

Book Review

Title: *Vulnerable Subjects: Ethics and Life Writing*

Author: G. Thomas Couser

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Reviewer: Steven Brown

In this fascinating book, G. Thomas Couser explores ethics through life writing. What I liked best are Couser's in-depth chapters exploring the work and life of Oliver Sacks, Michael Dorris's auto- and biographical book, *Broken Cord*, assisted suicide, and the Human Genome Project.

In the chapter about Michael Dorris and his adopted son, born with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, Couser emphasizes the roles everyone around Adam, the pseudonym Dorris used for his son, assumes. While the book is ostensibly about Adam and Dorris, Couser demonstrates why some might read it as less about Adam than it is about everyone else around him. As an example, although Adam contributes to the book, his writings are placed in contexts dependent on his much more erudite parents (Dorris and Louise Erdrich). Having read *Broken Cord* a number of years ago, and liking it, did not lessen for me Couser's analysis, which I thought quite adept.

Even better was his analysis of Oliver Sacks and his place in life writing in relation to medicine, disability, autobiography, biography, and patient/doctor relationships. Sacks is himself an intriguing figure because he so easily seems to move out of the clinic (or office) and into the public arena. Couser is both critical and complimentary to Sacks and does a good job of explaining why he feels ambivalent about Sacks's role in modern life writing—and storytelling.

Couser's chapters on suicide and genetics explore information and analysis often missing in the heated debates in which many of us engage. He does an excellent job of showing why assisted suicide and its many parameters have much more to do with society and cultural values than "objective" medicine; and in his chapter on genetics he similarly explores how seemingly scientific data has much more to do with cultural values than one might at first expect.

Near the beginning of the book, Couser writes:

"The potential harms of life writing are more akin to those of social research than to those of biomedicine; the former are not likely to cause physical injury or death, as medical treatment too often does. But whether and how the representation of vulnerable subjects in life writing benefits

them is also less clear than with medicine; hence, the need for ethical scrutiny” (20).

Clear to me in this reading is that no matter who we are, we are all potentially vulnerable subjects. The book would be an excellent addition to graduate seminars; it may be too sophisticated for most undergraduates. I highly recommend this book to anyone studying ethics, life writing, or any of the chapter subjects.