BOOK REVIEWS


One might imagine the enormity of cosmic disturbance that would cause social scientists to start writing short stories, trading in a century of tried-and-true research methods for the novelist's creative quill. On that day, dogs and cats will sleep together, Democrats and Republicans will stop shooting sound bites at each other, and a disability will suddenly become a status symbol far surpassing monetary wealth. OK, I admit, the marriage of qualitative social science and narrative fiction is not all that surprising. The blurring of these two genres of writing seems almost natural. It has never been an uncomfortable stretch to say that Keillor (1985) is a tremendous ethnographer of life in rural Minnesota or that Zola's (1982) biographic short stories are a powerful work of literature.

In his Opportunity House, anthropologist Angrosino walks that traditional boundary fence between ethnography and creativity, science and art. Angrosino spent 10 years (7 as a field researcher with a tape recorder) as a volunteer in a group home for men who were dually diagnosed, men considered to have both developmental disabilities and psychiatric disorders. Most of the residents had been convicted of a crime and sent to Opportunity House as their judicial sentence. Located in rural Florida, Opportunity House is a small campus of residences and a greenhouse, where many of the clients work. Additionally, some of the clients work off-campus at a Wendy's restaurant in nearby Tampa that serves as both an occupational training site and unofficial clubhouse for current and past Opportunity House clients. Angrosino provides us with a wide selection of fictional short stories based on his experiences and discussions with these men. Some of the stories are first-person narratives written from the author's perspective. These stories often place the author-narrator character (a somewhat naive middle-class guy) in uncomfortable and challenging situations. Other stories are written from the perspective of and in the language of various Opportunity House clients, bringing us imaginatively into the thoughts, desires, and fears of these individuals.

The book basically consists of two parts: theoretical writing and narratives. I comment separately on these two components not only because they differ greatly in purpose and form but because my evaluation of the quality of the two varies immensely.

The danger of publishing short stories written by an academic anthropologist is that one might end up with narratives that read as if they were written by an academic anthropologist. Thankfully, this is not the case for this book. Though occasionally the prose slips to the clichéd caliber of a college freshman writing course, the stories on the whole are smoothly crafted and well-developed, offering remarkably rich, vibrant, and vivid accounts of the tribulations and victories of the men of Opportunity House. I found myself emotionally lured into these stories, coaxed gently into caring about the characters not only as I read the stories but hours later as I was driving down the highway or making myself a cup of coffee. Reaching this measure of descriptive depth and narrative allure such that the characters' words, woes, worries, and worlds resonate and live on with readers is no small accomplishment for any story writer. Angrosino has presented a group of characters that many persons—too many persons—would easily overlook, avoid, or look down upon. He has presented them in a manner that made me care about their well-being and revel in their courage and ingenuity. For this alone, my forthcoming criticisms notwithstanding, I view this book as a worthy achievement.

Seeking to surpass "stereotypes of mentally retarded people as monochromatic figures defined as a category of disability" (p. 30), Angrosino paints multifaceted character portraits that speak more of the uncertain and unyielding vicissitudes of modern life than of something called "life with a developmental disability." The characters are wonderfully varied, and their poignant predicaments press readers into challenges both ethical and existential.

Angrosino's most notable talent lies in his ability to develop the characters through their own words; to use the spoken words of the Opportunity House clients, both in dialogue and first-person monologue, allowing the specificity of the speaker's dialect, tone, and rhythm to teach us about the character behind the words. Addi-
tionally, he realizes this feat by strategically placing the character in just the right situation, typically a personal quandary occurring at a cultural bottleneck, that draws forth substance from the otherwise hidden recesses of the character. Neddy Sampson directs the new volunteer (Angrosino) to take a slight detour and pull the car up for a moment in front of the group home for women with developmental disabilities, the one where all the rich women live. In one anxiety-filled, rapid-fire flourish of obscenity and revelation, Neddy Sampson teaches us volumes about the frustrated crossroads of dating and social class and the echoing torment of incest. Charlie Hastings is a virtually silent man whose occasional, brief mumblings reveal little of the man behind the silence. When afforded the opportunity to sing, however, Charlie bel lows forth tangled, agonizing country ballads about lonesome roads, jive joints, bottles of whiskey, and cheating hearts. Chad Clemmons is a grown man going on his first date. Wrestling with a psychic plate overloaded with insecurities, he assumes that he must don an alternative identity. He must become the Chadster: a macho, overbearing, sexist hipster who shows women who’s boss. Bo Gable, speaking in a racing, uninterrupted monologue that winds together cohesive thought sequences and disparate notions, tells a tragic tale of spending Christmas at home when home is not the place to be. Barney Hibbard has taken Horatio Alger to heart, dressing himself in spiffy clothes, arm ing himself with a business card and an entrepreneurship attitude. He is a business man. His business is panhandling at the mall, turning the cultural capital of disability upside down, trading stigma and pity for cash.

My criticism of these stories goes beyond the evocative or literary value of stories themselves to the broader issue of the social and political identity of the characters, the residents at Opportunity House. Angrosino tends to encapsulate the experiences of these men under the term mental retardation, as if the static and certain condition called “mental retardation” were lingering at the base of their lived experiences. The most obvious problem with this reductionism simply concerns the accuracy of categorical terms. The men of Opportunity House could just as accurately be described with labels of “mental illness” or even “convicted criminal” as “mental retardation.”

