

(Re)framing the Narratives of Gender and Disability in Sports: A Critical Study of Sarah Reinertsen's memoir *In A Single Bound*

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.59136/lv.2026.27.1.34>

Abstract

*This paper critically examines the interrelationship between gender, disability, and sports through an analysis of Sarah Reinertsen's memoir *In a Single Bound* (2009), the memoir of an American Paralympic triathlete. The focus of the paper is on the issue of women with disabilities who undergo multiple levels of exclusion within the sports culture that is formed on the principles of both ableism and patriarchy. Women with disabilities usually go through different stages of identity checking and stigmatisation. The memoir highlights Reinertsen's tremendous perseverance and dedication towards life. The author of the memoir seeks to shield herself from the various social stigmas and challenges that come with being a disabled woman participating in sports. Thus, in this article, through analysing themes of disability, sports and gender, the issues of stigma and stereotypes concerning women with disabilities in society and sports have been discussed. Besides, this article also seeks to reveal the issues of self and identity defined mainly by social and cultural norms. Applying Erving Goffman's concept of stigma, Judith Butler's idea of gender performativity, and feminist disability theory, this study analyses how Reinertsen's story reflects on the processes of identity negotiation. Using phenomenological and qualitative methods, this study shows how a personal story can be used to reclaim agency and disrupt cultural constructions of disability and womanhood. This paper also argues that Reinertsen's memoir reframes the narrative of disability, not as a limitation but as a strength that significantly contributes to contemporary discourses on disability, inclusive sports, and identity formation.*

Keywords: Disability, Gender, Identity, Narrative, Stigma, Sports

Introduction

The intersection of gender, disability, and sports constitutes a critical yet underexplored domain within literary and cultural studies. While the sport has traditionally and historically been positioned as a site of competition, physical excellence, and national pride, it also simultaneously functions as a deeply exclusionary space structured by normative ideals of able-bodied masculinity. Women with disabilities, therefore, inhabit a doubly marginalised position, situating themselves at the intersection of patriarchal and ableist discourses (Wendel 54). The

construction of the ideal athlete is deeply embedded in the notions of physical performance, competitiveness, and endurance. These are the parameters on which disabled bodies are judged and implicitly excluded from sports. However, in the case of women with disabilities, this exclusion is intensified. They are more often perceived as lacking both the aesthetic norms associated with femininity and the physical capacity associated with athletes. Sara Reinertsen's memoir highlights these structural challenges by recounting the experiences of being underestimated, excluded, and tokenised within sporting environments. Her memoir offers a compelling counter-narrative to these dominant discourses by foregrounding lived experience as a site of resistance and rearticulation. Even after losing a leg at a very young age, she became a pioneer in endurance sports. Her narrative breaks away from the conventional narratives where disability is associated with dependency. Instead, she offers her own unique narrative, viewing disability as a dynamic process that constantly interacts with external influences such as culture, society, and institutions, rather than as a deficiency. However, simply by recounting her struggles of being an athlete with a disability, she was able to enlighten people about the realities of being part of an environment that is not designed for athletes with disabilities, particularly women. The memoir does not fall into the cliché of overcoming adversity; instead, it focuses on structural injustices and the relational dynamics surrounding disabled athleticism. This is evident in the way she talks about her experience of participating in competitive swimming since an early age and how it exposes the inherent institutional biases that work against athletes with disabilities. However, the central argument is that Reinertsen's narrative reframes disability and gender not as limitations or hindrances but as productive categories of identity, enabling alternative articulations of athletic self/subjectivity (Thomas 178).

Erving Goffman's concept of stigma provides a crucial and important lens for understanding how disabled bodies are socially regulated and constructed. Goffman, in his essay *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (1963), conceptualises stigma as a discrediting attribute that reduces a person from a whole and usual individual to a tainted, discounted one in the eyes of society (41). He further extended this argument, emphasising that it is not an inherent trait but rather a social and cultural relationship. In the context of disability and sports, it manifests in the ways that athletes like Reinertsen are seen as either objects of pity or as inspirational exceptions. The fact of the matter is that both conditions serve to reinforce and reproduce normative boundaries rather than dismantle them. However, the memoir's narratives actively challenge these reductive compartmentalisations by asserting a complex and multifaceted identity that refuses to be confined to the fixed binaries of strength/vulnerability or ability/disability. Another significant concept employed in this study is Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity. Judith Butler, in her seminal book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), argues that gender is not an innate, internal essence; instead, it is a social construct produced and maintained through the stylised repetition of acts, meaning gender is an ongoing performance or a doing rather than a static identity (9). Reinertsen's experience as a female athlete with a prosthetic limb challenges conventional performances of femininity, particularly within sporting culture. Her body is noticed by both visible disability and athletic prowess and becomes a site where established normative gender scripts are both enacted and disrupted. Hence, the memoir also illustrates how gender and disability intersect to reproduce a unique form of embodiment that resists easy social and cultural categorisation. Furthermore, the last concept this paper examines is feminist disability theory. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, in her essay titled "Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory," discusses the integration of these two concepts: disability studies and feminist studies. As she says in the essay, "This essay aims to amplify feminist theory by articulating and fostering feminist disability theory. In naming feminist disability studies here as an academic

