

Book Review

*How I Became a Human Being:
A Disabled Man's Quest for
Independence*

Mark O'Brien and Gillian Kendall

(Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003)

Reviewed by G. Thomas Couser

It would be a shame if Mark O'Brien were known only, or mainly, as the inspiration for the 2012 film *The Sessions*, or as the subject of *Breathing Lessons*, Jessica Yu's Oscar-winning documentary about his life. For O'Brien was not just a polio survivor; he was a writer. And his best legacy is the text in which he represented himself most fully, *How I Became a Human Being*, developed, with the help of Gillian Kendall, from a magazine piece of the same title.

O'Brien was able to write by dictation or using a mouthstick, but those methods lent themselves best to short prose pieces and poems, of which he published many. For this longer narrative, his collaborator prompted him to expand on his telegraphic style. The result is a multidimensional narrative of his entire life, rather than a memoir in the currently fashionable mode, which focuses on a single episode or dimension of the author's experience.

I can't think of a narrative by anyone whose life was more constrained by an impairment. O'Brien's polio was so severe that from the age of six, he needed to spend all but a few hours of every day in an iron lung; supine in the machine, he could not even rotate his head, which was turned to his right. Much of the value of his narrative, however, is that it bears witness to the Disability Rights Movement, which helped liberate him from a life of immobility and passivity. For O'Brien, autobiography had to be more than the story of the evolution of its creator; it needed to register as well profound changes in society, law, and politics: "This book shows how that revolution freed me to become a human being, and how that revolution made a society become more human" (4). Accordingly, he divides his narrative into two parts: "Dependence," his life from birth to his arrival at the disability mecca of Berkeley, where he attended the University of California; and "Independence," his life thereafter as an autonomous person.

O'Brien's personal development was in some ways delayed by his condition, which rendered him a shut-in as a child. His confinement and his parents' protectiveness instilled in him a learned helplessness that was hard to transcend. His stints in two rehab hospitals prepared him for independence less by fortifying his body, according to

the medical plan, than by motivating him to escape them—and with them, the medical approach to his predicament.

The second half of the narrative recounts his attainment of autonomy in hiring and directing those who attended to his many needs. He learned to navigate his disability-friendly neighborhood and the UC campus using a motorized gurney equipped with mirrors. As an adolescent, he had been isolated and deficient in social skills; loneliness continued to be an issue during his self-directed life as well. O'Brien is candid about his tendency to fall in love with his female attendants—or any woman who befriended him. This love was rarely reciprocated, at least not in a romantic way. But as an adult he built a network of friends of both sexes and had significant emotional relationships with a number of women.

The Sessions has, perhaps unfortunately, highlighted one episode of his life, his sexual initiation by a professional surrogate. While quite faithful to his written account of this process, the movie can't match O'Brien's nuanced depiction of it. Part of his treatment had to do, literally, with self-recognition—learning that, naked, he was not the monster he saw in his mind. Understandably, his eagerness led him repeatedly to ejaculate too soon. After one failed attempt at full intercourse, "I felt humiliated. Cheryl asked me

whether I had enjoyed myself. I said, 'Oh, yes, up to the anticlimax'" (218). Let this quote exemplify his wry crisp humor.

O'Brien found his *métier* as a writer of poetry, journalism, and eventually autobiography. His confinement may have encouraged introspection and reflection, preparing him, all unaware, for his career. The narrative thus functions as, among other things, a *Künstlerroman*. More important, it stands as an impressive *Bildungsroman*, offering an insightful, candid, and intimate account of its author's growth to maturity. O'Brien's sensibility and his generosity to others are appealing; as a reader, I came to like him immensely and wish I had known him.

Though it may be hard for non-disabled readers to imagine living with such a severe impairment, this is no misery memoir. Its testimony is that O'Brien did not just "survive" polio; he succeeded in having a life—a life worth writing, a life very much worth reading. ☞

G. Thomas Couser retired in 2011 from Hofstra University, where he was a professor of English and founding director of the Disability Studies Program. His most recent book is *Memoir: An Introduction* (Oxford, 2012). He has completed a memoir of his father and is writing a book about contemporary American patriography (memoirs of fathers).