

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**Harilyn Rousso.** *Don't Call Me Inspirational: A Disabled Feminist Talks Back.* Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2013. xiii + 209 pp. \$74.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4399-0936-2; \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-4399-0937-9; \$24.95 (electronic), ISBN 978-1-4399-0938-6.

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**Commissioned by** Iain C. Hutchison (University of Glasgow)

Harilyn Rousso's book *Don't Call Me Inspirational: A Disabled Feminist Talks Back* is part memoir and part verbal collage. The author uses short stories and vignettes to create a loosely themed assemblage of various themes and life experiences, akin to the visual art projects that she mentions in the preface. Because of this comparison to collage, she encourages the reader to skip around through the various sections as they desire and to feel free to disrupt the chronology.

The book is organized by larger themes with several short stories in each section. It begins with an essay, "Who's Harilyn?," that orients the reader by giving a brief introduction to Rousso's life as a disabled woman growing up in the 1950s in New York City. She next guides us to the circumstances of her birth that resulted in her impairment, her delayed diagnosis of cerebral palsy (CP), and the impact that CP has had throughout her life. She presents these narratives in a style that resembles the transcription of an oral story. Many of the vignettes have a similar feel, while others feel more akin to reading a personal journal entry filled with emotion and nuance.

The book continues with the somewhat chronologically arranged themes "Close Encounters With the Clueless," "On Leaving Home," "On Not Looking in the Mirror," "What's a Woman?," and ending with "Why Claim Disability?" The entire work gives snapshots of the intersections of disability, girlhood/womanhood, and ed-

ucation, while also pointing out Rousso's privilege as a highly educated white woman. She uses her positionality in order to highlight structural inequalities that exist, for example, with poor disabled women of color.

Throughout the book, Rousso wrestles with issues of identity formation and development. This in turn leads to a discussion of the impact of language on identity categories and performance. She writes, "it is one thing to be labeled by others and quite another to label yourself" (p. 193). This is particularly evident in regards to feminism, sexuality, impairment and the medicalization of non-normative bodies, and disability identity. She calls attention to the various ways in which both bodies and identities are dichotomized in society: for instance, abled versus disabled, high versus low functioning, or sexual versus asexual. While she does not provide a direct critique of society's tendency to truncate identities to either/or options, the narratives provide space for the reader to begin questioning these supposedly immutable categories.

Rousso's writing style is accessible to a non-academic audience as it is free of scholarly jargon and allows various topics to be discussed succinctly. Because of this, her book stands as a useful example of how to create a work that is easy to read by a lay audience while still being both theoretically rich and engaging.

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