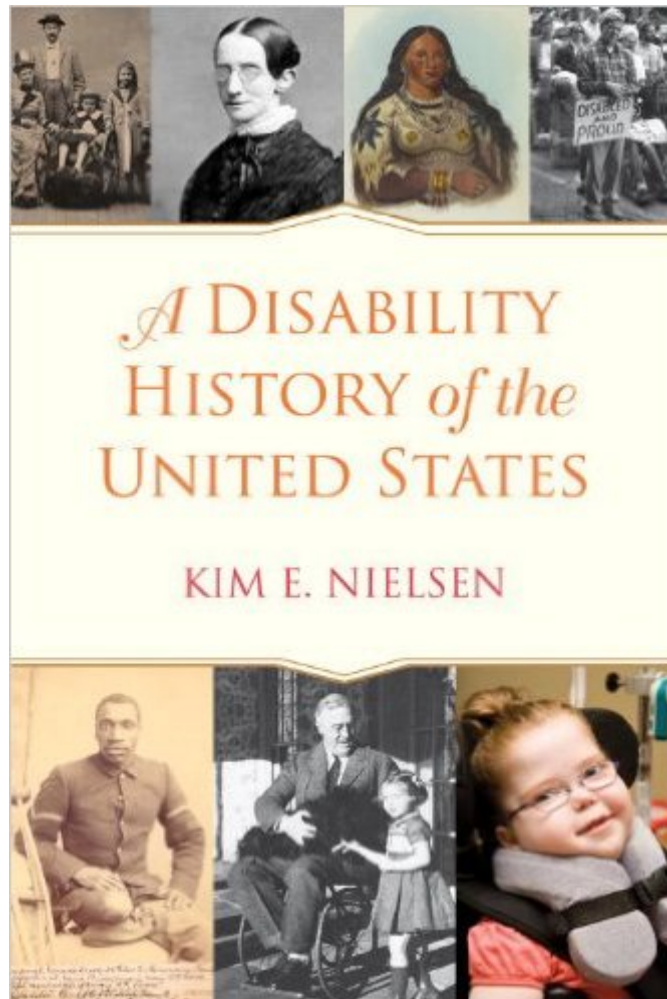


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A Disability History Of The United States (ReVisioning American History)



Synopsis

The first book to cover the entirety of disability history, from pre-1492 to the present—Disability is not just the story of someone we love or the story of whom we may become; rather it is undoubtedly the story of our nation. Covering the entirety of US history from pre-1492 to the present, *A Disability History of the United States* is the first book to place the experiences of people with disabilities at the center of the American narrative. In many ways, it's a familiar telling. In other ways, however, it is a radical repositioning of US history. By doing so, the book casts new light on familiar stories, such as slavery and immigration, while breaking ground about the ties between nativism and oralism in the late nineteenth century and the role of ableism in the development of democracy. *A Disability History of the United States* pulls from primary-source documents and social histories to retell American history through the eyes, words, and impressions of the people who lived it. As historian and disability scholar Nielsen argues, to understand disability history isn't to narrowly focus on a series of individual triumphs but rather to examine mass movements and pivotal daily events through the lens of varied experiences. Throughout the book, Nielsen deftly illustrates how concepts of disability have deeply shaped the American experience—from deciding who was allowed to immigrate to establishing labor laws and justifying slavery and gender discrimination. Included are absorbing—at times horrific—narratives of blinded slaves being thrown overboard and women being involuntarily sterilized, as well as triumphant accounts of disabled miners organizing strikes and disability rights activists picketing Washington. Engrossing and profound, *A Disability History of the United States* fundamentally reinterprets how we view our nation's past: from a stifling master narrative to a shared history that encompasses us all.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

