

Book Review

No Hand To Hold and No Legs to Dance On

Louise Medus and Gill Swain (2009)
London: Accent Press Ltd.

“It’s a full life, just like anyone else’s, but more precious to me in its ordinariness, perhaps, because that very normality has been a struggle to achieve.”

Gill Swain met Louise Medus in 1986 when she was a reporter on the Daily Mail and was sent to interview Louise who was born without arms or legs, as a victim of the drug thalidomide. Some 15 years later when Gill was freelancing, she heard that Louise wanted to write her autobiography and offered to help. The result is *No Hand to Hold, No Legs to Dance On*.

Louise started writing the book some twenty-one years ago but stopped at times due to the painful experience of knowing that her life and family was not ordinary. The book is told through Louise’s own words, whereby she captures her life as a child, a mother, a wife, a daughter and a victim of the thalidomide drug. The story explores Louise’s personal struggle with self identity, sexuality and personal relationships. The book is straightforward, an ‘easy read’, witty at times as well as poignant at times.

Louise delves into her life where she has experienced hurt, anguish, joy, excitement and love. There are times in the story when you feel Louise is not expressing her true emotions and instead of expressing the hurt she feels, she explains to the reader that she has a cupboard where she puts all her hurt emotions.

In reading the book, the reader may get the feeling that while it is a true story, Louise’s memories have become distorted at times. In reading between the lines, it is possible to see an inner turmoil that Louise may still be struggling with.

The phase of Louise’s life that is given greatest treatment is her childhood, and it seems her earlier years were easier for her to come to terms with and therefore openly spoken about. It is in the latter part of the book, where Louise moves into her adult years that she really justifies all decisions made around her—particularly in relation to her father.

This resonates with one particular theme in the book: justification. Throughout the book Louise continually justifies the decisions her parents have made, particularly in relation to sending her away as a child to an institution. There are many other themes identified within the book, particularly relating to childhood, family, identity, sexuality and

normalisation. These themes continually overlap one another and are seen to have both a positive and negative impact on her life.

The first part of the book is organized in chronological order, starting with her birth, then her childhood, teenage years, falling in love and getting married and having her two children. But then the book starts to become quite disjointed—jumping back and forth in her career, health and her life as an adult.

Within the book there is also a short story from a mother who decided to raise her thalidomide baby when she was told to send him away, and the story of a doctor who worked with the thalidomide children. While these stories were interesting to read they seemed very misplaced within the book and just ‘thrown in’. Being an author, it is questionable as to why Gill Swain thought it imperative to place these stories where she did?

Nevertheless, Gill Swain does show an extensive understanding of Louise’s life, a product of working with Louise for nine years to develop her story. There is a strong relationship between Louise’s life journey and the contemporary understanding of disability and service provision. Louise continually addresses the effect living in an institution has had on her life and how children who are born with a disability today are, like all children, given to their parents straight away in order for the parents and child to experience that bonding moment. As well as this, Louise does explain how the change in service delivery addresses the support for parents who have a child with a disability rather than simply sending them away from the family unit.

The stated aim of the book was to tell people about the thalidomide story which is unique in history. The book also asserts that it was written to tell the story of the woman who has been at the heart of the fight for justice for victims of thalidomide. Nevertheless, it does seem that Louise has decided to write the book for other reasons which have purposely not been mentioned within the book. Louise states that the book was not about her ‘airing grievances’ but the fact that this was her first reflection upon the book seems that it is actually one of the main reasons for her wanting to publish the book. It is evident that she wants to tell her story to prove to people—especially her family—that she has achieved a ‘normal’ life in which she has found love, raised children, become a disability rights campaigner and has been able to become a group leader for the Woodcraft Folk.

In all, *No Hand to Hold* does bring to light the story of the thalidomide babies who against all expectations are coming to enter their new stage in life- their fifties!

Gill Swain is currently working on her second book, a biography of Bronwen Jones.

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