field of inquiry, I am sometimes describing work that is already underway, some of which explicitly addresses disability and some of which gestures implicitly to the topic” (3). It is an interdisciplinary framework that critiques the marginalisation of disabled women within both feminist and disability discourses. Reinertsen’s life narrative complies with this framework by accentuating her lived experience, thereby exposing the structural barriers that shape her journey as an athlete. She refuses to accept the societal limitation. Her relentless pursuit of athletic excellence exemplifies embodied resistance that challenges dominant narratives.

Literature Review

Existing scholarship on disability life writing has established that memoirs written by disabled authors are not merely personal testimonies of experience but also social and cultural interventions in the politics of bodily representation. G. Thomas Couser’s work identifies disability memoir as a form through which disabled individuals negotiate self-representation, public interpretation and ethical visibility. The concept of narrative prosthesis given by Mitchell and Snyder also demonstrates how disability is frequently used in literature as a symbolic device that favours narrative meaning while marginalising disabled subjectivity. The present memoir is also important because it resists this type of instrumentalisation: disability is not used as simply a metaphor but becomes a condition through which athletic selfhood and gendered embodiment are narrated. Further, scholarship on the Paralympic Games and their intersection with gender complicates the discussion. As DePauw’s work on disability sport shows how gendered exclusion operates through access, funding, infrastructure and institutional recognition. However, more recent studies in this area extend this discussion, as Kirakosyan’s narrative inquiry into Brazilian female Paralympians shows that disabled sportswomen negotiate disability, gender, body norms, and athletic legitimacy simultaneously (428). Similarly, according to McGliveray et al., media portrayals of the Paralympics still employ the supercrip discourse through revision and appropriation (15). Additionally, Beldame et al. reveal how an inspiring self-presentation influences sponsorship and visibility for Paralympians and generates inequalities among them, depending on how marketable their stories appear (195).

Within this field, the debate around the supercrip trope remains especially significant. Silva and Howe argue that supercrip representation may appear empowering, yet it often reinforces an “achievement syndrome” in which disabled people are valued primarily when they surpass ordinary expectations and embody exceptional resilience (174-175). Berger, however, cautions against reducing all narratives of athletic achievement to ableist spectacle, since such a critique may overlook the pleasure, discipline, agency and self-making that disabled athletes themselves associate with elite sport (649). Schalk’s re-evaluation of the supercrip trope is therefore useful, as it allows for a more nuanced distinction between inspirational narratives that become restrictive and those that disabled subjects may rework for self-definition (76-77). Building on this debate, the present paper examines how Sarah Reinertsen’s memoir *In a Single Bound* both mobilises and unsettles the rhetoric of triumph, revealing the tensions between empowerment, visibility and the persistent demands of ableist sporting culture.

Hence, the research gap for this study is not the lack of research on sports literature involving people with disabilities. Instead, it is the paucity of close reading of the select memoir *In a Single Bound* that links four disciplines traditionally kept separate: feminist disability life writing, women with disabilities as athletes, prosthesis, and anti-supercrip theory. The article addresses this gap through questions such as: how does Reinertsen narrate disability as gendered, lived, and athletic embodiment? How does the memoir expose the social, cultural and institutional production of stigma and reclaim agency without making the disabled athlete only an inspirational achievement?