A Disability History of the United States by Kim E. Nielsen"A Disability History of the United States" is the informative book about the history of the United States through experiences of people with disabilities. It's a story of stigma and pride denied, it's a journey of overcoming special challenges to make oneself at home. Professor of history and author of three books, Kim E. Nielsen takes the reader on an enlightening and often-disregarded history in the United States through the lives of people with disabilities. The book begins prior to European conquest and colonization and ends to the present time. I found the book to be more informational than inspirational but overall educational, I appreciate the author's candor for the need to explore even further and this book will help whet the appetite of such pursuits. This instructive 272-page book is composed of the following eight chapters: 1. The spirit chooses the body it will occupy: Indigenous North America, Pre-1492, 2. The poor, vicious, and infirm: Colonial Communities, 1492-1700, 3. The miserable wretches were then thrown into the sea: The Late Colonial Era, 1700-1776, 4. The deviant and the independent: Creating Citizens, 1776-1865, 5. I am disabled, and must go at something else besides hard labor: The Institutionalization of Disability, 1865-1890, 6. Three generations of imbeciles are enough: The Progressive Era, 1890-1927, 7. We don't want tin cups: Laying the Groundwork, 1927-1968, and 8. I guess I'm an activist. I think it's just caring: Rights and Rights Denied, 1968-.Positives:1. Straightforward accessible prose, a well researched and enlightening book.2. An interesting and often overlooked topic.3. The author does a wonderful job of being fair and even-handed.

In writing A Disability History of the United States, Kim Nielsen takes on a difficult but very interesting task. She examines the history of our nation from the perspective of disability, specifically the experiences and treatment of people with disabilities in the United States. Given the changing perspectives of and language surrounding disability, it would not have been easy to trace that thread through historical documents, but Nielsen gathers plenty of anecdotes and primary sources to bring together a "wide-ranging chronological American history narrative told through the lives of people with disabilities."Like many historians in today's black studies, gender studies, gay studies or feminist studies field, Nielsen looks at history and events through a particular lens, in her case the lens of disability. She demonstrates the extent to which ableism has prevailed, stigmatizing disability

and equating disability with dependency. To a certain extent, in the lives of Native Americans and in colonial America, disability was only an issue when it prevented useful work. Nielsen may be guilty of idealizing some of the Native American groups, but the attitude she attributes to them, that everyone has a unique contribution to make, no matter what physical limitations they have, is certainly commendable. The treatment of slaves and women receives special attention, as these groups were considered disabled simply because of their race and gender. As they were by definition disabled, they required extra care--and of course extra measures of control. With the establishment of a new nation, new forms of organization and bureaucracy emerged, one expression of which was institutions for the disabled. In some cases, these were successful, such as schools for the deaf.

Nielsen's *A Disability History of the United States* reads as part history, part sociological commentary, and part strident and bitter judgment. That this judgment is part of her writing mission is discernible even from her chapter headings: "the spirit chooses the body it will occupy", "the poor, the vicious, the infirm", "the miserable wretches were then thrown into the sea", "the deviant and the dependent", "I am disabled, and must go at something else besides hard labor", "three generations of imbeciles are enough", "we don't want tin cups", "I guess I'm an activist. I think it's just caring." She discloses in her introduction that during the writing of the book her daughter became disabled; perhaps some of the anger that suffuses the work is personal. Maybe it should be personal for all of us; Nielsen is right that much of U.S. history with disability is unconscionable by any standard and diminishes us all. Nielsen documents how changing concepts of disability have been used to justify the denial of basic civil rights to persons of color, indigenous cultures, women, those who challenge the status quo, and persons with varying physical, mental, and emotional abilities/disabilities from the first European contact to the present. From slavery to the eugenics movement, from the moral judgments against Ann Hutchinson to the "ugly laws" of the 20th century, from the confinement of Patrick Henry's wife to the rise of institutionalization in the 19th and 20th centuries, the history that Nielsen documents is still too often untaught, or unacknowledged. *A Disability History of the United States* is an important read for all: policy makers and educators, those who are disabled, those who care about them, those of us who may only be temporarily-able-bodied.

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