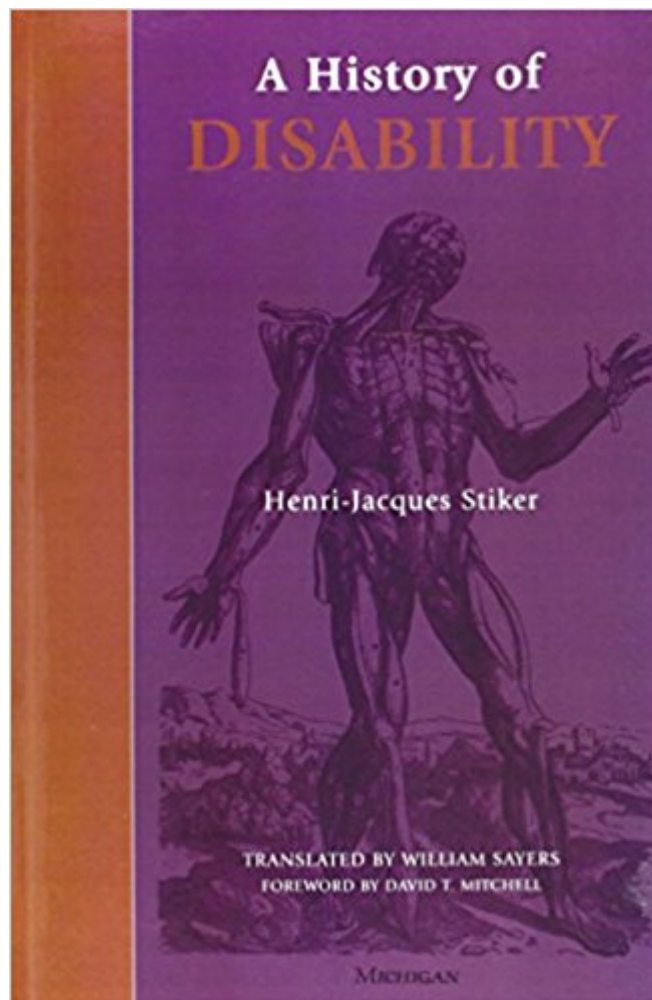


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A History Of Disability (Corporealities: Discourses Of Disability)



Synopsis

The increasing numbers of scholars, policy-makers, and political activists who are concerned with questions of physical and cognitive disability will warmly welcome Henri-Jacques Stiker's book, the first to attempt to provide a framework for analyzing disability through the ages. Published in 1997 in France as *Corps infirmes et sociétés* and available now in an excellent English translation, the book traces the history of western cultural responses to disability, from ancient times to the present. In this volume, Stiker examines a fundamental issue in contemporary Western discourse on disability: the cultural assumption that equality/sameness/similarity is always desired by those in society. He highlights the consequences of such a mindset, illustrating the intolerance of diversity and individualism that arises from placing such importance on equality. Importantly, Stiker does not hesitate to assert his own stance on the issues he discusses: that difference is not only acceptable, but that it is desirable, that it is necessary. The author goes beyond anecdotal history to traverse a little known history, penetrating to the heart of collective attitudes and reflecting on elements of policy. The sweep is broad; from a rereading and reinterpretation of the Oedipus myth to current legislation regarding disability, he proposes an analytical history that demonstrates how societies reveal themselves through their attitudes towards disability, at times in unexpected ways, since the study of detail is often the best entry into the whole of a culture. The book will be of interest to scholars of disability, historians, social scientists, cultural anthropologists, and those who are intrigued by the role that culture plays in the development of language and thought surrounding the disabled. Henri-Jacques Stiker is Director of Research and member of the department of the History and Civilization of Western Societies, University of Paris VII.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Great foundation for disability studies scholars. I found this book immensely helpful for my own understanding of critical moments in the European history of disability. Particularly helped my thinking on rehabilitation as normalisation.

This was practically designed to be a companion to Michel Foucault's A History of Madness. Stiker focuses on physical disabilities but traces some of the same important fractures in the historical genealogy of the conceptualization disability. Perhaps the most important contribution in here is his extension of this genealogy through what he calls "The Age of Rehabilitation." If you are studying the sociology or history of disability, this is a must have.

If you're looking for dates and places, you can put this book back on the e-shelf. If you want to understand how Western society perceives disability and why, from the gut level, you may want this book. But be warned, this is not light reading. Stiker's book would probably be best used in a university philosophy or sociology classroom; maybe it should even be required reading in settings such as those, since disability issues in general are too often ignored by academia. An important thing to know before buying this book is that it is written originally in French, by a French author; it winds its way from the antiquity shared by all Western civilization directly into specific French history. Readers looking for the impact of the Americans with Disabilities Act will not find it here. But all Western countries have shared philosophical concerns even though the history itself differs. Also important to know is that much of Stiker's discourse is founded on the very French phenomenon of understanding a people by its language, in this case, French. He does take somewhat long journeys into the meaning of certain French words. (I am a little less offended by the term "handicapped" as the French understand it, for example, and our term "rehabilitation" now takes on a whole different light.) If you can hold these diversions somewhere in your brain long enough for him to explain his point, what he says does eventually make sense. I did not always agree with his conclusions, but there was enough food for thought that I would say, altogether, the book is worth reading.

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