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BOOK REVIEWS, MEMOIR

A review of not a poster child: living well with a disability by Francine

Falk-Allen

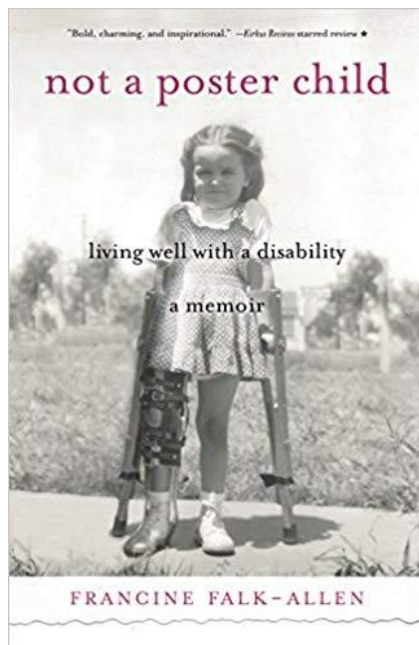
Reviewed by Nancy Smith Harris

Not a Poster Child: Living Well with a Disability—A Memoir

By Francine Falk-Allen

She Writes Press

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In her evocative memoir, *not a poster child*, Francine Falk-Allen achieves her goal of describing life well-lived while handicapped. In so doing, she fulfills another goal: to honor all handicapped individuals. What results is a remarkable story told in an easily accessible and conversational manner with intelligence, wit, and grace.

Diagnosed with polio as a toddler, Francine's ensuing journey engages us with its episodic description of her quest for a life as untethered to her handicap as possible.

A series of vividly detailed images culled from memory flow through this narrative, beginning with Francine's recollection of having run on two reliable legs for the last time. It's a sunny December day on a Los Angeles suburban sidewalk; she is three and dressed in frilly chiffon. Thirteen months later, she is sequestered five days a week for six months in one of many tall white cribs filling a white-walled room at the Kabet-Kaiser Institute, a beachside Santa Monica rehabilitation center for young polio victims.

The complex relationship between Francine and her mother is as skillfully portrayed and as riveting as any such theme one might hope to encounter in a work of this scope. A woman who may be embarrassed by her daughter's affliction and who fears her daughter will remain a lifelong burden is the same woman who encourages the fortitude her sensitive and willful daughter will need to walk again after doctors have said Francine will be in a wheelchair for the rest of her life. In an era informed by strictness and the Biblical adage "spare the rod, spoil the child," Francine's mother imparted the message that her daughter's handicap was no excuse for bad behavior or dependency; if Francine was often angered and confused by her mother's harsh treatment, she also became disciplined and fiercely independent. It is difficult to condemn a mother influenced by the zeitgeist of 1950's childrearing philosophy when she so clearly, if not always productively, sought to provide a normal life for her handicapped daughter. It is also clear that such a philosophy cost mother and daughter a fair measure of intimacy.

In any event, that intrepid attitude fostered early in life, together with Francine's innate strength, have been instrumental as she navigates the challenges of relationships, career, and working with a medical community that is at times extraordinary and at other times less knowledgeable about her condition than is Francine herself.

An impressive rendering of the interplay of physical obstacles and social interaction describes the ways in which one with a paralyzed and atrophied leg and foot must proceed if she is to make her way in the world of "normies"—a term coined in reference to non-handicapped persons. Poolside stares at public swimming facilities are unpleasant and result in a plunge into the waters where Francine finds undeniable euphoria. When advised by her music instructor in the Sufi community that not all men would want the challenge of committing to a life partnership with a handicapped woman, Francine responds to the insight afforded her with wisdom. Accusations of parking illegally in handicap spots (often voiced by elderly people believing she looks too young to be disabled) are usually met with Francine's calm explanation that she has a paralyzed leg.

Early in her memoir, Francine tells us:

"I was not a poster child—not in reality and not in terms of the smiley, optimistic, never-bothered attitude that is often wished for in disabled people. Certainly, that winsome courage is more appealing...I was also not pathetic or helpless..."

It is a worthy undertaking—a mission to show the mistake in reducing a handicapped individual to the often lasting simplistic impression of static images—and it is achieved.

This finely-tuned work successfully depicts the gamut of reactions Francine deals with as she encounters situations of every kind. There is fearlessness in playing neighborhood games; there is confidence and pride in academic achievement; there is bravery at 13 with the decision to undergo triple arthrodesis—a surgical procedure to stabilize her ankle. There are also tears of frustration during the post-operative rehabilitation process, disappointment when loneliness descends at college, frustration at the news that big eight accounting firms would not be interested in hiring the handicapped.

Ultimately, one of the many compelling aspects of this erudite memoir is its refutation of the stereotypes so often attached to the handicapped. It is in many ways a guidebook by example describing how one individual has enjoyed and continues to enjoy the experiences so many non-handicapped people take for granted—from exploring at Camp Fire Girls summer camp, to playing Four Square, to going steady and dancing, to achieving professional career success, to skiing, to finding a life partner, and beyond. It is also much more than that—a well-written story conveyed through a mastery of those elements of craft that allows us to see and feel the author's journey.

Throughout, we experience with her the determination and toughness—often a visible toughness that sometimes goes far beyond what she may be feeling in any given moment—that is necessary in order to live a full and satisfying life. Francine's story is a tribute and surely an inspiration to handicapped individuals everywhere.

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