book: What It's Really Like to Have a Brother or Sister with Special Needs*, is an innovative work, intended specifically for teenagers who have siblings with disabilities and/or special needs. The format of the book follows what might be a typical "slam" book format: Each individual receives the slam book, a simple notebook filled with questions about teen-specific issues and spaces for replies, and he or she can add personal responses to those questions—be they angry, joyful, droll, or somber—to those already entered. While in *The Sibling Slam Book*, the text itself is typed, the entries are in different fonts (representing different handwriting styles), and some cross the paper's printed lines, often stretching into curves or looping into circles of text, as handwritten entries might. *The Sibling Slam Book* is an enjoyable, insightful compilation of the thoughts and feelings of teenage siblings without disabilities, eighty of whom collectively author the work, as they navigate daily life with their brothers and sisters with special needs.

Recent news reports have broadcast various debates surrounding "myspace.com," a website where teenagers can upload their own photos and profiles, and post comments about teenage life, on topics ranging from musical interests to trendy fashions, from romantic intrigue to peer pressure. Parents worry that teens posting their lives on the Internet for all to see is irresponsible and even dangerous. Teens counter that the site provides them with a venue to meet peers with whom they can discuss what is on their minds, to talk about things they cannot or will not share with parents or teachers.

The Internet may have helped myspace.com to flourish in the 21st century; however, the concept of a "teens-only" space—and the value of such space—is certainly not new. Middle school and high school teens have been using slam books to voice their thoughts and feelings for decades. Furthermore, in slam books teens not only record their own words, but also read the responses of others, many of whom have faced similar situations and experienced similar feelings in reaction to such situations. The unwritten rule that the slam book is a nonjudgmental, free space for expressing oneself means that the responses are usually frank—in response to the question, "What's the toughest thing about being a sib?" for example, a *Sibling Slam Book* author writes: "The responsibility definitely stinks. I get few privileges for all the work I do for my family and my little brother" (p. 141). They are also poignant: "[I]t is the uncertainty, not knowing what's coming next, and the feeling of vulnerability if something does happen and that you're open to being really hurt," writes another. "Also, not knowing if my little brother will wake up the next morning or when a kiss I give him will be the last" (p. 141).

The book's simple question and answer format allows the reader to compare and contrast sibling perspectives on a plethora of issues—some disability-related, some more generally teen-related. Importantly, the *Sibling Slam Book* asks questions about the advantages of having a sibling with a disability, and some of the answers reveal teens' great pride in their siblings' resilience. "He's my special light in the darkness," writes the sibling of a brother with special needs, "There when all other lights go out" (p. 134). These responses offer support to others who may not receive such reassurance from school peers or friends who do not understand their circumstances. I call this book a reference work, for while it does not offer dictionary definitions or historical descriptions, it does provide, through its list of questions, an index of topics that teens can explore based upon the questions they have at a particular time.

The Sibling Slam Book may not offer new theories or medical breakthroughs, yet it is informative and would serve as a good resource for courses on disability culture as well as for teens' libraries. This heartwarming, honest, and humorous book will appeal to parents, teachers, practitioners, and others who seek to broaden their understanding of teen siblings' experiences with brothers and sisters with disabilities. It is definitely worth the price, and moreover, as suggested by the editor, himself the creator of hundreds of trainings for families of children with special needs, some or all of the fifty-four questions included in the book can be used to spur discussion in similar workshops or classroom sessions.