

A World Without Martha: A Memoir of Sisters, Disability, and Difference by Victoria Freeman

Mallory Davies

Volume 113, numéro 1, spring 2021

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1076082ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1076082ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The Ontario Historical Society

ISSN

0030-2953 (imprimé)

2371-4654 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Davies, M. (2021). Compte rendu de [*A World Without Martha: A Memoir of Sisters, Disability, and Difference* by Victoria Freeman]. *Ontario History*, 113(1), 111–113. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1076082ar>

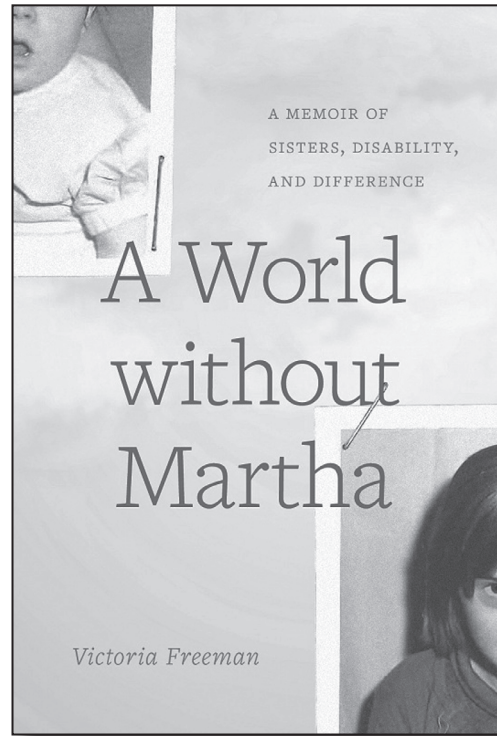
A World Without Martha

A Memoir of Sisters, Disability, and Difference

By Victoria Freeman

Vancouver, British Columbia: Purich Books, 2019. 328 pages. \$29.95 paperback. ISBN 978-0-7748-8040-4, \$29.95 e-pub. ISBN 978-0-7748-8042-8 (www.ubcpres.ca)

Victoria Freeman's *A World Without Martha* is a compassionate story about the trauma and grief of growing up apart from her younger sister Martha. In 1958, Martha was born with Down Syndrome and placed at the Rideau Regional Hospital School in Smith Falls from the age of two until she was a teenager. The memoir begins with Martha's birth and relates how when the family's learning of Martha's diagnosis, there also came the mixed reactions of hospital staff, family members, and friends ranging from pity to disappointment. When the doctor suggested that the family send Martha into care, Freeman's mother felt the weight of failure for Martha's Down Syndrome. These early chapters set the tone and historical context for the pressures Martha's family felt regarding institutionalization. Next, Freeman integrates her own childhood and educational experiences and the absence of Martha in the family home with the history of shifting perceptions of institutionalization of people like Martha on the part of both professionals and the general public in Canada. In the final chapters, Freeman speaks to the later years of Martha's life in a group home with her kind caretaker, Mrs. Zaretsky, and her early death. Freeman closes her book by disclosing the journey she underwent to come to terms with the unsettled trauma and unspoken past in her own family.



Freeman received her PhD in history and skillfully applies her historical training to connect the story of her own childhood with letters and photos that were exchanged between her parents and the Hospital School. Freeman's discussion of intellectuals who valued IQ and its place within the eugenics discourses provides important context for how children were placed in care. In a chapter titled Normalization, Freeman turns to the deinstitutionalization movement. The 1971 Williston Report criticized institutional care for children with developmental disabilities. The report was accompanied by the investigative news article of the inhumane treatment of students at the Hospital School's sister facility in Orillia and the report of suicide from a former resident of Rideau Regional Hospital School. While the Williston Report recommended that these facilities close, the Rideau Regional

Hospital School continued to operate on the rehabilitation approach. The rehabilitation approach included new recreational facilities such as swimming pools, gymnasiums, the involvement of Scouts and the introduction of the Special Olympics. However, as Freeman states, these programs, much like other institutions of the time, did not solve the basic problems of care. (130) Freeman's historical analysis demonstrates how children were systematically excluded from rights that other able-bodied children could access. As public opinion shifted with the deinstitutionalization movement, Freeman's mother was open to fresh judgement from friends. Vera, a friend of the Freemans passively criticized that she "would not have had the strength to send [her] own child away to one of those places." (140) As a result of the deinstitutionalization movement, the social workers at Rideau suggested that Martha be placed within the community. The Freemans were not ready for this responsibility, so Martha went to live in a group home with Mrs. Zaretsky.

