

Book review

Milbrodt, Teresa (2022). *Sexy Like Us: Disability, Humor, and Sexuality*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.

Teresa Milbrodt's book *Sexy Like Us: Disability, Humor, and Sexuality* is my first encounter with disability studies and disabled sexuality as a field for humour, and, as a reviewer, I have no idea what to expect. I imagine the book would provide some insights into the images of the disabled in popular culture that I intend to research eventually, but I am not even close. *Sexy Like Us* is a unique narrative of an academic quest to build up the research material base – a very familiar occupation for myself, but also perhaps for many academics who venture upon a previously unexplored field of investigation. At the same time, it is a touching and very personal tale of a disabled person's journey through her life, which reveals the society's attitudes to disability as a state of otherness.

Teresa Milbrodt is a creative writer, disability scholar, and assistant professor at Roanoke College in Salem, Virginia, USA. She is author of three short story collections, a flash fiction collection, and a novel, as well as several critical articles in disability studies. She is a disabled person – and *Sexy Like Us* is an academic journey into the subject of disabled humour and sexual humour, combined with her first-hand experience of disability. Teresa Milbrodt is also a wonderful storyteller able to combine academic writing with intimate diary style to the best advantage of both herself and her audience. The personal diary-type entries (provided in italics for clear distinction) work as illustrations of the scientific ideas developed in the academic part of the text, thus enriching research with the element of humanist, emotional, real-life experiences, which is not a frequent case in scholarship. Or so I think before embarking on the acquaintance with Teresa and her style – yet very quickly I learn that the practice is rather common in disability research, as “many disability studies texts include elements of memoir, in which scholars relate their own experiences with disability back to the discipline, moulding theory into the largest of mirrors” (p. 21). As I have not read those other authors, I cannot confirm it, but somewhere in mid-Chapter 1 I catch myself looking forward to the intermittences of personal stories told by a perfect storyteller that the Teresa Milbrodt seems to be – stories narrated with detachment, in chronological order, but with very satisfactory punchlines.

The author claims that her text

is a playful and provocative perusal of cultural expressions developed by disabled people and in disability communities. The chapters explore ways that disabled people perceive their bodyminds, and how their creative and comic acts crash, collide, or collaborate with perceptions of disability and sexuality in literature and dominant culture (p. 21).

And it is a text where the grammar of present tense is the dominant style: after a while it becomes obvious that this stylistic solution is highly effective for emphasising the urgency of the researched subject for the author herself and conveying the importance of it for the reader. Present tense brings the reader next to the author and into her life; it seems impossible and even rude to dismiss the invitation of the book to take up the conversational manner for the review –

any other approach would kill the immediacy of experience and reflection that *Sexy Like Us* bestows on its reader and reviewer. So I continue in what seems to me to be a reply to Teresa Milbrodt.

Sexy Like Us consists of six chapters connected by five intermittent texts called “Meditations” and is finished with an epilogue. Each chapter is devoted to a different aspect of disability humour; each meditation dwells on the subject of the preceding chapter from the personal experience of the author.

The Introduction provides the background of the author’s interest in the themes of disability humour and presents her organisational problem, which is finding people who would be willing to talk about their disability and even joke about “what might seem to outsiders to be the most cheerless of subjects” (p. xii). The introduction hints at the writing style of the study – personal, easy to follow, yet highly competent and precise.

Chapter 1 is a long introduction into the world of the disabled and their relation with humour, as well as the main concerns with disability as seen through the eyes of TABs – “temporarily able-bodied individuals” (i.e. the author’s preferred term for the non-disabled people). It begins with the description of the author’s visual disability that she has been born with, and the fact that as a child she considered having one blind eye cool (p. 3). The chapter is significant as it presents the most frequent social observations about disability: “Disability is assumed to be an identity that must be swept under the rug, concealed, and/or derided in favour of the mythological ‘normal’ body” (McRuer, 2017, p. 398–99); “Disability is the phantom reminder of human fragility, the fact we can break” (Shakespeare, 1999, p. 49). The book will obviously attempt to question those beliefs as well as standard ideas about health, fitness, and normality.

The first intermittent text, “Meditation 1”, dwells on the absence that moulds a personality – in the author’s case, the absence of vision in her right eye. It is this disability that has turned her into what she is, namely a special feature that she has grown up to define herself by. The text consists of very personal expositions of the problems the author encountered due to her impairment – and a philosophical reflection on how the world would have been different if she was not impaired, and whether she would wish to be ‘normal’. The quote from the poet Rumi “The wound is the place where the light enters you” (p. 28) provided in the text seems to be the defining motto of Teresa’s life and work.

Chapter 2 begins with the discussion of the terminological problems of naming the disabled people and what terms could be used, when, and by whom (e.g. are the terms *cripple*, *crip* really derogatory, or could they be used in certain contexts?). A very extensive exploration of the terminology is concluded with the claim that the negative meanings associated with the mentioned terms is an age-old tradition that might be difficult to get rid of, but using them “as a form of joking is part of a larger movement to throw a wrench in the gears of dominant cultural perceptions of disability” (p. 56).

