SITTING PRETTY

BY

REBECCA TAUSSIG

**SUMMARY:**

(from the publisher)

<https://www.harpercollins.com/products/sitting-pretty-rebekah-taussig?variant=32914662981666>

A memoir-in-essays from disability advocate and creator of the Instagram account @sitting\_pretty Rebekah Taussig, processing a lifetime of memories to paint a beautiful, nuanced portrait of a body that looks and moves differently than most.

Growing up as a paralyzed girl during the 90s and early 2000s, Rebekah Taussig only saw disability depicted as something monstrous (The Hunchback of Notre Dame), inspirational (Helen Keller), or angelic (Forrest Gump). None of this felt right; and as she got older, she longed for more stories that allowed disability to be complex and ordinary, uncomfortable and fine, painful and fulfilling.

Writing about the rhythms and textures of what it means to live in a body that doesn’t fit, Rebekah reflects on everything from the complications of kindness and charity, living both independently and dependently, experiencing intimacy, and how the pervasiveness of ableism in our everyday media directly translates to everyday life.

Disability affects all of us, directly or indirectly, at one point or another. By exploring this truth in poignant and lyrical essays, Taussig illustrates the need for more stories and more voices to understand the diversity of humanity. Sitting Pretty challenges us as a society to be patient and vigilant, practical and imaginative, kind and relentless, as we set to work to write an entirely different story.

**REVIEWS:**

(from NoveList)

Publishers Weekly:

Taussig debuts with a pull-no-punches memoir about life in a wheelchair. She insists up front that she doesn’t speak for everyone with a disability (“I would be doing us all a great disservice if I led you to believe that the conversation starts and ends with bodies and experiences that look just like mine”) and provides a frank look into her life with “a body that doesn’t work,” one that she’s lived in since surviving an aggressive cancer as a 14-month-old. She analyzes sex and disabilities; her marriage to her first husband, which came about only because she was afraid it would be her only chance (she eventually found love with her second husband); unintentional ableism; online dating; and what she sees as the disempowering message from Hollywood that characters with disabilities are “always longing for a ‘whole' body through a fantasy sequence.” Taussig’s refreshing, matter-of-fact tone makes it clear that she’s not asking anyone to feel sorry for her; rather, she’s asking for just the opposite—to not be defined by her wheelchair. Her smart and witty observations about living with disabilities will be enlightening and eye-opening for readers. (Aug.) --Staff (Reviewed 04/27/2020) (Publishers Weekly, vol 267, issue 17, p)

Library Journal:

/\* Starred Review \*/ Disability is often seen by the able-bodied population as something to be fixed, something to be pitied. With Taussig's memoir, readers are given a different perspective—one of someone seeking to bring awareness and education to the world around her. Taussig, with both a PhD in disability studies and the lived experience of having a disability herself, is able to meet readers where they are, whether they are disabled themselves or are curious to learn. However, Taussig states up front that she is not representative of all disabled people and that this book is not exhaustive. Rather, it is a personal account, and one that is organized as a book of essays, each a vignette of an experience where disability informed Taussig's experiences: her romantic relationship with an able-bodied person, teaching an experimental disability theory class for high schoolers, discussing her life experiences with her family, and more. VERDICT Taussig's narrative style is highly conversational, making it feel like one is chatting with a lifelong friend. Her ability to bring levity to a topic some may find taboo is certain to help spread her message of acceptance and love. --Ahliah Bratzler (Reviewed 08/01/2020) (Library Journal, vol 145, issue 8, p84)

Kirkus:

/\* Starred Review \*/ A disability advocate debuts with a collection offering potent rejoinders to ableism.Tracing memories from childhood to the present, Taussig, who has a doctorate in disability studies, explores her life story and relationship with her body as well as attendant concerns of confidence, belief, and hope. Even though she grew up “after the passage of the 1990 Americans With Disabilities Act,” the author, who was paralyzed at age 3 following a lengthy, deleterious cancer-treatment regimen, faced many difficult situations related to her disability, from confronting lowered expectations at a youth camp to navigating awkward moments with friends and acquaintances. She investigates what accessibility really means and how it relates to housing, employment, and health care—“The older I got,” she writes, “the more I cringed at the bills my body created”—and she looks at dating challenges and the difference between finding marriage and finding love, exposing many of the mechanics behind traditional social scripts. Constantly questioning the damaging illogic of nonaccessible public spaces, Taussig confronts the insidious nature of “stigma, isolation, erasure, misunderstanding, skepticism, and ubiquitous inaccessibility.” Introducing many key themes of disability studies throughout the narrative, the author pushes for nuanced awareness and understanding of fluid rather than fixed needs, essential for a more effective intersectional approach to social solutions. Taussig goes beyond empty inspirational jargon, forcing readers to consider the value of the real-world improvements that can emerge from centering underrepresented voices. An engaging, up-close view of the need for structural change regarding disabilities in this country, the text is a solid combination of theory and personal experience. “We should bring disabled perspectives to the center,” she writes, “because such perspectives create a world that is more imaginative, more flexible, more sustainable, more dynamic and vibrant for everyone who lives in a body.”A fierce and fabulous revision to entrenched ableist scripts. (Kirkus Reviews, June 1, 2020)

