



This is a repository copy of *Disability and Other Human Questions* by Dan Goodley (Emerald Publishing, 2021), 145pp.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:
<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/184416/>

Version: Published Version

Article:

Hollin, G. orcid.org/0000-0003-4348-8272 (2022) *Disability and Other Human Questions* by Dan Goodley (Emerald Publishing, 2021), 145pp. *International Journal of Disability and Social Justice*, 2 (2). pp. 106-108. ISSN 2732-4036

<https://doi.org/10.13169/intljofdissocjus.2.2.0106>

Reuse

This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) licence. This licence allows you to distribute, remix, tweak, and build upon the work, even commercially, as long as you credit the authors for the original work. More information and the full terms of the licence here:
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/>

Takedown

If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing eprints@whiterose.ac.uk including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.



eprints@whiterose.ac.uk
<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/>

Book Review

Disability and Other Human Questions by Dan Goodley
(Emerald Publishing, 2021, 145 pp.)
ISBN: 978-1-83982-707-5

Greg Hollin
Research Fellow, University of Sheffield

Review

Dan Goodley's new book is oriented around six questions, each of which has a chapter devoted to it: 'What brings us to disability and other human questions?'; 'Who is allowed to be human?'; 'What is human desire?'; 'Are human beings dependent?'; 'Are we able to be human?'; and 'What does it mean to be human in a digital age?'. It's notable, I think, that once that introductory chapter is out of the way, the word 'disability' does not appear in any of these questions. Indeed, Goodley frames these questions as being fundamentally about 'community, independence and desire,' and not disability per se (p.116). The key to understanding disability's simultaneous presence (in the title) and absence (in the primary topics of concern) is that, for Goodley, disability is '*the* phenomenon to think again about these very human qualities' (p.116, emphasis in original). The title, then, is a misnomer: this is not a book about disability *and other* human questions, it is a book that asserts that disability *is the key* to answering human questions.

There are, of course, inherent dangers in framing disability in this way. As soon as a person is valued not simply for who they are but for the lessons they might teach, there is a real risk of objectification and exoticisation and the possibility that disability will be reduced to a fable, a limit case, or a thought experiment. There are few better placed to avoid this significant risk. As Professor of Disability Studies and Education at The University of Sheffield and co-director of *i-Human*, an inter-disciplinary institute at the same institution exploring 'what it means to be human,' Goodley is well placed to examine the intersection of disability and the human condition. More importantly, and while identifying as non-disabled (or, rather, as a 'temporarily able-bodied' person, p.89), Goodley is able to draw on years of work with disabled activists who are named and resolutely figured as colleagues, comrades, and allies.

The intimacy with which Goodley recounts the experiences he shared with friends gives a clear sense that these individuals are written *with* rather than *about*. When we read, for example, about Goodley's friend Elizabeth – who 'announces her

humanism,' (p.32) by taking a seat in a train, but whose humanism subsequently 'threatens to collapse before us,' (p.33) when, as a result of deskilling following years of institutional confinement, she is unable to unlock the door of her hotel room – the question 'Who is allowed to be human?' ceases to be abstract and is instead made manifest in a decidedly concrete, everyday setting. Crucially, Goodley always interweaves stories such as Elizabeth's with his own. There are partial affinities between Elizabeth's dependencies and Goodley's own – to his family, to alcohol – and by making these connections and affinities Goodley is able demonstrate, in a deeply personal and empathetic manner, the ability to render not only new understandings of disability, but the human *tout court*.

Importantly, *Disability and Other Human Questions* is published as part of a relatively new series called *SocietyNow* which offers 'short, informed books' that 'makes the best academic expertise accessible to a wider audience, to help readers untangle the complexities of each topic and make sense of the world the way it is, now.' The goal is not necessarily, therefore, to push the theoretical boundaries of Disability Studies but to render the discipline intelligible to students and general publics. This is an agenda that clearly maps onto that of the venture that is the *International Journal of Disability and Social Justice*, but it also aligns *SocietyNow* with other recent attempts to take sociological thinking to more expansive audiences – the *21st Century Standpoints* series, published by Policy Press with The British Sociological Association, declares very similar goals, for example. For the present audience at least, it does not need to be stated how important it is that Disability Studies appears in these series alongside analyses of poverty and populism, selfies and celebrity, post-Brexit society and digital technology. Nonetheless, and if the infernal and tedious debates over the incomprehensibility of much academic writing reveal anything it's this: many of us find writing 'accessible' works easier said than done.

Goodley's early declaration that it is the 'ontological duty' (p.8) of non-disabled people to rethink their understandings of disability left me anxious with regard to this question of accessibility – I'm not *entirely* sure what this phrasing means and I struggle to believe that undergraduate or general audiences will feel at home with terminology of this sort. Thankfully, though, this early philosophical flourish turns out to be an aberration. For the overwhelming majority of the text Goodley turns out to be a lucid, engaging, and thought-provoking tour guide. It is very easy to imagine the whole book being set as core reading in undergraduate Disability Studies modules and individual chapters could be set across the curricula: the chapter on being human in the digital age, for example, would complement courses in, for example, social media. This is surely a key marker of success, for if Goodley's core argument is that disability is not (only) about disability then it is crucial that the work finds uptake beyond Disability Studies. That there is scope for this to happen is a real achievement on the author's part.

For an audience outside of the academy, a twinge of disappointment comes with the price-tag. While a 125-page book with an RRP of £16.99 is cheap in comparison

to the sky-high prices of some commercial, academic publishers, it's noticeably more than that charged by competitor series. The books in *21st Century Standpoints* series are substantially longer and come in at around £13. The landmark *A Very Short Introduction* books are, materially, perhaps the most easily comparable and these cost under a tenner. This all matters, of course: the goal is to be accessible to all readers, but if browsers in a bookshop balk at paying substantially more than they would for a paperback novel, then we have a problem. This shouldn't distract from Goodley's achievements, but – and as a scholar informed by Marxist thinking, I'm sure he'd be in agreement here – accessibility is not simply achieved through the words of an individual author, the institutional context is just as important. A social model of accessibility, perhaps. Nonetheless, this remains a timely and important contribution from a scholar with an evident ability to moor huge, existential questions in the varied and mundane ongoings of everyday life.