



**Elizabeth Grubgeld, *Disability and Life Writing in Post-Independence Ireland* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan/Springer Nature, 2020, ISBN 9783030372453).**

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During the last decades disability life writing has become an essential means to represent the experience of living with a disability. Against the background of the memoir boom since roughly around the turn of the millennium, autobiographical disability and illness narratives have gained popularity and receive increasing public and scholarly attention. As a result, they have also become a subject of research in various academic disciplines, first and foremost in disability studies, health care studies, literary and cultural studies, sociology as well as in the wider field of the medical humanities. Since many research activities and publications in these fields predominantly focus on US-American narratives and in view of a paucity of studies of life writing by disabled people from Ireland, Elizabeth Grubgeld's monograph *Disability and Life Writing in Post-Independence Ireland* intends to close this persistent gap. Published in Palgrave Macmillan's renowned book series *Literary Disability Studies*, it approaches the subject from an interdisciplinary perspective addressing major concerns of disability studies, literary and cultural studies as well as providing insights from Irish cultural history.

As the first book 'to bring the study of life writing and disability studies into the context of Irish literature and culture' (v), Grubgeld sets herself the ambitious aim 'to address, however briefly, every life writing available by a disabled person in Ireland and Northern Ireland' (vi). Therefore, the monograph examines a broad corpus of twenty memoirs and numerous shorter pieces like testimonies, oral histories, blogs etc. Taking its main vantage point from literary studies, the book is structured with regard to different genres of life writing, dedicating chapters to the testimony,

autobiography and the novel, the sports and celebrity narrative, oral history as well as to modes of self-representation on new media. These chapters are preceded by a preface and a thoughtful introduction into the subject, which defines and elaborates on key concepts in the field and reflects on critical debates in disability studies, the study of autobiography and the study of illness and disability life writing in particular. After this introduction and before delving into the following genre-oriented chapters, the author presents an instructive chapter on the interplay of class and blindness as the intersectionality of disability and social class proves to be very pronounced in the Irish colonial and postcolonial context.

Thus, in chapter Two Grubgeld pervasively discloses the interaction of disability and class belonging in Ireland. Exploring the example of sight impairments due to infections and further causes resulting from inadequate, unhygienic living conditions and insufficient health care provisions for poor and working-class people, Grubgeld skilfully elaborates on the relationship between Ireland's postcolonial condition, social and economic inequalities, and disability. For this purpose, she analyses Sean O'Casey's childhood memoir *I Knock at the Door* (1939) and Joe Bollard's *Out of Sight* (1998). The experiences of O'Casey and Bollard reveal 'the ways poverty produces disabilities or impedes their treatment' (29), for example through families' lack of knowledge, their limited access to information, medical diagnosis or expensive treatments as well as through the persistent discrimination of disabled children from working-class backgrounds by the Irish school, church and state authorities. Grubgeld's analysis of the two autobiographies relates how both works avoid paradigmatic genre conventions of the disability and illness memoir, like the quest narrative or the pattern of restitution described by Arthur Frank (1995). Instead, they essentially illustrate the 'social model' of disability. In this way both memoirs highlight how the intersectionality of class belonging and disability exacerbates existing power inequalities in post-independence Ireland.

As the first genre-oriented section, chapter Three reflects on the testimony and its social and political objectives. Grubgeld emphasises the collective purpose of the testimony as a specific feature of this type of disability life writing. Through narrating one individual life story, the testimony usually exemplifies the experience of a larger group and thereby also speaks for others who might be unable to relate their own story. Focusing on Paddy Doyle's *The God Squad* (1988) and David Lane's blog, *Tales from the Institution: The David Lane Story* (2011), the author examines the representation of traumatic experiences of disabled children in Irish residential institutions. Supporting her comparison of the two works with parallels found in further oral and written reports, the author reveals that these first-person accounts

provide collective testimonies of widespread abusive practices in state-funded and church- and charity-run institutions. Once more, Grubgeld's analysis shows that '[c]lass, again, proves a determining factor in who remains at home, [...] and who grows up in a residential facility' (58) and thereby is at a higher risk of becoming affected by physical and mental abuse. Finally, the chapter contrast these testimonies of life in residential institutions with narratives of disabled people living independently, for example Joe Bollard and Noel O'Connell. According to the book's line of argumentation, it is leaving institutional spaces and moving to independent living that permits them agency and enables them to achieve their personal aspirations, i.e. a musical and an academic career as well as founding a family.

The fourth chapter on 'Autobiography and Novel at Mid-Century' examines how the choice of genres in the middle between memoir and fiction enables writers with disabilities to address topics more openly which were associated with stigma in mid-twentieth-century Irish culture, like social exclusion, domestic violence and sexual desires. The author argues that by fictionalising the main characters' experiences and by adopting a third-person narrative perspective, the autobiographical novels grant privacy to the writers' families and to those members of the communities depicted. In addition, the genre of narrative fiction provides different aesthetic options to the novelists, for example a more literary style and formal flexibility in the representation of bodily and inward experiences. Grubgeld exemplifies these observations through her comparison of Christy Brown's memoir *My Left Foot* (1954) and his autobiographically inspired novel *Down All the Days* (1970). While Brown's childhood memoir of growing up with cerebral palsy focuses on his acquisition of literacy and the inclusionary practices of his close family and friends, it also relates the experiences of isolation and exclusion as a disabled boy and teenager from a first-person perspective. In *Down All the Days*, Grubgeld concludes, 'Brown writes of experiences that have rarely been chronicled in any genre until very recently' (90). She convincingly maintains that the modernist style of the third-person narrative conveys previously untold experiences of disability in relation to sexuality, pain and humiliation. The ensuing analysis of Christopher Nolan's *Under the Eye of the Clock* (1987) provides insights into the writing techniques of an author with cerebral palsy. Grubgeld shows that Nolan's extraordinary style, which is characterised by rich imagery, neologisms, alliterations and sound effects, is both related to his aural learning and to his means of communication and composition with the aid of a touch stick, typewriter and computer. Through her close analysis, Grubgeld demonstrates that Nolan's literary style is an accurate way for him to represent his embodiment and his inner thoughts and feelings. The chapter concludes with an examination of