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

(from St. Louis County Library)

1. Do you agree with how Taussig’s parents raised her, without any disability accommodations?

2. What caused her to have a sense of shame as a young girl?

3. What do you think of her experience of working at a summer camp as a girl? Did the camp treat her fairly?

4. What role did the media play in her identity as a disabled person?

5. What do you think about public pity expressed for the disabled? Recall the young woman who prayed over Rebecca.

6. What is ableism as defined by the author? (a set of beliefs and structures that favors the imagined, idealized body and disfavors those who don’t compare) Do you agree with her definition?

7. Do you agree, as Taussig argues, that everyone faces disability in their lives? For example, being old, being pregnant, or raising a child?

8.Has the book changed how you view the disabled?

9.What do you think about the author’s dating experiences? Would you date a disabled person?

10.One disabled Goodreads reviewer felt that Taussig was too defensive about taking offense when someone offered to help. Do you agree?

**AUTHOR INFORMATION:**

[**https://www.harpercollins.com/blogs/authors/rebekah-taussig**](https://www.harpercollins.com/blogs/authors/rebekah-taussig)

**Author Bio**

REBEKAH TAUSSIG, PH.D. is a Kansas City writer and teacher with her doctorate in Creative Nonfiction and Disability Studies. She has led workshops and presentations at the University of Michigan, University of Kansas, and Davidson College on disability representation, identity, and community. She also runs the Instagram platform @sitting\_pretty where she crafts “mini-memoirs” to contribute nuance to the collective narratives being told about disability in our culture. She lives with two cranky orange cats and one angsty-tender human. (from the publisher). After the publication of her book, she had a son, Otto, in May 2020.

**ARTICLES:**

Kansas City Writer Rebekah Taussig Challenges Pop Culture Depictions of Disabilities In "Sitting Pretty"

by Laura Spencer, KCUR.org, Sept. 18, 2020

<https://www.kcur.org/2020-09-18/kansas-city-writer-rebekah-taussig-challenges-pop-culture-depictions-of-disabilities-in-sitting-pretty>

## Taussig's memoir delivers poignant and entertaining personal stories that examine "life in this body of mine."

On herInstagram account, Rebekah Taussig shares photographs and “mini-memoirs” about what it means to live in her "particular (disabled, female) body)."

Taussig's new memoir in essays, "Sitting Pretty: The View From My Ordinary Resilient Disabled Body," reflects on her experience growing up in Kansas after being paralyzed at the age of three from cancer treatments. She also explores how "disability affects all of us, directly or indirectly, at one point or another."

Here are some excerpts from a recent conversation on Up to Date.

**STEVE KRASKE:** I can probably guess, but why did you want to write this book?

**REBEKAH TAUSSIG:** Part of it, like you might assume, is that I grew up a world that didn't really have any books like this. I didn't have any examples or stories that really felt familiar to me or that represented the nuance of my actual experience. So that was part of it.

But about five years ago, I started writing these, I call them mini-memoirs on Instagram, just about life in this body of mine. And (I) didn't really necessarily expect anyone to care because it felt like such a singular experience to me. But I was really surprised to find that people were interested — either they saw themselves in those stories or didn't and wanted to know more about them.

So I think both of those things really motivated me to kind of stretch my words out from the Instagram space into an actual book.

Rebekah Taussig didn't grow up reading stories about disability as "complex and ordinary, uncomfortable and fine, painful and fulfilling," so she wrote her own book.

**KRASKE:** Now you have a doctorate in both creative nonfiction and disability studies from KU, and a concept that comes up a lot in your book is this wordableism. Can you define what that is for those of us not in the know?