Freeman deviates from Martha's life, to reflect on her own life as a teenager. She realizes that trying to appear "normal"—as a white, able-bodied, and heterosexual young woman from a nuclear middle-class family—was simply impossible. Freeman acknowledges her own privileges as an able-bodied, white, middle-class woman; however, she realizes in her teenage years that her bisexuality was much easier to keep private than Martha's Down Syndrome. These crucial dilemmas in Freeman's book demonstrates society's expectations and discrimination as those who appear or act different from the norm. Freeman becomes fully cognizant of her guilt and trauma after Martha's death when she was in her forties. It is in these years that Freeman becomes aware of the abuses within the Huronia and Rideau Hospital

Schools. While Freeman is unable to uncover whether Martha suffered such abuses, she learns from others who did.

A World Without Martha does not centre solely on the life of Martha, but rather the parallel stories of two sisters, Martha and Victoria. Freeman reveals the individual long-term effects of institutionalization for those who never lived in institutions. Freeman offers the perspective of how family members were also affected. This memoir acknowledges the shame of association with the histories of institutionalization from Victoria's own trauma, to her mother's cold affront, her younger sister Kate's survivor guilt, and her adopted brother Eric's treatment as an interloper in the family. Accordingly, Freeman gears her book towards a wider popular audience, and especially for families affected by institutional care. For historians, the memoir provides important context of familial relationships from the first-voice of a family member who was affected by provincial care rather than from the usual archival documentation, although the book includes this too. It also tells the history of the policy of institutionalization for people with Down Syndrome, and how medical experts believed these children should be cared for over time, and how that changed, which is an important contribution to disability history.

This memoir may also interest historians of memory. Historians might use this memoir as a tool for understanding childhood memories. In the early chapters, Freeman pieces Martha's birth and her mother's hospital stay by using creative non-fiction—her own imagination paired with the few documents of Martha's birth. Freeman's mother rarely discussed her own experiences in the hospital. Historians would be interested to know how Freeman, as a historian, constructed and processed these imaginations with the written historical re-

cords. Later, Freeman illuminates Martha's perspective by including a few of her spoken phrases, such as "Shub up kib!" Martha spoke few phrases, but her inner word was communicated through the manifestations of Freeman's physical pain. These discussions would be of interest to historians to interpret the spoken and unspoken word of historical actors.

Freeman's book is meant for the families and siblings of Down Syndrome youth that were in care. However, it will also appeal a wider popular audience interested

in disability and disability history, as well as to historians of Ontario more generally. Freeman's ability to vulnerably share her own trauma and guilt opens discussion to the silence and shame faced by her parents. Freeman carefully explains the historical context of children with disabilities in the 1960s while shedding light on the long-term effects of families who sent their children into provincial care.

Mallory Davies
University of Waterloo

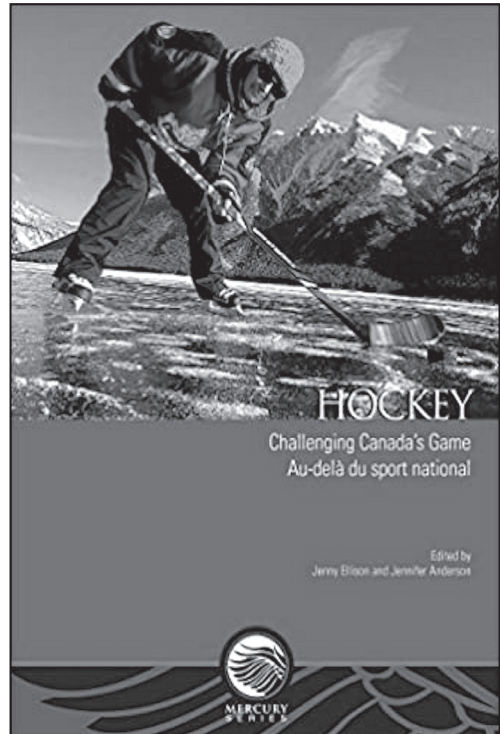
Hockey

Challenging Canada's Game; Au-delà du sport national

Edited by Jenny Ellison and Jennifer Anderson

Ottawa: The Canadian Museum of History and the University of Ottawa Press, 2018. 313 pages. \$49.95 softcover. ISBN 978-0-7766-2599-7. \$39.99 eBook ISBN 978-0-7766-2771-7 (<https://press.uottawa.ca/>)

If a history of hockey is a history of Canada, then *Hockey: Challenging Canada's Game; Au-delà du sport national* has done an excellent job at showing the diversity of experiences of the sport in Canada, from its complex origins to its play in residential schools, from the experience of previously-excluded women to hockey as a part of Canadian childhood. It covers aspects of professional and amateur hockey in Canadian life, including play, fandom, sports broadcasting and activism, and uses the lenses of gender, race/ethnicity, sexuality, ability, business, and geography to analyse the sport so often touted as Canada's game. The sport has been defined as a masculine



and white sport, but the goal of the exhibit and the book is to tell the true, diverse story of the history of the sport. This beautiful interdisciplinary book is an extension of the Canadian Museum of History exhibit,