

Brave writing

Charlotte Simmonds

The Walking Stick Tree

Trish Harris
Escalator Press, \$35.00,
ISBN 9780994118646

A Small Blue Thing

Julie Hanify
Submarine, \$35.00,
ISBN 9780994123770

The Case of the Missing Body

Jenny Powell
Otago University Press, \$30.00,
ISBN 9781877578311

What Does the Sea Sound Like?

Evie Mahoney
Mary Egan Publishing, \$30.00,
ISBN 9780473367718

My friend Uther once called a play *A Show About Superheroes*, partly as a ploy to get non-theatre people into theatres, under the logic that there are people who will go to anything if it is about superheroes. Similarly, there are people who will read any book on certain topics. This is how disability memoirs do so well and how companies like Jessica Kingsley Publishers (JKP), publishing solely on Autism Spectrum Disorders, can churn out so many books and end up making far more money than publishers with a wider subject range. They are selling to niche audiences, but audiences which aren't necessarily avid readers or literature lovers. And, just as the readers of disability memoirs may read a book solely because it describes an experience that affects them or a loved one, the authors of disability memoirs often have no other qualifica-

tion for becoming an author than their experience of disability. The majority of disability books are bad. But, being one of these people who will read any book on a certain topic myself, I understand when reading such books that I am not reading for the aesthetic enjoyment obtained from poetry. I am reading purely for the content, no matter how poorly presented.

It is a great pleasure, then, to be given three New Zealand disability memoirs all written by writers. Although not publishing with an established disability book factory may mean that these memoirs do not sell millions of copies and go into hundreds of reprints, this probably also guarantees them an audience outside that of people who would have read the books simply for the topic, and will not consign them to the Whitcoulls bargain bins a year on from publication. I hope that these books will find audiences who read them also for their literary value.

Trish Harris's *The Walking Stick Tree* is the most traditional disability memoir. This relates her experience of living with rheumatoid arthritis, an autoimmune disorder which, in Harris's case, is visible and very physically limiting. In her 50s at the time of writing, she also chronicles the changes that have taken place in New Zealand society and culture in terms of how disability is perceived and reacted to or responded to, and the changing obstacles and barriers we, as a society, have both put up and taken down. Although rheumatoid arthritis is specific, this memoir is the one with the most universal applicabil-

ity. Everyone deals with pain and loss. Short essays intermingle with Harris's story. Harris has mastered the form of the personal essay well, and it is these essays that take the book beyond an account of merely rheumatoid arthritis and into contemplative reflection with broader relevance.

Harris has also neatly achieved the perfect balance between the two conflicting positions commonly at war in disability stories: "Look how different I am to you and how much harder my life is than yours" and "Look how similar I am to you and how much we have in common as human beings". Perhaps the meditative feelings of balance and tranquillity that appear in her writing come precisely through battling these two sides for so many years. Of her school-aged self, Harris writes: "I wanted desperately, often to my own detriment, to be the same as my peers. I wanted to have our similarities affirmed because I lived in a world where the differences were constantly highlighted" Of herself in her 20s, she writes: "I had my own preferences for a first encounter and that was to find what we had in common, not our differences." And she writes again: "Where I didn't want to belong was also very clear: with other people with disabilities", before going on to discuss the ambivalence everyone has to face when forming their identity, but which is much more keenly felt for those whose differences are more pronounced.

Are the things that make you different the things that alienate you, and do you reject those features in an attempt to be more like everyone else, or are the things that make you different the things that make you interesting, unique, an individual? While never overtly stating this, Harris's book is also a very vivid reminder that no person is ever 100 per cent able-bodied 100 per cent of the time. Because our levels of ability and disability vary throughout our lives, it should be easier for us to relate to people with chronic disability than it perhaps is. This makes ableism more bewildering than racism or sexism, as disability affects everyone at some point. Perhaps it is indeed the difference between the more common transitory experience of disability through sickness or injury, and the persistent nature of chronic disabilities, that gives rise to frustration and impatience on the part of the able-bodied.