**TAUSSIG:** Essentially it's a framework that really favors and almost obsesses over this notion of a perfectly able, infallible body, and really shapes the world in a way that does not consider or honor or respect bodies that deviate from that sort of ideal. And most of us honestly don't fit that ideal.

So, in a way, one of the things that the book explores is all of the ways that even if we don't identify as having this fixed identity of disability, there are ways that ableism kind of punishes all of us, just because most of us are existing outside of that ideal.

And even if we happen to be inside that ideal for a moment, we all are aging. And eventually, we're not in that tiny little hub of the ideal body.

**KRASKE:** You were part of a big family as a kid. You wrote about sharing bunk beds with your siblings and piling into the backseat of cars. What was it like growing up like that?

**TAUSSIG:** I had a great time, honestly. I'm the youngest of six kids. And I loved growing up in a family that was really busy and loud.

And, now I just had my first child. Otto was born in May of this year. And I'm thinking like, 'How did my parents possibly do this with six children?' I don't know how to recreate this for Otto at all.

But, for me, it was one of the most beautiful experiences of childhood. All of my siblings have three or four or seven kids, so they're definitely carrying that large family legacy on.

In 2020, Rebekah Taussig released her first book, and she and her husband, Micah Jones, welcomed their first child.

**KRASKE:** You write about how you didn't feel different from your siblings, even though you were disabled. Why was that, do you think?

**TAUSSIG:** Yeah, well, honestly, my family never really focused very much on my disability — for good or bad. I think that there are definitely enormous benefits to that. And there are some losses with that too. It took me a long time to start actually unpacking it for myself.

But when I was 3 I became paralyzed just from cancer treatments. And so that was sort of just like this seamless transition into, 'Now our youngest, you know, her body just moves differently.'

We didn't really focus so much on, on how that made me really different from my siblings. We kind of were all still just this group of tumbling around in the backseat of the car and the bunk beds, as you mentioned.

**KRASKE:** This is so interesting to me because you said you would physically pull yourself up to the top bunk, and your legs were all scabby from dragging yourself around. What do you recall when you look back on all that?

**TAUSSIG:** I think I felt really pretty empowered. I think I felt really comfortable.

But I loved my top bunk. It felt like I had earned it, you know, I didn't have it at first. And my brother moved on to his own room and I was like, 'Finally, the top one is mine.' So I wanted that space. It was coveted.

**KRASKE:** Could you describe how you pulled yourself up to that bunk?

**TAUSSIG:** My legs have a little bit of strength, but I really relied mostly on my arms. There was sort of like a ladder up the side of the bunk bed. And so I would really pull myself and then sort of prop myself up with my legs and then pull myself up to the next rung. And then eventually I would get far enough up that I could sort of like flop myself over the edge and I was on the top.

It didn't, it didn't feel like a struggle. And that's one of the shifts that kind of came to me as I got older was realizing the way that people saw me versus what it felt like actually to be in my body and to move in, in whatever way it made the most sense to me.

Taussig's memoir "Sitting Pretty" includes essays about the "rhythms and textures of what it means to live in a body that doesn’t fit."

**KRASKE:** Do you recall when that shift first began for you? Was there a moment when it hit you that people saw you differently?

**TAUSSIG:** Several moments. It was wave after wave where I had to slowly realize like, 'Oh, wow, no, I'm different. People look at me differently. People treat me differently.'

It was in stops and starts. I talked a little bit earlier about the representation of disability in stories and mostly I was just kind of saturated in the representation of bodies that weren't like mine. So when I started to equate, you know, notions of like what beauty is, or what growing up to be a powerful woman would look like, I started to realize that I didn't match those images. That was a big part of it for me was recognizing, 'Oh, I fit somewhere outside of this.'

# A Conversation about Ableism by Rebekah Taussig

<http://theconnectioncorner.com/journal/a-conversation-about-ableism>

**Let’s start here:** When I was a little girl, I believed that I was beautiful, valuable, and fully capable of contributing to the group. I made up dances, wore frilly dress-up gowns around town, and pretended I was married to the prince. I felt capable and dreamed big. The fact that I couldn’t walk – that I strapped braces to my legs and used a walker and a wheelchair – didn’t really factor into my evaluation of myself. At least, not at first. Very quickly, I began to believe different things about myself. I started to see myself as a burden on the people around me. Spending time with me cost something extra, and I wanted to spare people that high price. I started to believe I was ugly. No one would ever want to date me, let alone marry me. I began to see myself as weak and helpless. I would never be able to support myself, have a “real” job, or pay my own bills. The best I had to offer society was to encourage other people by being joyful despite my wheelchair. This was where I fit best.

