

Accidents Of Nature



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Synopsis

I'm in the middle of a full-blown spaz-attack, and I don't care. I don't care at all. At home I always try to act normal, and spaz-attacks definitely aren't normal. Here, people understand. They know a spaz-attack signals that I'm excited. They're excited too, so they squeal with me; some even spaz on purpose, if you can call that spazzing . . . An unforgettable coming-of-age novel about what it's like to live with a physical disability

It's the summer of 1970. Seventeen-year-old Jean has cerebral palsy, but she's always believed she's just the same as everyone else. She's never really known another disabled person before she arrives at Camp Courage. As Jean joins a community unlike any she has ever imagined, she comes to question her old beliefs and look at the world in a new light. The camp session is only ten days long, but that may be all it takes to change a life forever.

Henry Holt published Harriet McBryde Johnson's adult memoir, *Too Late to Die Young*, in April 2005. Ms. Johnson has been featured in *The New York Times Magazine* and has been an activist for disability rights for many years.

Book Information

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Age Range: 12 - 18 years

Grade Level: 7 - 12

Customer Reviews

Grade 9 Up It is August, 1970, and 17-year-old Jean attends Camp Courage, labeled Crip Camp by her new friend and cabinmate, Sara. Because she has cerebral palsy, Jean depends on others for

many things, but she has always felt part of the normal world. This view changes as she sees herself through Sara's eyes. Sara, an incredibly intelligent, thoughtful teen, talks openly about what it's like to have a disability, as she herself is in a wheelchair. She maintains that no matter what those who are able-bodied think about their efforts to be helpful, they'll never really get it. Nowhere is this better depicted than in the skit that Sara writes for Jean and their bunkmates to perform in front of the entire camp. Through Sara's fierce creativity, the skit turns everything upside down, showing a telethon parody in which the normal people are advocated for, pitied as not being more like the crips. The skit gets them into trouble, but it proves a point. Jean is forever changed by Sara, knowing that with her she can truly be herself. Issues of race, feminism, identity, and sexuality are looked at as well, all relating to Sara's question, What would happen if we could find our own power? This book is smart and honest, funny and eye-opening. A must-read. Tracy Karbel, Glenside Public Library District, Glendale Heights, IL Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Gr. 8-11. Seventeen-year-old Jean, who "has never let [cerebral palsy] hold her back," has spent her whole life trying to minimize her differences. Then she attends Camp Courage, a retreat for the disabled, where she forms an alliance with a wheelchair-bound firebrand named Sara, who subversively shuns "Norm" society's palaver about overcoming obstacles: "Say it loud, 'I'm crippled and proud!'" Unlike Ron Koertge's *Stoner & Spaz* (2002), also about a teen with CP, the characters here, especially caustic, diatribe-prone Sara, are present primarily to advance lines of debate, and the novel's 1970 setting will leave many teens wondering how philosophies about disability may have evolved. Still, readers will grow fond of Jean as, nudged by vibrant friends, she trades pious striving for empowering irreverence and struggles to reconcile yearnings to fit in with "oddly thrilling" new ideas: "Surely it makes sense to try to become as normal as possible. But what if normal isn't the only way to be?" Jennifer Mattson Copyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved

"Accidents of Nature" Harriet McBryde Johnson Henry Hole & Co. New York Review by Taylor and Michael Bailey It is not easy to place "Accidents of Nature" into a neat category. Is it a novel for young adults? A treatise on disability culture? Or, simply, a well-crafted story of how one woman learns that, by accepting others, she comes to accept herself? The basic tale is simple. Jean, a 17-year-old woman with Cerebral Palsy, has always attended school with "normal" classmates. Her protective family has done everything possible to ignore Jean's differences and provide her with all

