

BOOK REVIEW

The Ugly Laws: Disability in Public (NYU Press) by Susan M. Schweik

Review by Kirstee Radley

Deep in America's history of disability is *The Ugly Laws*. In this book, Schweik, a former Presidential Chair in Undergraduate Education for Disability Studies at U.C. Berkeley and a professor in a variety of courses in disability studies, examines how American society has understood disability and identity through public policy from well meaning charity organizations to the laws written by pompous politicians. Meant for the modern Disability Studies of Education (DSE) scholar, Schweik assumes this perspective with the purpose of demonstrating how the social construction of disability, beginning in the 1800s, has affected contemporary issues.

In looking at how American society comprehends a standard of normal, Schweik recounts how different laws around the United States were written to keep the "ugly" out of sight within typical societal life. In 1867, the first law to keep the unattractive out of public view was established in San Francisco, California. This decree intended to remove those presumed to be without good morals, for instance beggars or those with disabilities, from the streets to be placed instead into the Almshouses. Here, those that are "diseased, maimed, mutilated, or in any way deformed" (p. 26) were quarantined from those that were good, decent, and proper in appearance.

In addition to San Francisco, Schweik chronicles 11 other United States locations and one in the Philippines where laws were enacted to discard and segregate the "unpleasant" people of those cities for the good of the larger community. The book recounts the lives of many nameless individuals caught within these laws with rich historical detail and parallels their collective stories with accounts of our postmodern American perspectives on issues such as race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and those with immigrant status.

Because Schweik writes from the perspective of a disability studies scholar, her work may provide a welcome and fresh voice to any individual with a desire to understand the ideology of American society in the past and present. This book leaves no stone unturned and looks at every avenue that may perpetuate the cycle of the ideologies that promote and maintain segregation of those who are different. In looking in the past, we begin to appreciate how the exclusionary ugly laws isolated people with disabilities and is continued in the 21st century especially within our K-12 public school system. In today's public schools, inclusion seems to be more of check on a to-do list than an attribute of a child's educational program. Even within the special education world, there appears to be a hierarchy of disabilities from those children who are assigned to classrooms for the severely handicapped to those students who are assigned to the classrooms for children labeled with autism who do not "look" like they have a disability. Schweik begs general education and special education teachers alike to ask the question of their classrooms, "How might I be perpetuating the ugly laws within different aspects of my classroom?" Are we inadvertently teaching our students that they must learn in a separate classroom because they are "too ugly" to learn with their peers?

As a professional special educator, I continue to be concerned about how students with disabilities are treated in schools. I believe that those who work on behalf of America's children with disabilities will agree that *The Ugly Laws* will provide a context for understanding contemporary American education practices of segregation and marginalization. Each page of

the book compels readers to ask questions about themselves, our schools, and our American history. Schweik exposes the legacy of our unfortunate medical ideology of those with disabilities and parallels how our cultural memory of these times remains in some of the “best practices” that prevail in the current American education system. I highly recommend this book for those who believe that disability is not an individual tragedy to overcome, for those who desire to bring society into a disability way of seeing that the “other” can fully participate in life, for those who understand that all people—including those with disabilities--have lives worth living within the fullness of society.