**So this is my question:** How on earth did this happen? Why did these ideas take root? I was never bullied or abused. In fact, I grew up in a world of kindness and generosity – one where everyone knows you’re supposed to be nice to the disabled kid. I never once heard a person describe me as a “burden” or “ugly” or “weak.” (Well, maybe once. But once? Is that really enough to highjack a person’s entire sense of self?) In fact, people often used positive words to describe me, like “joyful” and “bright” and “inspirational.” By all accounts, I should have had a hearty sense of self-worth. So, what is this?

I ask, not just because I want to understand myself, but because I know I am not the only one who has experienced this. So many of us have grown up under spirit-crushing systems– racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, size-discrimination, ableism. These structures are buried deep into our cultural history and steal from us our sense of worth and power. This act of thievery can be loud and violent, or quiet and pervasive. There are ways these oppressive systems overlap, feed off each other, mirror one another, and there are also ways they remain uniquely distinct. As a white, cis-gendered, straight woman who grew up in a middle-class family, I won’t pretend to understand most of these structures intimately. Even in my paralyzed body, I carry a world of privilege, much of which I haven’t yet begun to understand. At the same time, nearly thirty years of paralysis has prompted some thoughts on this slippery, subtle, shifty little monster called ABLEISM.

In its most boiled-down, squished together, simplified form:

Ableism is the process of favoring nondisabled bodies while discriminating those that move, see, hear, process, or look differently. The application of this idea can morph into ten thousand shifting shapes, and for the world we live in today, it’s usually more subtle than overt cruelty. Some examples to get us started: the assumption that all those who are deaf would prefer to be hearing – the belief that walking down the aisle at your wedding is obviously preferable to moving down that aisle in a wheelchair – parents physically holding their children back as a person with a disability passes by – the assumption that a nondisabled person who chooses a partner with a disability is necessarily brave, strong, and especially good. All of these are different flashes of the same, oppressive structure. Ableism separates, isolates, assumes. It’s starved for imagination, creativity, curiosity.

An ableism metaphor to help make sense of this mess:

The concept of ableism is so deeply entwined in our culture, and, by extension, the wiring of my own self-perception, that sometimes it can be difficult for me to name. It helps me to picture ableism like an elaborate stage performance that we, as a culture, perform together. For most of us, we learn our parts as we go along. We pay attention to cues, we watch how the other characters interact with us, we see what happens when we step outside of our designated parts, and soon, we learn the precise parameters of the roles we play in this story. When you live inside of the story, it can be difficult to really see it. We begin to believe things like, “this is just how it is – this is how the world works,” forgetting that we are in charge of the stories we create. So, in the spirit of this month – our month of Disability Awareness – I want to take a step back with you – to attempt to work some of this through – to pin some of this slippery business down so we can examine it, process it, weigh it against our individual experiences, and hopefully, decide for ourselves – What is this, really?

When I pause, take a breath, get some distance, these are some of the ways I see ableism shaping the roles we play in the story:

* It is hard to see/resist something that has no name.

I am going to confess something to you: I had not heard of “ableism” until I read about it in a book a few years ago. I mean, I knew that I was uncomfortable in my own body, that people stared at me when I went out in public, that I was barred from many spaces by flights of stairs, narrow doorways, and cluttered aisles, but I internalized these experiences as evidence of my own inferiority. I was swimming in the omnipresent fumes of ableism, drinking it up through a straw, absorbing it through my skin, but still believed that the poison itself came from me. Unfortunately, I don’t think my response is surprising or rare. In general, ableism doesn’t show up in the forefront of our public conversations. In fact, when I did a Google search for “ableism” a couple of weeks ago, the first suggested search Google offered was “ableism isn’t real.” So this is where we start – not from the ground up, but from the boiling center below ground.When we refuse to acknowledge ableism as an oppressive structure, we tell a group of people that the inequality they experience is a result of the defects located in their individual bodies and minds. It says, “Sorry you’re inferior,” as it drapes a giant, white sheet over the external barriers impeding them. Might the absence of critical conversation – the silence surrounding ableism – be one of the ways that a girl with a disability comes to believe she is a burden on the people around her without anyone speaking the word?