“Meditation 2”, “On blindness”, is a reflection on whose life is worth living: Is a disabled person less worth than an abled one? The author recalls a very recent situation with the pandemic, with shortage of various tools, such as respirators, when doctors had to make the hard decisions about whose life was more worthy, and it was a source of worry for many disabled people. The chapter is about the curse of the people in marginalised groups who live with the permanent task of proving themselves. It evolves into a reflection of the different perception of the world that blind people have and the importance of appearing to have a strong vision in this world where it is more important to appear than to be (here I think of Guy Debord and the society of the spectacle; Debord, 1967), and the cultural narrative about blindness that pervades Western culture.

Chapter 3 finally arrives to the subject of “crip humour”. This part reviews the functions of comic “crip humour” storytelling, analysing what functions telling jokes about disabled perform for the disabled themselves. The author notes several of these, such as integrating the disabled into the social environment (p. 66), creating a space of understanding between individuals (p. 67), debunking commonly held stereotypes (p. 67), dispelling ableist beliefs regarding the limited capabilities of disabled individuals (p. 78), twisting the notion of “disability” through jokes, using humour as a social corrective (p. 88), and many others. The author provides numerous examples of real-life situations that came about as jokes, or actual jokes, explaining how their humour performs one or another function relating the world of the disabled with the world of the able people. As reader and reviewer, I cannot actually break away from the text; one story is more interesting than another, and it goes on and on.

The chapter confirms the idea that for humour, context is a very important parameter: disabled jokes are received differently in the environment of other disabled people and in the environment of TABs (p. 73). As a researcher of irony, I cannot agree more - and think of Will Smith, slapping the comedian Chris Rock in the Oscar ceremony of 2022 for making an inappropriate joke on his wife Jada Pinkett-Smith. Referring to the actress’s health disorder in front of the global audience turned out to be a poor joke, first of all, because of the public exposure of an issue that she had been trying to avoid displaying; secondly, Chris Rock and Jada Pinkett-Smith are on the different sides of the barricades, so to speak, when it comes to that particular health issue the joke was about, so the comedian’s act would have been insensitive in any case.

“Meditation 3” is “On childhood”, referring to the disability of the author since her early days at school, how she had to learn to deal with her otherness, being different in the world of ‘normal’ kids – and a reflection on the difficulties that other disabled children not privileged to be white and middle-class, had. It is that part of the text where I notice the ‘refrain’ that seems to link the author’s personal quest for answers about her worsening condition (her seeing eye is deteriorating) and her development as a scholar and academic. The repetition of the phrase “And I know my story isn’t over” is a very literary means of knitting all elements of the book together.

Chapter 4 discusses the sexuality issues of disabled people, pointing out the general uneasiness of the ‘normal’ world about the sexual needs of the disabled. It is one of the reasons why the author finds it difficult to locate disabled people who would be willing to share their stories and has to search for them online. The other reason is much more predictable: many physical spaces will not be adjusted to disabled people, such as wheelchair users. Therefore, social networks and online communities are the most popular spaces for finding other disabled people, sharing stories or simply spreading “crip humour” and building community. On the other hand, internet use in the case of disability might be yet another privilege that not all disabled people can enjoy, for not all websites are adjusted for all types of disability – thus becoming reserved for those who may afford it financially, as in paying the internet use bill, but also for those who can afford assistance for the use of internet, if the required sources are not adjusted for the disabled people. The discussion evokes Castells’ (1998) claim that, differently from a popular belief about social equality that the internet has brought, the network society is yet another form of social hierarchy. The analytical part of the chapter is focused on the texts of four disabled bloggers who discuss their sexuality in their publicly accessible blogs. The author analyses their writing, observing and pointing out the meanings of disabled life and humour that she discerns in the texts.

“Meditation 4”, “On metaphor”, is a reflection on the metaphors about blindness and deafness as expressions of counter-states to a universal ‘natural’ body that does not include a disabled body, which is a natural state to some disabled people. It is a text about linguistic norms that limit the human perception of phenomena, and a contemplation on how the conscious effort

to refuse those norms could change the perception of the disabled people and disability in general. It also discusses the habit of representing disabled people in literature as symbols of some unacceptable idea and then eliminating them (by way of death or cast out of society), which is supposed to erase the social ill they were meant to symbolise. In this way, the disabled people are not characters but props, and this does not help the society to accept disability as a form of life, but on the contrary, makes it seem like a deficiency that should be corrected. Here I remember examples of the ‘good practice’ (they are not discussed in the book), such as the films *The Intouchables* (Nakache, 2011) and *Breathe* (Serkis, 2017), where disabled characters take the main role, and both stories are based on real-life events.

