Sitting Pretty
Rebekah Taussig

HarperOne
2020
256 pages
ISBN: 978-00762936790

Disability Health

Summary

Born in Manhattan, Kansas, in the mid-1980s, Rebekah Taussig was 14 months old when she was diagnosed with a malignant cancer that attacked her spine. Two years of intense treatment left her cancer-free but paralyzed from the waist down. Taussig's *Sitting Pretty* is a "memoir-in-essays" spanning personal stories and family histories, offering "a fierce and fabulous revision to entrenched ableist scripts" (*Kirkus Reviews*) through "spunky, self-aware wit, combined with education that never feels didactic" (speaker and disability rights activist Emily Ladau).

Questions

1. In the first essay of *Sitting Pretty*, "What's the Problem?", Taussig explores the complexity of the word "ableism" and the ways in which it "seems to shut off curiosity—it sounds familiar enough that we're confident we already, pretty much, understand it" (p. 8). How would you have defined ableism before you read this book? Did that definition change for you as you read? What was important in your original understanding of ableism? What was missing from it?
2. In the same essay, Taussig writes about her older brother, David. Despite growing up beside each other, "one bunk over, one seat behind, just across the table" (p. 6), a chasm widens between his memories of their childhood and her own. How would you describe that chasm? Think about the people you have grown up alongside: siblings, cousins, friends. What is your favorite story about them? How might they tell the same story? What stories might be missing from their knowledge of you? What questions might you ask them to uncover stories that you might not know?
3. Across the collection, Taussig confronts systems that shape our histories and our culture—racism, sexism, ageism, classism, homophobia, size discrimination, housing discrimination. In doing so, she names the many ways in which those systems intersect, isolate, limit, and prescribe: the way they restrict things to something they "should" be rather than freeing people to imagine what "could" be. Can you think of some examples of this from the book? What about something in your own life, or in the life of someone you know, that is (or has been) limited to what "should" be rather than would "could" be? Who or what do you think framed that thinking?
4. In the essay, "An Ordinary Unimaginable Love Story," Taussig pens a tender meditation on love and the structures that attempt to define it. "Getting married meant an ostentatious wedding where I didn't feel present or real—it was trying to fit into a role I'd seen play out

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countless times in stories that didn't represent me…. Was there a way to build our own structure? To reimagine what two people can be to each other? To wipe the slate clean and create something from scratch?" (p. 48) Think about the people you love. What roles do you hold for each other? How do you honor each other's distinct selves? What unique rituals, habits, rhythms, or practices of care have you co-created?

5. In the same essay, Taussig traces her adolescent search for love: being disabled and longing for a love and a wedding like the kind depicted in the romantic comedies she grew up watching in the early 2000s. Think about the stories you grew up watching, hearing, absorbing. Did those stories have any kind of impact on what you imagined for your own life story? What kind of story do you wish you could have seen?
6. In the essay "Feminist Pool Party," Taussig unpacks the ways in which disability is often left out of feminist discourse, pushing back against the exclusivity of mainstream feminist spaces. How would you have described feminism before reading this essay? Did your idea of feminism change as you read? How does Taussig describe the relationships between gender and bodies? Between desire and selfhood?
7. Taussig writes often about the importance of imagination and curiosity in expanding access, choice, and opportunity for those who have been historically marginalized. "This is the wild emancipation I wish for all of us…a world that instead strives to invite more, include more, imagine more" (p. 17). Can you think of ways to apply this in your community?
8. In the essay, "More Than a Defect," Taussig shares a glimpse of her first year teaching in a high school classroom. In that classroom—and for her readers—she introduces two lenses through which people perceive disability: the medical model and the social model. Were either of these models familiar to you? When you think about the places you visit in your day-to-day life—your office, your local grocery store, a nearby park—which model do you think shaped those places? What might this reveal about your world? About who has decision-making power within it?
9. In the essays "More Than a Defect," "The Real Citizens of Life," and "The Price of Your Body," Taussig draws our attention to the common categories of "disabled" and "not disabled," and asks us to examine the limitations of those categories. What are some of those limitations? Why might those terms come up short? If we think about disability as a social process rather than a human category, how might we re-examine our own assumptions about disability?

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10. Taussig's collection draws from years of writing and thoughts shared through her Instagram account, @sitting_pretty. Were there any moments in the book that felt particularly visual or scenic to you? How do you think your reading of these essays would have changed if you had experienced them through the medium of social media? Through images?
11. In one of the last essays of the collection, "The Complications of Kindness," Taussig writes about the many ways in which "being kind" and its close cousin, "being nice," can flatten the experiences of disabled people into ableist narratives of victimhood or otherness. Did this essay disrupt your understanding of kindness? Have you experienced different types of kindness in your life (some welcome, some unwelcome)?
12. In an introduction to an interview with Taussig for the National Endowment for the Arts *Art Works* podcast, Josephine Reed describes the tone of *Sitting Pretty* as "conversational...mak[ing] it feel as though you're talking with a very smart, funny, and thoughtful friend." Do you agree? If not, why not? If so, in what ways did this conversational style of writing affect how you experienced—or related to—the essays?
13. Across the book, Taussig tells a few of the same stories from different angles: the dissolution of her first marriage; a taxing search for accessible affordable housing as a single woman in Kansas City; the predictable tempo of her father's daily commute. Why might Taussig keep coming back to these stories in different ways? Can you think of any other moments in the book where this kind of telling and retelling occurs?
14. At the end of the book, Taussig includes a short section titled "Postscript," in which she shares a few brief updates from her life in the year after her book manuscript was submitted. Did the addition of a postscript enhance or change your experience of the book?

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