* **Inaccessibility creates more than inconvenience.**

We live in physical spaces that exclude large portions of our people. Using a wheelchair, I understand one sliver of this. There are many ways that certain bodies are barred, but when I approach a building with stairs and no ramp, I see the words “CRIPPLES NOT WELCOME” painted across the front. Does this sound extreme? To me, it feels like regular, boring life. I am positive that the owners of these spaces would be appalled if someone scrawled these words across their doors, bathroom stalls, or parking spaces. That’s not the message they are consciously sending. But that’s the power of the force that remains unnamed – as a culture, we are so slow to recognize the manifestation of ableism.

The question I’m working through here is this: How does the uninviting design of our communities shape a person’s self-perception? I mean, really, what happens in a human brain when it moves through a world that shouts “You don’t belong here!” from the rooftops and in the streets. How might this person imagine herself as a contributing employee, parent, student, artist, consumer, vendor, or citizen in the very spaces that disregard her? There isn’t one answer. Everyone experiences these spaces differently, but I’m wondering – might the design of our communities be one of the ways that a person with a disability comes to believe she doesn’t fit without anyone speaking the word?

* **Kindness is complicated.**

In my experience, the vast majority of strangers I interact with are recklessly kind – racing to open a door for me, offering to help me put my chair together, making jokes about how I need a speeding ticket \*wink, wink\*. People want to reach out, connect, help. What a beautiful thing! The reverse of this – a world where no one offers to help with anything, ever – sounds lonely. And yet, these very gestures of kindness often leave me feeling so small. How do I explain this? Maybe this story will help: Shortly after I learned to drive a car by myself, I took a trip to the bookstore. I felt powerful and independent as I pushed myself up the curb-cut and toward the entrance. An older couple opened the first set of doors for me, so, by the time I got to the second set of doors, I was ahead of them. This time, I opened the door for them. As they passed through the door I held open, I heard the woman say to her husband, “She’s a proud little thing, isn’t she?” I had stepped outside the boundaries of my assigned role, and it stung like a slice through my belly.I long for the freedom to play a different role in the story. Maybe the people I meet would like that, too? But these parts haven’t been written into most of our scripts yet, and improv doesn’t always go well, especially if both parties aren’t on the same page. When I encounter strangers who insist on helping me, I feel forced to participate in a storyline that hinges on my dependency. Whether it is true or not, accepting help from strangers often feels like supporting a suffocating narrative of disability – one in which the crippled lady is always the recipient of aid from the non-disabled heroes on stage.

Does this sound like an unfair setup? I mean, forty-five seconds ago, I was telling you how uninviting and inaccessible many built environments are for people with disabilities, and now I’m telling you it doesn’t feel great when someone tries to help? It’s slippery, right? I hear it in my words, even as I type them. But here’s the question mark – what does it do to a person’s sense of power and worth to receive constant offers for assistance whenever they enter a public space? What would we begin to think of ourselves, for example, if every time we walked down the street, people approached us with a look of tender concern, a couple of bucks, and an offer to use their shower? There’s something nice about extending a hand, certainly, but there’s also something degrading about receiving it without request, no? Over and over and over again, unsolicited offers of aid send a very powerful message: when people look at you, they see helplessness.

It leaves me wondering – might these relentless acts of kindness be one of the ways that a person with a disability comes to believe she is powerless without anyone speaking the word?

* **And while we’re talking about being nice, completely ignoring a person’s disability isn’t.**

During a first date with a guy I had met online, I asked him, “What do you think about the fact that I use a wheelchair?” He answered quickly. “It’s not like it defines you.” Without pause, he said the words his script had taught him to be the kindest and most generous for this conversation. Instead of making me feel valued, though, it made me feel whitewashed, sanitized, invisible. I wanted to ask, “Am I only acceptable to you if we ignore the fact that I can’t walk?” This doesn’t work. My body is inextricably stitched into the person I am. When people say things like, “You’re too pretty to be in a wheelchair,” or “All I see when I look at you is a beautiful woman. I don’t even notice your wheelchair,” I think they believe they’re progressing beyond that ableist script. Instead, it folds directly back into the oppressive storyline that forbids beauty in the defect itself.

