

# Over the wall ...

**Alan Maley** considers ability and disability.



In this article I shall be looking at two novels, two autobiographies and one non-fiction manual, all dealing with disabling conditions. It may seem unusual to introduce this set of books on various forms of disability. Perhaps that is symptomatic of an era when we are all so much more aware of disability and more positively engaged with it. However, I hope it may also prompt us to become more aware of our own and others' disabling conditions, with beneficial effects on the way we deal with them, and make us more conscious of the way disability in one area may be compensated by exceptional gifts in others.

## ***The Story of My Life***

The case of Helen Keller is perhaps the best-documented of all accounts of disability. The edition I am reading of *The Story of My Life* includes a section of letters and a supplementary account of her life and achievements, so it goes well beyond the relatively short basic text (only about 110 pages long). As is well-known, at 19 months, Helen Keller lost both her sight and her hearing in a childhood illness. At the outset, '*Gradually I got used to the silence and darkness that surrounded me and forgot that it had ever been different, until she came – my teacher – who was to set my spirit free.*'

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Essentially, the book is an account of the remarkable education she received at the hands of her tutor and companion, Anne Sullivan. Apart from the inspiring story of how she overcame her disabilities, acquiring not just one but several languages and becoming a leading public figure in the life of her age, there are strikingly radical observations about the condition of being disabled: '*... the way to help the blind or any other defective class is to understand, correct, remove the incapacities and inequalities of our entire civilisation ... Technically we know how to prevent blindness ... but socially we do not know how. Socially we are still ignorant.*' The book is also notable for its lyrical passages, which celebrate her appreciation of the natural world largely through her other senses of touch and smell, which were clearly hyper-sensitive,

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probably to compensate for her loss of sight and hearing. The book remains a remarkable account of one person's triumph over physical adversity.

## ***Deaf Sentence***

In *Deaf Sentence*, David Lodge dissects with his customary humour and intelligent observation the life and woes of retired Professor of Linguistics, Desmond Bates. As he observes, '*Deafness is comic, as blindness is tragic*'. The early part of the book, especially, contains some highly comic observations on the fate of becoming deaf and its consequences for social intercourse: '*What would be the equivalent of a guide dog for the deaf? A parrot on your shoulder squawking into your ear?*' And there is a good deal of witty wordplay with well-known literary quotations. However, as the novel moves on, the emphasis shifts away from the predicament of deafness to a more general concern with how to cope with an ageing father, and with the plight of being retired. The disabling effects of advancing deafness are what gets the novel off the ground and are thought-provoking for anyone who suspects their auditory acuity may be duller than it once was, but the issue of how we cope with life when we are effectively useless is more sobering still.

## The Diving Bell and the Butterfly

Imagine that you are unable to move your limbs, or to talk, or, indeed, to communicate at all with those around you, while maintaining full consciousness. This is 'locked-in syndrome' and is the fate that befell Jean-Dominique Bauby following a massive stroke at the age of 44. The former editor-in-chief of *Elle* was confined to his bed and wheelchair at the Naval Hospital in Berck-sur-Mer, totally cut off from communication with those around him but with his mind racing – re-living his past, outraged by his present condition, humorously philosophical, aware of how pathetic and repellent he has become: '*What kind of person will those who only know me now think I was?*'

So how do we know this? He was able to open and close one eyelid and, with the patient help of his specialised nurse, managed painstakingly to send messages to her by indicating which letter of the alphabet he needed to make up the words of the book he wrote. The result is *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*, translated from French by Jeremy Leggatt, a terrifying account of his condition and a testament to his courage. It also raises the uncomfortable question of how many patients who appear to be in a deep coma are, in fact, conscious of what is going on around them, but powerless to communicate. There is a film of the same title which is, if anything, even more terrifying than the book.

## The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time

Christopher, the protagonist and first-person narrator of Mark Haddon's novel *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*, suffers from a form of autism. He has problems with social interaction and becomes uncontrollable when he panics, often acting violently, as when he is touched by a policeman early in the story, or groaning in an alarming way. He cannot bear to be touched, hates crowds and does not look at people when he speaks to them. He has total recall of whatever he sees and has a head full of detailed information, most of which he cannot use to make sense of new situations: '*I know all the countries of the world and their capital cities and every prime number up to 7,507.*' In fact, if he encounters a new situation, like buying a train ticket or

finding his way to the station, he has to work everything out from first principles. In order to exert some control over his life, he has developed routines and rituals, which he cannot bear to have disturbed. He is obsessed by numbers and by total accuracy: '*I am 15 years, three months and two days,*' he replies when asked his age. But he has brilliant visualisation skills and can solve quadratic equations and other mathematical problems in his head – something he often does to calm himself down. The story of the difficult relations with his estranged parents and the effects of his unusual behaviour on those he

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meets is told by him in a manner both highly comic and with a bitter edge. Finally, he succeeds in getting an 'A' in A-level maths ... but what sort of future awaits him in a world he still does not understand and which offers him little tolerance?

## Thinking in Pictures

*Thinking in Pictures*, which is Temple Grandin's insider's view of autism, largely corroborates the symptoms of the fictional Christopher. Hers is part autobiography and part detailed information about autism. She became, in spite of her condition, or perhaps because of it, a highly-successful animal scientist. The book is both an inspiration and a valuable source of information on the condition.

## The Gift of Dyslexia

Autism is widely regarded as sharing many of the symptoms of dyslexia. Ronald Davis' book *The Gift of Dyslexia* is of interest partly because it also gives an insider's view of dyslexia and partly for the diagnostic and treatment tools it offers. The description offered of dyslexia makes the powerful point that, besides its negative consequences, it is a positive gift, and Davis cites the cases of many highly gifted people who were also dyslexic. Interestingly, some of these, such as Einstein, are the same as those claimed by Grandin to have been autistic. The fundamental cause of dyslexia in relation to reading and writing is disorientation,

leading to panic and to the building of compulsive solutions such as mnemonics (like the Alphabet Song) or heavy concentration, which do nothing to resolve the essential problem. Davis describes dyslexia and its results, then moves to the unusual but, according to his claims, effective ways of diagnosing and treating it by teaching the dyslexic to turn the disorientation on and off at will. These practical procedures are described in great detail, and would only be comprehensible in the context of a real dyslexic undergoing treatment. The main messages for me from this unusual book were that dyslexia is not all negative and that it is treatable given the right conditions.



If nothing else, these books remind us of how difficult it is to empathise, rather than merely to sympathise, with conditions we do not fully understand. 

Bauby, J-D *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* Harper Perennial 2008

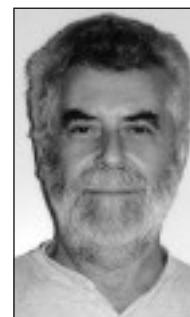
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