Stewart Parker's novel *Hopdance* (2017). As a writer who, in comparison to Brown and Nolan, was not born with a disability but whose left leg was amputated as a result of bone cancer at the age of nineteen, Parker addresses the relation between identity and the changed body. According to Grubgeld, it is through the protagonist's reflections on the continuity or potential transformation of the self after a life-changing physical alteration that *Hopdance* investigates the interdependency between body and mind.

Chapter Five of *Disability and Life-Writing in Post-Independence Ireland* turns to the popular genres of the sports and celebrity memoir as well as to oral histories collected by third parties. In this context, the volume addresses questions of authenticity, (assisted) authorship, and conventionalised genre patterns. With regard to autobiographies by celebrated athletes with disabilities, Grubgeld here critically reflects on ableist notions that repeatedly emerge from the genre conventions of this type of disability life writing, most of all the recurring emphasis on extraordinary achievements by a single person. In her analysis of Ronan Tynan's memoir *Halfway Home* (2002) and Janet Gray's *Blind Ambition* (2009) she shows that sports celebrities' memoirs often follow the pattern of restitution in which exceptional individuals overcome limitations, injuries and physical pain, while this process is illustrated through metaphors of competition and battle. She compares both memoirs to Dorine Reihill's *Going Home: A Story of Survival* (1987), which shares some of the athletic, competitive features of Tynan's and Gray's works but deviates from the limiting genre constraints of the restitution narrative, for example in Reihill's personal articulations of her experiences of physical and psychological pain. In her close readings of these three exemplary sports autobiographies and their marketing paratexts, Grubgeld demonstrates that the books oscillate between ableist conceptions of normalisation and exceptionalism. As Grubgeld concludes, '[t]he tensions within each book actually lay open some of the key contradictions in the experience of disability and in writing about it' (128). The chapter closes with a discussion of oral histories and testimonies collected by service organisations or as part of legal inquiries, for example the Ryan Commission's inquiry into child abuse. Although fundamentally different from the sports and celebrity memoir, due to the specific purposes of these testimonies and the intervention of interviewers who guide the narratives through their questions and selection of topics, this genre proves to be likewise constrained. Instead of a holistic representation of the life stories and identities of individuals, these genres, though, are able to offer a wide variety of perspectives on living with disabilities in Ireland.

The monograph's final chapter on 'New Media, New Lives: Self-Publication, Blogging, Performance Art' examines forms of life writing that enable authors with disabilities to communicate their experiences more independently from established publishers, editors or service organisations through the manifold opportunities the internet and social media offer. First, the book here explores the features of self-published autobiographies as exemplified in the works of John Curran, Leigh Gath, Brendan Brophy, Robert Dowdall and Tommy Collison. Grubgeld explains that through self-publication more authors who are not professional writers get access to means of representation. At the same time, as an inexpensive type of publication, for instance in the e-book format, these memoirs reach different audiences and can be 'more accessible through adaptive technology than traditional book publication' (139). The writings under consideration centre on the authors' struggles against stigmatisation and discrimination, and the invaluable roles of community, family and friendship. In the second part, the chapter reflects on 'the blog's functionality as a mode of disability life writing, as well as some of its limitations' (139). In contrast to many other types of disability narratives examined in the preceding chapters, blogs are not restricted by the genre conventions and patterns of traditional book-length literary outputs and offer new narrative and creative strategies. While often fusing personal narratives with disability activism and political commentary, blogs can create networks and 'communities of exchange' (146). In a short final section to the chapter, Grubgeld draws attention to self-referential performance art by artists with disabilities, like Mary Duffy and Rosaleen McDonagh, whose performances transcend conventional forms of disability narratives and, according to Grubgeld, 'create a generative moment for dialogue' (162).

In sum, *Disability and Life-Writing in Post-Independence Ireland* offers an intriguing analysis of the cultural, aesthetic and social facets of disability life writing in Ireland. This well researched study of an impressively wide-ranging corpus closes a gap in both Irish studies and disability studies. The heterogeneous body of sources is analysed very carefully, thereby demonstrating the particular features of the respective forms of self-narrative, their functionalities as well as limitations for expressing the lived experience of individuals with disabilities. Considering the writings against the background of the postcolonial Irish state and its institutional structures, Grubgeld succeeds in repeatedly drawing attention to the intersectionality of disability and class. Although the reader might miss a conclusion that summarises the main arguments and gives an outlook for future research directions, it is already in the Preface that Grubgeld points to enduring blind spots in Irish disability life writing. Thus, she observes urgent intersectional problems, namely a 'paucity of texts

by women’, ‘[t]he dearth of autobiographies by Irish individuals with intellectual or neurodiverse disabilities’ and her inability ‘to locate memoirs by disabled people of color within Ireland or by Travellers with disabilities’ (vi). By pointing out these issues, her monograph not only proves to be an informative read for scholars in the fields of Irish studies, literary studies and disability studies, but also invites them to engage in future research.

### Works Cited

Frank, Arthur, *The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness, Ethics*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1995.