the trappings of life without a disability. Jean confronts some very real truths about herself, her disability, and her connection to other people with disabilities when she faces a week of summer camp. The typically named "Camp Courage" caters entirely to people with disabilities and it is there she must deal with during her week away from family, home and her regular circle of "friends." We read this book with care. Partly because it is a good read and partly because our daughter/sister is 18-years-old and is a person with Down syndrome. Like the character, Jean, from the book, she has always been in "regular" classrooms and had school friends with no disabilities. What we have learned is that her friendships only go so far. Her "friends," like Jean's, only pursue her, or tolerate her, within the bounds of school. Although no one is actually mean to her, it is clear to everyone that she is different and that there are limits on how much time and energy her classmates are willing to devote. And, like Jean, she has learned a lot about herself by going to a place called Mt. Hood Kiwanis Camp, which, like the fictional "Camp Courage" is for people with disabilities only. Jean has been exposed to politically correct people and circumstance. So she is quite shocked when she meets Sara. Sara calls the camp "Crip Camp" and promptly labels Jean as "Spazzo." Jean is quite distressed by these characterizations and her fellow campers whose facial deformities, speech, lack of coordination and odd behavior shock and, at the same time, intrigue her. Throughout her week at Crip Camp Jean is exposed to "the world according to Sara." Sara ridicules the notion of charity, the pomposity of the camps sponsors and the whole culture of "do-gooders." Sara revels in her disability. She also manages to get poor Jean into a lot of hot water with her comments and misbehavior. As the week moves along Jean comes to see more and more that Sara's seemingly mocking and tasteless behavior carries with it a seed of truth that no one has ever expressed before in her presence. It becomes clear to Jean that, like it or not, Sara is telling the truth and that she, Jean, has a mysterious connection with all the other campers that regular school, determined parents and a blind eye cannot erase. Jean finds, at camp, a window on a whole new view of life that makes her happier and sadder, wiser and more curious and, mostly, more at peace with herself and the truth of her place in the universe. As our family member moves into the world of young adulthood we see her experiencing some of the same things as Jean. To her and her pals with Down syndrome they are the "Downers." They like the "Down syndrome girls supper club" and other disabled-only shenanigans they cook up. She moves about quite skillfully in the world of the temporarily able-bodied but finds her real friends, the people who understand, the people she can be goofy with, among her peers with disabilities. This book is not anti-inclusion. Quite the opposite. Jean learns that her life in the "real world" will never be real if it is based on a paradigm of rigid segregation from people like herself, or if she is only and always treated as some kind of exhibit that

needs to be treated courteously but is never afforded a real place in the human family. We were struck by what a well-established character Jean is. Her interaction with Sara is the catalyst for self-discovery. Jean, through the roguish character of Sara, is altered profoundly. The new discoveries she makes mature and change her in ways she had never considered. This story is funny and sad and clear and obscure and, above all, wise. If you have a family member with a disability this book will awaken you to the fact that they are fully endowed human beings. People with their own inside jokes, bitterness and point of view. The book is a joy to read for anyone. And, who knows, perhaps it will cause you, like Sara, to open your imagination to a complex and complete world, a world based on truth and not perched precariously on the edge of an artificially created world of telethons, charity and good intentions which, inevitably lead to isolation and artificial trappings. It is a conclusion important to every young person and especially young adults with disabilities longing to find a path in life that is right for them.

Great breezy read-- good for young adults or older ones too. Clear portrayal of teen issues with new experiences, dealing with differences & a glimpse back at 1960-70's life.

A different point of view than we get from fundraising telethon presenters. This is the person with disabilities point of view. The need for thinking outside the box for ways they can "do it myself" and avoiding pity.

It was a gift to my grandson. He was completely satisfied with it.

This novel is fresh and unique, and will open your mind and your eyes to a different way of viewing the world. Like much of her work in the disability rights arena, and her essays, Harriet McBryde Johnson challenges traditional notions of normality. She may also be giving us a peek into what she, herself, was like as a teenager--fiercely intelligent, independent, and a bit of a troublemaker. That alone is worth the price of admission.

Harriet McBryde Johnson's passing should be mourned for many reasons, but her chronicled life and spirit live on in her writings. Everyone should read this book just simply to learn the love that Harriet had just for being alive and the adventures that each circumstance presented her with everyday. Such a wonderful person that will be missed each day.

Great book, it is a book that gives a perspective how people with disabilities feel and have to interact with the world.

The following is excerpted from my blog, Bums & Bellybuttons. (bumsandbellybuttons.com) Jean is a "Crip in Norm clothing", at least according to her cabin-mate, Sara, a Camp Courage veteran bent on revolution. Jean has done the telethon circuit, attends Norm school, has Norm friends, and is somewhat adrift among other disabled people. Sara, on the other hand, has always attended a "Crip" school, but will be transitioning to a Norm school for the coming year. Sara's ideas about disabled people and their place in the world make Jean's head spin. To me, Jean and Sara are two sides to the same coin. Jean represents the disabled self before she comes to the realization that she is different from those she loves, and that, despite her numerous abilities, she will always be set apart. Sara is the disabled self after she has had this realization, has accepted herself, and now refuses to be limited by others' perceptions of her.

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