Looking further at the meaning of categorical terms, I stumble upon my own desire to read narratives that provoke readers to reconsider the meanings and politics of disability labels and constructs. Personally, I would have preferred a set of stories that made a priority of problematizing the stigmatized social identities in which these individuals have been snared and defined. I would like to see stories that illuminate the broader social conditions under which, and daily human activities through which, these stigmatized identities are produced. I believe that the author rightfully implores us to love persons with disabilities, yet he seems to do so without fully questioning the commonly assumed hierarchy of normality and disability that often brings us to displace love with pity and patronizing treatment.

The weakest portions of the book are the theoretical sections. Angrosino adequately and clearly explains how he gathered the data and wrote these stories. Where he falls short is in attempting to explain in theoretical terms why a series of fictional stories should be considered ethnographic research. To some extent this failure is due to the unfortunate structure utilized to address these complex and challenging ideas. Over the course of three short chapters interspersed at various points among the narratives, a doctoral student interviews the author, asking him questions concerning the philosophy of social science that supports his fictional narrative writings. Within this unwieldy and fragmented format, the author skips lightly and quickly across the most troubling and exciting issues in the philosophy of social science of our time.

This half-hearted and light-hearted coverage of the epistemology, methodology, ethics, and politics of ethnography leaves the interviewed author uttering a host of poorly explained, conceptually muddled, and contradictory notions. He claims to be objective without being neutral, truthful without being factual. I think his basic claim is that as a researcher he can be “truthful” in some sense without clinging to the facts of the lives of the men of Opportunity House. Fictional narratives do not adhere to the facts of a given person’s life, but they put forth a linguistic representation that has “the ring of truth.” How one would distinguish stories that have this romantic, vague “ring of truth” from those that do not is left unaddressed.

It seems that Angrosino is trapped in the legitimization nightmare of qualitative social sci-
ence in this postmodern era: If the elevated value of one’s reports cannot be assured by claiming that the work is scientific, then how can a researcher claim to have anything better to say than anyone else? Once the value of a piece of social science writing is not asserted by using the approved methods of social science, then the researcher seemingly has little social and political means to elevate his work above the scribblings of the clerk at the corner 7-Eleven.

I came away from this book thinking that these stories need not be called “ethnographic fiction” or any other little term that attempts to bridge the apparent gap between literature and social science. I think the stories simply stand on their own. To me, whether one interprets the truthfulness of narratives by the degree of factual content or by an emotionally resounding “ring of truth,” the truth value is irrelevant. I prefer to view all stories as somehow growing out of the uncertain confluence of experience and imagination. Coles (1989) uses the term moral imagination when he writes about how we can use stories to challenge our rarely questioned assumptions about what is right, what is good, and whom we think we are living beside. Angrosino's stories, whatever you might call them and however you might attempt to philosophically support them, are valuable as vehicles on which readers may climb aboard on a journey exploring human identities and relationships.

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References


"The lived oppression that people with disabilities have experienced and continue to experience is a human rights tragedy of epic proportions."

So begins this stirring book by one who has experienced first hand the subjugation detailed in vivid prose page after page after page; but in the tradition of Jonathan Kozol's Savage Inequalities, Charlton's is no project of pity. His is the rallying cry of resistance, of dignity in the face of horrific world-wide shame, and of the power found when individuals merge into a revolutionary movement to face down those who would banish them to the nethermost margins of community. Make no mistake about it, Charlton's manifesto is destined to become a classic of sociology and should be required reading for all of us whose resumes lay professional claim to disability.

The title comes from an expression the author first heard when traveling through South Africa. Two leaders of the Disabled People South Africa movement invoked the slogan that they, in turn, first heard from an Eastern European at an international disability rights conference. Its power, Charlton tells us, "derives from its location of the source of many types of [disability] oppression and its simultaneous opposition to such oppression in the context of control and voice" (p. 3).

Through the pages of this book, we journey with Charlton across the Americas, throughout Southern Africa and parts of Asia and Europe. In so doing, we hear the tales of disablement oppression in everyday life through the voices of people with disabilities. From Soweto, South Africa, Charlton introduces us to Friday Mandla Mavuso, head of the Self-Help Association of Paraplegics. He was shot by police "for no apparent reason" (p. 39) and spent 4 years forgotten in a back ward of a hospital. From Brazil we meet Rosangela Berman Bieler who describes evangelicals approaching her to rid the devil from her body. Nancy Ward, national coordinator of People First in the United States, recounts her segregated educational opportunities as "just one labeling experience after another... automatically we were considered less" (p. 89). These are just a few of the dozens of people whose tales make clear the global dimensions of social injustice.

In near seamless fashion, Charlton links the prismatic stories into a broad framework for understanding disability oppression. In so doing, he draws extensively from, and adds to, the work of critical theorists and scholars of cultural studies and the emergent disablement studies movement. A strong point is made that progressive researchers in the fields of sociology and education have by-in-large left disabili-