I understand how it happens – if you live in a community where disability is framed as tragic, sad, and inferior, then claiming not to see that so-called defect feels like a nice thing to say. Deep within our cultural understanding of what it means to be a human with a body, we position disability below ability and at odds with health, beauty, wholeness, and happiness. But I don’t need (or want!) my paralyzed legs to be erased in order to be seen as able, healthy, beautiful, whole, or happy.

Might this impulse to erase disability out of “kindness” be one of the ways that a person with a disabled body comes to believe she is inherently ugly without anyone speaking the word?

* **Good grief, is any form of kindness good enough for this woman?!**

When I remember the acts of kindness that stir me with genuine gratitude, I don’t think about people offering to hold a door or carry a bag for me. I think of the Kansas City organization that builds ramps for people who need access to their homes and my brother who connected me with them – my friend who used her connections with a medical supplies clinic to advocate for some of my wheelchair needs – the owners of a local café who installed a new mirror in their bathroom so I can actually see my face when I wash my hands in their sink.

When I imagine the most effective, long-lasting, empowering ways to offer help to a person with a disability, I think of all the people across my city who run businesses, manage grocery stores and restaurants, teach classes, drive buses, design buildings, work in hospitals and schools and churches, raise children, and on and on and on. What would it look like for these people to hire a person with a disability? To make their restaurant more accessible? To create a classroom space that invites physical and mental diversity? To talk with their kids about differences? Instead of entering the personal space of a person with a disability, what would it look like for all of us to make our corners of the world more accessible and inviting to those same people? When our spaces are made accessible, we are no longer forced into forever relying on the strangers around us. And, yes, I think there is always something miraculous and beautiful about the willingness to help out when someone is stretched thin. This is fundamentally different, however, than fostering a culture that shapes an entire people-group around the experience of helplessness and dependency.

In our ableist play metaphor, the occasional helpful hand does very little to expand the boundaries of the confining “disabled person” role. It may allow the helped person to conserve some energy, but it doesn’t change their actual position in the story. Becoming an advocate to change the set-designs, though? Arguing for a new script? Instead of minor and fleeting tweaks to a moment within the play, these are the kinds of acts that create fundamental changes to the story itself.

### What I’m trying to get at here:

What I’m circling around with all of these words layered on words – is this: Our work with “Disability Awareness” and “Disability Rights” can only go so far before we have to address the deep roots of ableism harvested in our culture. The majority of our communities are well-trained in “political correctness,” even as they are steeped in ableist thinking. The result of this confusing combination is a culture that says all the “right” things, while continuing to practice the marginalization of an entire people-group. I know this, because the little girl version of me grew up in a world that advertised itself as inclusive, tolerant, and aware, and I still grew into a self-loathing adult who saw herself as incapable and undesirable.

That is not to say that we haven’t made meaningful progress in our pursuit of disability rights. There is progress worth celebrating! Last year, for example, we paused in gratitude for the twenty-fifth anniversary of the ADA – a change in our legal system that brought tangible benefits to the lives of people with disabilities in the US. There are powerful advocates doing work, bit by bit, to contribute richer representation in media, create more accessible spaces in public and private sectors, prompt changes in our education and workforce systems. Nor do I intend to suggest that we shouldn’t continue to fight for more of our disability rights. More handicapped spaces, please! More interpreters, more employment programs, more affordable, accessible housing! All of this is gorgeous, powerful stuff. But somehow pursuing these legislative changes feels simpler or more straight-forward than undoing the tightly intertwined tenants of ableism. Ableism itself is the source of the problem – the reason we have to go in with our sledgehammers and perform damage control on our established architecture, education, and employment structures.

### Releasing our grip on the script long enough to make eye-contact:

As we go about fixing the tangible evidence of ableism, how do we dismantle ableism itself? It’s intimidating, isn’t it? To step into this mess? I think there must be many answers to this question. There has to be, right? To match the complexity? But from where I sit, I think this is the moment when we put down our scripts for just a second, look in each other’s faces, and *listen*.

And when I say listen, I don’t mean approaching a stranger in the parking lot, figurative clipboard in hand, with a list of questions designed to make them explain their disability to you. “What’d you do to yourself?” “What happened to you?” When I suggest listening, I imagine a planet where people with disabilities are allowed to tell the world who they are and what they need, instead of the other way around. I imagine someone pausing long enough to see my strength before they jump at the sight of my wheelchair. I imagine sharing my experiences with ableism without someone telling me why I shouldn’t be bothered by them. I imagine more stories that include disability. And not just more in volume, but more variety – we don’t need more stories about the Tragedy or the Inspiration. I imagine my younger self, making up dances in my dress-up clothes. What would have happened if my culture – my community – had rallied around my vision of myself and *listened*?

