

Book Review

Title: *Home Bound: Growing Up with a Disability in America*

Author: Cass Irvin

Publisher: Temple University Press, 2004

Paper, 2003 ISBN: 1-59213-220-0

Cloth, 2003 ISBN: 1-59213-219-7

Cost: Paperback - \$19.95 USD; Hardcover - \$59.50 USD

Reviewer: Steven E. Brown

Whenever I desired to break from reading Cass Irvin's book, I was unable to do so. Her story kept calling me.

It's a fascinating description of growing up with a disability in the American South in the 1940s, 50s and 60s. Individuals from other countries might perceive a monolithic US experience, which we in the US know is not accurate. My life, as a young person with a disability, born about six years later than Irvin, in Michigan in the US Midwest region, reflects a quite different experience. Even so, we both arrived at similar junctures, promoting disability rights and culture.

Some of what I found compelling in the book included Irvin's descriptions about her experiences at Warm Springs, Georgia, the rehabilitation center for those with polio, made famous by Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR). She felt so much at home there that she writes, "It is a paradox to think that an institution can be liberating, but for me it was. I was not confined there as I was when I was home" (page 51). To me, this sentence sums up a lot of the American disability experience: we can be confined or liberated, no matter who we are, no matter where we are, no matter our dis- or a-bilities; it's a juxtaposition between our internal and external environments and for Irvin as a child, freedom was found at Warm Springs.

Many more descriptions of how a timid young girl became an adult advocate are found within this book. What makes it different from many other autobiographies is how Irvin stretches her own life's experiences into those of a community of people similar to her. The following exchange when Irvin tells a friend she found a publisher for her book signifies why lots of people should read this life story:

"Are you going to tell them how hard it is to be a cripple?"

"Yes, Jewell."

"Are you going to tell them it doesn't have to be this way? That it's because of their stupid prejudice and their stupid belief that we don't matter? That that's what makes it so much harder than it has to be."

"Yes," I answered. "I'm going to try" (page 168).

The part of the book I liked least was what seemed to me extraneous detail. For example, I don't really need to know the author brought a doggie bag home from a restaurant dinner for her sometime boyfriend (page 156). There are also a number of typos and missing words, particularly in the last chapter and a half, which seemed unusual for a university press book. But these are niggling points. The big picture is many of the stories we've been sharing with one another, in the disability rights movement, for the past thirty years or so, are now being perceived as interesting to people outside of the movement. This is incredible progress. And yet...while we move forward, we seem to continually stumble on ourselves along the way.

Irvin writes:

“Franklin Roosevelt hid his disability from the public simply because he knew what public perception could do to his image. He did not hide it from Winston Churchill because he did not fear Churchill's perceptions. Churchill knew he was capable, a leader and a peer. And to people who were close to him, he was grand just the way he was” (page 169)..

As are we all. If only we would pay attention. This book will help achieve that goal.