Chapter 5 discusses online performances of disabled comics, searching for their sex jokes and trying to counter the myth of “disabled sex” being “a deviant spectacle” (p. 142). The author is echoing the discussion raised by Gilbert (2004, p. 47) who points to the tradition of the comic as the “wise fool”, who is a cultural critic, but “a reflector rather than a reformer”, highlighting problems within a culture but not necessarily shifting norms (p. 143). The analytical part of the chapter looks into a number of sexual jokes found on a website operated by a wheelchair user, providing a social reading of the jokes in terms of power relations that the jokes seem to illustrate. The author distinguishes two groups of joke authorship: those broadcast by able people, and those broadcast by the disabled. It seems to be the chapter that responds to the main theme of the book – sexual jokes about disabled people by the disabled themselves – most fully.

“Meditation 5”, “On sexuality”, begins with the story of Drew, one of the respondents I have already met at the beginning of the book, and his girlfriend. Their promise to tell about their sex life to Teresa Milbrodt dissolves smoothly into the author’s own observations on disabled sexuality. The most valuable part of the text is the account on the task that the author’s disability studies professor made for the students: the academic did not think it worthy for all students to ‘fake disability’ for a week or any other period of time sitting in a wheelchair or placing a patch on their eyes. Instead, the students had to plan a date with a disabled person – which involved solving real problems disabled people encounter in the real world, such as getting to the place of the date by public transport, finding out whether the restaurant had steps at the entrance, if it had large-print or braille menus, if there was a bar along the wall at the bathroom to help the person to use the toilet, and dozens of other details. The quest was not only a realistic exercise, but a lot more – it created the possibility for all students to “think of disabled people as highly date-worthy individuals” (p. 191).

Chapter 6 looks into disability through the lens of burlesque performance, as it is one of the types of comedy that seems not to shy away from certain body issues (such as, in this case, the sexuality of disabled bodies). The author found an online theatre company – Vancouver’s *Realwheels* – composed of professional and community actors with disabilities who had recently produced a show that included burlesque performances, *Sexy Voices* (p. 193). The show invites audiences “to stare at the actors, listen to their stories, and find shared understanding” (p. 194). The chapter includes one of the most touching stories – the story of a disabled wheelchair user who performs a strip in the costume of a mermaid (pp. 215-216). The description and the analysis of the performance create an unexpectedly poetic yet thought-provoking image of a disabled woman who finds freedom of movement despite her disability: like a mermaid, she cannot walk but she is able to dive, so the sea environment becomes her space of liberation. The description of the mermaid costume and the symbolism of the performance create a very feminine and aesthetic image of disability that is, at the same time, a powerful statement.

The Epilogue is a personal tale, as it should be – an appropriate ending of a book that reads like a diary: the progressing cataract of the author and how it is attempted to be treated with a “very large contact lens”. It contains another beautiful story that causes a lot of reflection in me, as a ‘first-world’ resident: it is a story about a seven-day clinic in Ethiopia where

ophthalmologists perform hundreds of cataract operations daily. The patients and their families camp in the courtyard of the clinic with their tents and blankets – after the 4-minute eye surgery they must be examined every day for a week to see if the healing is fine and if there are no infections (pp. 232-233). Patients laugh and cry and dance in the new light of their life that has just opened for their eyes after the operation, and the family members are happy about their relatives who will now be able to take care of their farms and their animals – and I, as reader and as reviewer, together with the author, are left thinking about the idea of what is a privilege and how disability is far from being the single thing that defines the framework of one's life.

The book is, in fact, a worthy attempt of bridging the gap between the two worlds – the world of the able people, and those who have a disability. Even though the difference between the two social groups is continuously reinforced in the text, by using the term TABs for the able, and speaking of them as the 'outsiders' of the disabled world (e.g., p. 155), yet the book does manage to provide glimpses into the quotidian life of the impaired people, especially those parts of the text where personal stories of the author's respondents are told, or the Meditation chapters that tell the author's personal experiences. Those parts provide lots of small details about the difficulties that the disabled people face in the world of the 'normal', encouraging the able to perceive the otherness of the disabled. It produces more understanding and empathy, and it is, to my mind, the main humanistic value of the book.

As for its academic dimension, *Sexy Like Us* is an informative and extensive analytical development of disabled sexuality humour that adds to the field of humour studies in a rather important way. It must be noted that most of the observation and 'field-work' performed by Teresa Milbrodt with regard to sexuality and humour of disabled queer and black individuals have been done for the first time ever. The text should be praised for its analysis of jokes and humour forms, for its well-wrought balance between the academic and the personal formats, for concise information on certain forms of humour, such as the burlesque.

To conclude, *Sexy Like Us: Disability, Humour, and Sexuality* is an advisable read for everybody, not just the academic audience, as it is well-written, easy to read, and discusses issues that are increasingly important for contemporary society. Teresa Milbrodt claims she does not mean the book to supply answers, but to keep asking questions (p. 10). The ones she asks encourages us to reflect on our attitudes towards disability and disabled people. We must all learn how to be around them so that the gap between us and them would begin to shrink. Then, perhaps, we may learn how to be a more humanistic, diverse, and open-minded community.

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