

Medicine on the big and small screen: Disability, Instagram, and @sitting_pretty

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Editor's Note: For many years, Dr. Peter Dans contributed smart and funny reviews of films with physician characters and medical matters in this column. When we succeeded him, we changed this space in two major ways: we invited colleagues working in various disciplines to write about health and media issues, and we included television as an integral part of the subject matter. The first decision was an effort to include different voices in the column and the second to recognize the increasingly significant role television plays in medical culture. With Amanda Greene's column below, we introduce an even smaller, yet equally influential screen into the conversation: social media. Everyone reading The Pharos realizes how much the new world of communication platforms has profoundly transformed teaching, practice, and scholarship about health care and its delivery. COVID-19 has forced even the most reluctant of us to acknowledge that the topography of health care will never return to its pre-pandemic contours. As such, the inclusion of social media in this piece recognizes the crucial role it now occupies and how it has, and will, inevitably continue to shape the future of medical culture.

"a body that looks and moves differently than most"
—Rebekah Taussig

An Instagram account may seem like an unexpected intrusion into this column. Yet, the tiny screen of the mobile phone or laptop can house powerful art and storytelling. Social media platforms are increasingly important places to encounter images and stories coming from marginalized perspectives.

Disability cultures thrive in digital spaces. Virtual environments, while far from perfect, sidestep an array of accessibility concerns, and as a result, they can facilitate social connection, community building, information sharing, and advocacy work that would otherwise be impossible. Intertwined with, and complementing, these relational benefits, social media platforms support the proliferation of disability representations. They bolster individuals' opportunities to portray themselves and their experiences in ways that feel authentic and that don't often circulate in the mainstream media. Content-creators can take ownership of their self-presentation with documentary and



Instagram post from February 20, 2020 on @sitting_pretty.

creative work that challenges both the invisibility of disability and its enfreakment—the all too frequent elicitation of gazes rooted in spectacle or pity.

A number of influencers (users with large public social media followings) with disabilities have embraced their accounts as tools for breaking down stereotypes and affirming the beauty of non-normative bodies. With nearly 47,000 followers, @sitting_pretty is one especially eloquent example. This Instagram account is composed of posts that combine photographs with poetic “mini-memoirs” in the caption. It resembles familiar media forms, like the magazine, while still being perfectly tailored to this digital context.

The creator behind @sitting_pretty is Rebekah Taussig, an educator and author with a PhD in creative nonfiction and disability studies. In her own words, the purpose of her Instagram account is to:

- 1) Reflect on what it means to live as a disabled woman;
- 2) Connect with others who are also processing what it means to live from a particular body; and
- 3) Share more beautiful nuanced photos of a body that looks and moves differently than most.

Both the prose and the pictures are aesthetically pleasurable, but they retain a profound weightiness. Through @

sitting_pretty Taussig repeatedly puts her body at the center of Instagram's signature square frame in order to address the ableist narratives that insidiously permeate the everyday, including her own reckonings with internalized ableism.



Instagram post from November 25, 2020 on @sitting_pretty.

Some of @sitting_pretty's most compelling through lines are the frank and poetic engagements with gender and, most recently, with pregnancy and motherhood. One poignantly intimate photograph captures Taussig in profile in her wheel chair, her hands holding her bare belly. The stark straight gridlines of the bookshelf in the background compositionally amplify the curvaceous synergy between the chair's wheels and the pregnant body.

There is incredible care taken in producing such images, which are beautifully nuanced in and of themselves. Still, the captions enrich them by unflinchingly addressing tropes and histories that these portraits directly contest:

Women with disabilities have long been framed as unfit for motherhood. From coerced and forced sterilization, pressure to terminate, and gross misinformation, pregnant disabled women have been met with skepticism, dismissal, and criticism, Taussig explains, "To be clear, this is not what I've experienced. I'm grateful most of my time with medical staff during this pregnancy has been very sup-

portive, open, and empowering. But that doesn't mean history isn't lingering in the rooms I occupy—that we're not all aware that my swollen belly sitting atop my paralyzed legs challenges the default narrative of motherhood."

Taussig's posts are in dialogue with other artistic statements that have publicly confronted the problematic imaginaries around disability and pregnancy such as Marc Quinn's massive marble sculpture *Allison Lapper Pregnant* (2005), which sparked heated controversy when it was installed at Trafalgar Square. Although an unconventional medium, @sitting_pretty is art as much as (and perhaps even more powerfully than) this sculpture. Being less monumental makes these provocations all the more impactful; sometimes the tiny screen trumps the oversized spectacle.

Weaving image and text together, Taussig folds reader-viewers into the textures of her everyday experience, as lived from her particular body. Her most recent post, which addresses the tender bond her young son has developed with her wheelchair, helps articulate the world that the account asks an audience to enter. Accompanying a series of images showing her son joyfully interacting with her and the chair, Taussig describes how he "has no idea that people see wheelchairs as sad or inspirational. He hasn't learned to read them as symbols of confinement or an obstacle I must overcome. My wheelchair chirps comfort, spins in play, holds steady for him and for me."¹

Culturally ingrained symbols are unfortunately not easily unlearned. But, without turning to trite storylines based on simply overcoming them, @sitting_pretty creates space to recognize how ableism can contort everyday life, while also reveling in ordinary narratives of non-normative bodies rooted in play, in comfort, and in beauty.

References

1. Taussig, Rebekah. *Sitting Pretty: The view from my ordinary, resilient disabled body*. New York NY: HarperOne; 2020.

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