Because that’s one of the most defining characteristics of ableism, isn’t it? (And maybe most of these oppressive systems we experience as people?) Ableism doesn’t listen. It assumes, erases, ignores, pushes away. It takes an entire group of people loosely identified by one characteristic and blurs a thousand individual faces into one giant category of “other.”

To begin the work of undoing our ableist systems – to build a community on awareness, respect, and care – we create space for people. We forget ourselves long enough that we don’t feel defensive during someone else’s story. We let these new narratives fill us up and change the way we see what a human life can be. We take a gulp and recognize that, even as we strive for insight, we don’t fully understand yet.

As we engage in more and more conversations about ableism (and let’s do that, yeah?) let’s create so many new conversations about ableism that Google replaces the “ableism isn’t real” search with something new and true and awesome, like “ableism sucks – let’s knock it down, burn it to the ground, and build a sunflower and mint garden in its place”), let’s not forget the depth and breadth of the work we have ahead of us. As a culture, we’ve spent ages performing a very old, very established script. Can we be both patient and vigilant, practical and imaginative, kind and relentless, as we set to work to write an entirely different story?

# Rebekah Taussig Knows My Life.

by Elizabeth Wright

<https://medium.com/conscious-life/rebekah-taussig-knows-my-life-6a0f308fa586>

## A book review of “Sitting Pretty: the view from my ordinary resilient disabled body.”

“I know what it’s like to be yelled at across a parking lot, but my stories don’t seem to match with these catcalling anecdotes. If I were to tell my version of a man hollering at me — frantically yelling ‘DON’T FALL!!!’ across a parking lot — the group would droop or scoff or laugh at the absurdity.”

*Sitting Pretty: the view from my ordinary resilient disabled body* is Rebekah Taussig’s memoir of her life up till now. From the absorbing descriptions of her middle class upbringing, to the experience of “adulting” as a disabled women, this book made me want to yell a resounding “ME TOO” into the atmosphere. And this is what Taussig’s book helped me realise — we may live in different countries, have different backgrounds, different impairments (Taussig is a wheelchair user, I’m a prosthetic wearer), but what ableism does is cause the same issues and a whole host of feelings that only disabled women will ever understand.

**Taussig made me feel heard. She made me feel seen.**

There were three particular themes, amongst many, in *Sitting Pretty* that resonated explicitly with my experiences. Right down to specific moments in mine and Taussig’s lives that are so exacting and familiar.

Firstly, she talks about her childhood and the desperation to fit in, to be included, to be “one of the girls.” That was all I ever wanted as a limb different child, to be seen as one of the pack, an equal; let’s face it, I wanted to be one of the cool kids. I saw my 8 year old self stretching out to connect with an equally disconnected 8 year old Rebekah. Even as Taussig writes

“I saw all the girls jumping on each other in the water, easy and light, graceful and wild. I saw myself trying to act casual and chill, gripping the edge of the pool,”

so I saw my own chubby tanned face peering at my friends playing sports, or taking part in the end of year school performances.

**I desperately wanted to take part, but knew already, instinctively that I wouldn’t be allowed to.**

Secondly, the non-disabled gaze that locks us into a fear of failure. A fear driven by a need to prove that we are disabled enough. Or perhaps disabled too much. A chill went down my spine when I read Tuassig’s words,

“I try to ignore the weight of the man’s eyes on me, but I feel my hands start to shake. *Please just go away,* I beg him silently.”

Taussig describes the moment she had rejected a man’s offer of help for her to get in her car. He then stood there to watch her do her normal routine of transferring into her car and dismantling her wheelchair. This expectation of failure is always heavy on disabled people. Surely we can’t survive this world without the kindness and help of non-disabled. And if we reject that help, or even if we don’t, non-disabled people reserve the right to watch us.

**To observe us.**

To stare as though we are still performers in a freak show, except the stage is life and we have to perform every single day. I’ve been there multiple times, from the cashier who ripped the shopping bags out of my one hand to pack for me without even asking if I needed help, to the woman who came running out of a hotel screaming at me to not park in the disabled spot I had the legal right to park in.