Having read an enormous number of books on Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASDs), I can assert that Julie Hanify's *A Small Blue Thing* is not the standard ASD memoir. Hanify's writing reminds me more of Bruce Mason's *Under the Pohutakawa Tree* than anything from

JKP. Reading this work, so reminiscent of older New Zealand writing, is neither nauseatingly nostalgic like Te Papa's *Early Days* exhibit, nor distressing like my grandparents' politics, but is friendly, like finding a well-loved forgotten garment in the back of a drawer. That the writing is retrospective not just of Hanify's life, but also of New Zealand literary style, is very fitting for a memoir.

Although subtitled "Life on the Spectrum", this is firstly about growing up in the Wellington region in the 1960s and 1970s, and only secondarily an account of life on "the spectrum". Hanify's diagnoses of Attention Deficit Disorder (ADHD) and ASD as an adult do help her to make sense of her past and frame the way she looks back on it, but the ADHD and ASD do not come through as the weightiest elements of her story. The diagnoses never become characters of their own (as is the case for Harris) and are merely accessories to the tale. Like many other autists or aspies, I resent person-first terminology (largely for grammatical reasons!), but this book is an excellent example of how a memoir about an experience of disability (or difference) can place the person at the fore.

The standard ASD memoir goes into great length and detail about the narrator's textbook quirks and stereotypical traits and markers. The standard ASD memoir leaves no room for doubt that the author truly has an ASD. Hanify makes no effort to do this, and I am aware that she has kept many things private, as is her right. For those who have read all the other ASD memoirs, this makes a very refreshing change and is really the only book I have read that truly embodies the autism adage, boringly repeated to the point of irritating cliché: "If you've met one person with autism, you've met one person with autism." Instead of being a story that encourages all autists or aspies to band together and proudly inhabit a space distinct from that of the maddening neurotypicals, this story draws no such tribal lines but rather blurs them.

The Case of the Missing Body is a memoir by a poet, the size of a poetry collection, and is released by a poetry press. As one would expect, Jenny Powell's writing is elegant and eloquent ("the position of his body was like a lizard in the sun"), and the book itself does not fit tidily into either memoir or poetry. It is a beautiful read and one that can be appreciated even for its style alone. Posed as diary entries, Lily visits the gym to help with her hypermobility, dyspraxia and proprioception difficulties, interacts with her physiotherapist, processes the self-consciousness of the

body that comes when a head-dweller is forced to be aware of what is usually just a means of transport for the brain, and discusses sensory processing disorder and dissociation with her psychiatrist. (It can be noted here that there is tremendous overlap between all of these things and ASDs.)

The Case of the Missing Body is sold as a "detective story", a woman on a quest to locate her body, yet the story has nothing in common with a detective story (where one would expect to find the physiotherapist in the role of good or bad cop partner to the protagonist) and very much in common with a love story, albeit one of those bittersweet, slightly unsatisfying, inconclusive ones. Patrick the physiotherapist fulfils the narrative function normally assigned to the main character's love interest. The book also feels like an apology to Patrick and part of me wants to say "Don't apologise! Women apologise too much!", but at the same time I realise that this may stem from the writer's wish to explain her incomprehensible behaviour to herself. Powell states that she has created the character Lily to tell her own story, as "in order to write it I have to step back, and examine it from a distance." Here is where I understand that there may be another meaning in calling someone a "brave" writer. Prior to this, I had always thought that when people describe a writer as brave, they really mean "I would never make such things public!" Now I understand that there is another act of bravery a writer can perform, not sharing one's most painful secrets with the world, but venturing into the most painful parts of one's psyche in order to produce the work. For Powell, the pain is too bright to look at directly, and so she refracts it through Lily. Harris and Hanify also mention the emotional strength involved in recounting painful events of the past. The bravery for all three of these memoirs has been more the act of writing than the act of publishing. I hope that all of them will appeal to avid readers and literature lovers as much as to those affected by the differences these memoirs portray.

On another level entirely, *What Does the Sea Sound Like?* by Evie Mahoney is a passable effort for an amateur book to be shared amongst the extended family. Unfortunately, to succeed further afield than that, Mahoney's story of growing up as a hearing child with deaf parents, which sounded extremely promising, really needed a ghostwriter.

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