Methodology

The research is based on a qualitative and phenomenological approach. The study follows a close textual analysis of Sarah Reinertsen and Alan Goldsher's memoir *In a Single Bound: Losing My Leg, Finding Myself, and Training for Life* (2009). However, the textual analysis is not based solely on random sampling; rather, it focuses on the purposive selection of texts or passages specifically relevant to the current study. Passages are selected according to the three criteria: the first is their explicit engagement with the gender, disability, sport and prosthetic embodiment; the second is their recurrence across the memoir as a motif of visibility, shame and athletic legitimacy, and the third is their capacity to expose the tensions between structural ableism and personal agency. As for the analytical procedure, this study examines recurring themes of public staring, clothing, bodily self-perception, competition, and institutional access. Further, the passages around these themes are thematically coded through the lenses of gender performance, stigma, athletic identity, resistance, and supercrip tension, and are interpreted using concepts from Goffman and Butler, feminist disability theories, and debates over supercrip narratives. The use of phenomenological dimension as its method lies in its attention to the lived embodiment. It is used here not as an empirical interview method but as an interpretive orientation toward how the body is experienced and felt from within and perceived from the outside. Therefore, this approach allows the paper to read or interpret disability not as a medical cause alone but as a lived, relational and spatially situated experience. However, Memoirs, as personal narratives, function not only as accounts of events but also as reflections that show how structural constraints interact with personal autonomy. The existing literature on this issue remains underexplored, particularly regarding the selected memoir. Therefore, this paper endeavours to fill these gaps by analysing the memoir and focusing on the narrative as a tool for critical intervention.

Narrative as Resistance: Reclaiming identity

One of the most important contributions of this memoir lies in its use of multiple narratives as a form of resistance. This work is not merely autobiographical writing; it enables her to reclaim authorship of her own body and experiences by resisting the dominant narratives that portray individuals with disabilities as dependent or passive. However, through the help of autobiographical writing, disabled women can construct and reconstruct their identities, integrating their experiences of disability into a coherent and empowering self-narrative (Sirisha and Prabhakar 2144). Rejecting victimhood and reconstructing the body have served as two important tools in the reclamation of identity. Reinertsen explicitly rejects narratives of victimhood and pity, reframing her experience in terms of determination, agency, and resilience. As she says, "For the first time in my life, I was comfortable in my own skin... or at least for the most part. You see, thirteen-year-old girls are never completely at ease, especially when they hate the way they look in all of their clothes" (Reinertsen 30). So, through this statement, she didn't want to be defined by what she lost, but by what she could do. It not only challenges narratives about disability and how society treats women with disabilities but also offers a profound and impactful message to society. Furthermore, her narrative reconstructs the body as a site of capability and strength, describing her prosthetic leg not as a limitation but as a useful tool. She further adds, "For the first time, I truly owned my disability. I was proud of my body... even the metal parts (31)", and she also notes further, "I wasn't owning my prosthetic ... but I had to amuse myself, and sometimes I couldn't take people just staring unabashedly. I was a tough little girl, but tough little girls can't be tough all the time (44). Therefore, it wasn't about replacing what she had lost, but it was about redefining what she could become. Furthermore,

the visibility of disability, its representation, and the negotiations around it in both social and aesthetic spheres are reflected in Reinertsen's relationship with her friend, Delilah, who offers a more complex perspective. Unlike Reinertsen, who emphasises the visibility of disability through playing various sports, Delilah decides to hide it, covering up her legs by wearing long skirts and pants. Delilah's desire is what ultimately fulfils normative expectations of women. Reinertsen uses athletic activity to assert her bodily legitimacy, which allows her to empower the visibility of her disability. In doing so, the memoir serves as more than just a story of personal life or a motivational book; it also challenges existing socio-cultural norms regarding femininity and disability. By employing narrative as a mode of writing about her experiences, Reinertsen creates a new concept of disability as something other than a static state but as a form of being. Hence, the nuanced portrayal saves the narrative from collapsing into what disability scholars critique as the supercrip trope; it offers a more complex and critical engagement with the realities of competing and living as a disabled woman (Williams et al. 697).