**Our lives are steadily assessed and judged, and it seems we are constantly found wanting.**

Thirdly, the sexuality of a disabled woman and how it can’t sit comfortably in society’s mythology of womenhood. Again, there is that connection of understanding Taussig, that “uh-huh” moment. From where she talks about her sister being told to dress more modestly, whilst Taussig was allowed to dress however she wanted, to her never being asked when she would settle down and have children. There is an assumption made that as a disabled woman you won’t be seen as attractive to the opposite (or same) sex. That you could walk, hobble, push yourself down the street naked, and still not *arouse* a speck of sexual interest.

This asexualising bleeds into the narrative of marriage and motherhood. That non-negotiable life milestone for a non-disabled women. Many of my single and/or childless non-disabled women friends get asked all the time, “when are you going to have a baby?” I can count on one hand when I have been asked this — zero. Even when you enter relationships, and in Taussig’s case, get married, the baby question seems taboo. For disabled women the traditional women’s journey is out of bounds for us.

**And this is the twist, isn’t it?**

As much as non-disabled women have fought to be free of the bounds of tradition, disabled women are fighting daily to be given any choice at all. Some of us may want to be single and/or child-free, but many of us want to couple-up and experience pregnancy and motherhood as well.

Taussig’s writing is addictively descriptive. Often it felt that she had reached into my head and heart to pluck the pain, hurt, and fears out, to lay them on paper by way of her memories, thoughts and feelings.

**I absorbed this book.**

I’ve dog-eared nearly every page, because on nearly every page she has reminded me of my own life. She has inspired me to write more, speak more about my own experiences. Taussig knows the power of story (she has a doctorate in creative non-fiction after all), and she’s had years honing her memoir style through her wildly popular Instagram account — Sitting Pretty.

If you are a disabled women I highly recommend you read *Sitting Pretty*. If you are non-disabled person I highly recommend you read *Sitting Pretty*. Taussig’s memoir takes the mystique out of disability and brings the disabled woman’s lived experience crashing back to earth with humour and challenge. Honest and open, she has shown bravery to simply say it as it is — disabled women are invisible in this world, but we are here and we refuse to be ignored anymore.

**EXTRAS:**

Video interview with Atlanta History Center

<https://www.atlantahistorycenter.com/event/rebekah-taussig-in-conversation-with-virginia-prescott/#recording>

**READ-ALIKES:**

(from NoveList)

1. *The Pretty One* by Keah Brown

Reason: Online influencers and disability rights advocates share their perspectives in these witty memoirs. -- Autumn Winters

2. *Disability Visibility*

Reason: Both own voices books offer an engaging and accessible introduction to disability studies. Essay collection Disability Visibility anthologizes personal essays; Sitting Pretty is a memoir by a disabled author who also holds a PhD in the field. -- Autumn Winters

3. *The Reason I Jump* by Naoki Higashida

Reason: These books are candid, and they have the genres "autobiographies and memoirs" and "life stories -- facing adversity -- medical issues -- living with disabilities."

4.  *More Alike than Different* by David Egan

Reason: These books have the genres "autobiographies and memoirs" and "life stories -- facing adversity -- medical issues -- living with disabilities"; and the subjects "ableism," "people with disabilities," and "people with down syndrome."

5. *Still Living the Edges*

Reason: These books have the genres "life stories -- facing adversity -- medical issues -- living with disabilities" and "science writing -- medicine and health -- disabilities and disorders"; and the subjects "ableism," "barrier-free design," and "women with disabilities."

6. *Year of the Tiger* by Alice Wong

Reason: These books have the genres "essays" and "life stories -- facing adversity -- medical issues -- living with disabilities"; and the subjects "ableism," "disabilities," and "people with disabilities."

7.  *Young, Sick, and Invisible* by Ania Bula

Reason: These books are candid, and they have the genres "autobiographies and memoirs" and "life stories -- facing adversity -- medical issues -- living with disabilities"; and the subjects "ableism" and "people with disabilities."

8.  *Dear Marcus* by Jerry McGill

Reason: These books are engaging, and they have the genres "autobiographies and memoirs" and "life stories -- facing adversity -- medical issues -- living with disabilities"; and the subject "people with paraplegia."

9. *From the Periphery* by Pia Justesen

Reason: These books have the genres "life stories -- facing adversity -- medical issues -- living with disabilities" and "science writing -- medicine and health -- disabilities and disorders"; and the subjects "disability rights advocates," "ableism," and "barrier-free design."