



Venus on Wheels: Two Decades of Dialogue on Disability, Biography, and Being Female in America

Gelya Frank

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In 1976 Gelya Frank began writing about the life of Diane DeVries, a woman born with all the physical and mental equipment she would need to live in our society--except arms and legs. Frank was 28 years old, DeVries 26. This remarkable book--by turns moving, funny, and revelatory--records the relationship that developed between the women over the next twenty years. An empathic listener and participant in DeVries's life, and a scholar of the feminist and disability rights movements, Frank argues that Diane DeVries is a perfect example of an American woman coming of age in the second half of the twentieth century. By addressing the dynamics of power in ethnographic representation, Frank--anthropology's leading expert on life history and life story methods--lays the critical groundwork for a new genre, "cultural biography."

Challenged to examine the cultural sources of her initial image of DeVries as limited and flawed, Frank discovers that DeVries is gutsy, buoyant, sexy--and definitely not a victim. While she analyzes the portrayal of women with disabilities in popular culture--from limbless circus performers to suicidal heroines on the TV news--Frank's encounters with DeVries lead her to come to terms with her own "invisible disabilities" motivating the study. Drawing on anthropology, philosophy, psychoanalysis, narrative theory, law, and the history of medicine, *Venus on Wheels* is an intellectual tour de force.

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