Embodied Marginality: The Performance of Gendered Disability

The memoir foregrounds how the disabled female athletic body is subjected to the layered or doubled regimes of stigma, surveillance, and normative expectations within a sporting culture which is historically shaped by ableist assumptions based on patriarchy. As far as embodied marginality is concerned in the larger context of gendered disability, it refers to how the phenomenological experience of disability fundamentally alters how an individual with disability performs, embodies, and is perceived within prescribed societal gender performances (5, Meekosha). It also examines the intersection where repeated acts of systemic ableism and sexism collide, which often leaves disabled individuals outside the set normative definitions of traditional femininity or masculinity. Reinertsen's life reveals how disability is socially constructed as a spoiled identity, especially when it intersects with femininity, which itself is controlled by rigid performative codes and acts. However, as a young girl, Sarah becomes very conscious that her prosthetic body does not fit the normative ideas of feminine appearance. As she admits at one place that "Skirts were a problem for me. I never felt good wearing them because my legs were so different—and not just different from everybody else's, but from each other (Reinertsen 30)". This also indicates how gendered disability is experienced and perceived through bodily presentation and clothing; the skirt, a traditional identity of girlhood, becomes a site of problem and discomfort because it reveals and exposes the bodily difference. She also observes that the prosthetics are made only with the masculine discourse in mind. As she says, "The fact is, these prosthetics were made for men. We women just had to accept and deal with it" (31). This is also crucial because it shows that technology related to disability is not neutral, often neglecting female embodiment, aesthetics, and social visibility. Her disability becomes a mark of damaged or fractured femininity when her body was sexualised in her adolescence, when the boys around her reduced her to "a one-legged girl" (46). After all upheavals, Sarah Reinertsen gradually transforms marginality into agency. Through the help of sport, she further stands against the assumption that disabled female bodies are weak and passive. Her running body resists by turning the prosthetic leg from a sign of lack into an instrument of speed. Hence, the memoir reflects that gendered disability is performed under social and cultural scrutiny, but it is also reperformed and reimagined through pride, self-definition, and athleticism.

Beyond the Body: Gender and Disability in Sports

Gender and disability in sports functions within a deeply stratified matrix of ableism and patriarchal notions of the athletic body. However, engagement in sports among disabled female athletes is influenced by several factors, including family, economic status, and social

and government support (Seth and Dhillon 66). As Culver et al. also discuss, because they constitute contexts in which bodies are intensely engaged, sport and physical activity are privileged places for the construction and/or deconstruction of gendered and ableist norms. (as quoted in R. Richard et al. 332) So, the field of sports serves as a privileged space, as it prepares the ground for several norms related to gender and ableism. During one race, the field which was provided to the women athletes was very small and disorganised as Sarah states “This wasn’t uncommon, because at this point, there weren’t as many disabled girl runners as there were boys, partly because many foreign doctors convinced their team coaches that girls shouldn’t run on the prosthetic legs, as it posed a greater risk to them than men. At some meets, there were so few women signed up that my races were cancelled altogether” (Reinertsen 39). These incidents also encapsulate the gender dimension of disability in sports, where underrepresented disabled women are marginalised and discriminated against within the sporting community (DePauw 50). Her use of an artificial leg, often seen as a marker of deficiency, has been re-signified as a tool of athletic excellence and capability. In doing so, it destabilises the conventional and traditional binaries of strength/weakness and ability/disability. She also exposes the unevenness of sports and the authority that decides, which is not merely physical but epistemological, rooted in the sporting culture and systems that define merit, normalcy, and excellence. Consequently, the fact of the matter is that disability and gender in sports must be understood not as isolated or separate categories but as intersecting axes that reshape embodied experience, recognition, and access. Hence, Reinertsen’s narrative reimagines sport as a contested arena where marginalised bodies not only seek inclusion but also actively participate in and redefine the parameters of athletic achievement, empowerment, representation, and identity formation.

Conclusion

The memoir *In a Single Bound* finally emerges as more than a mere representation of a disabled female athlete. It is proven as a path-breaking counter-narrative to the social and cultural scripts that reduce disabled women’s existence to pity and dependence. Her journey from childhood to competitive sport, from social discrimination to public visibility, and from bodily shame to accepting bodily ownership, the memoir shows how disability does not function as a condition of limitation, but rather a socially negotiated and culturally interpreted identity. In her life, she refuses both the ableist assumption and the patriarchal expectation of women’s bodies. Her prosthetic leg becomes a sign of endurance, mobility, and a self-fashioned identity, which were previously associated with difference, discomfort, and stigma. And that is why her athletic performance not only proves an individual’s grit and resilience but also exposes the insufficiency of society and institutions that underestimate disabled women before they even compete in any sports activity. However, it also reveals that sports are never a neutral activity. Her repeated encounters with limited opportunities and unfair treatment for disabled women athletes show how institutional structures reproduce exclusions which they claim to eradicate. Therefore, the paper concludes by arguing that *In a Single Bound* significantly reframes the discourse of disability and sports by shifting attention from impairment to agency, from stigma to self-representation, and from loss to embodiment. The story Reinertsen narrates rejects the rhetoric of deficiency and instead uses the terms adaptation, bravery, training, and transformation. Reinertsen’s memoir qualifies as a feminist disability text since it argues that women with disabilities are not marginal characters in the sport culture; instead, they challenge the notions of normalcy, competitiveness, beauty, and human capability in the sport. Ultimately, the memoir’s narrative reaffirms that identity is not inherited from social and cultural labels but actively produced and reproduced through performance, resistance, and narrative reclamation.

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