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Book Review: Katherine Anderson Howell: Disability and Fandom

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Book Review

Katherine Anderson Howell: Disability and Fandom

KEYWORDS

fandom, disability studies, identity, accessibility, awareness, representation

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Book Review

Katherine Anderson Howell: Disability and Fandom

Iowa City: University of Iowa Press 2024, 219 pp., ISBN 9781609389673, USD 57.-

In recent years, scholarship on the relationship between dis/abilities and popular media has expanded significantly, whether in connection with awareness, representation, accessibility issues and practices, or the externally and internally ascribed processes of identity formation. The appropriation and negotiation of popular media narratives within fan cultures and fan practices have likewise received increased academic attention, particularly since the establishment of fan studies as a field, where questions concerning fan identities, communities, and spaces have become central.

In her book, *Disability and Fandom*, Katherine Anderson Howell brings these strands of research together, examining intersecting aspects not only within academic engagements with disability studies and fan studies—fields that each place concepts such as othering, marginalization, and the related power dynamics at their core—but also within identity configurations and the resulting fan works that emerge from this intersection. She further investigates the social as well as the technical-infrastructure accessibility of and within fan spaces, alongside the function of disability in concrete fan practices. As Anderson Howell shows, these interrelations of disability and fandom constitute an understudied yet crucial field of inquiry, one that reveals how embodied experience, cultural participation, and media engagement intersect.

From the outset, Anderson Howell makes clear that she brings her own experience as a disabled person and active fan into this conversation. This provides her with a distinctive vantage point that grounds her analyses in lived social experience within fan spaces and communities. At the same time, she highlights that disabilities and the practices associated with them, contrary to generalized, normative medical models, constitute a highly subjective and extraordinarily diverse set of experiences, which must challenge “the false notion of objective knowledge found via artificial conventions” (4).

Accordingly, Anderson Howell does not conceive her book as an exhaustive academic study, but rather as an invitation to initiate dialogue between the disciplines and as a starting point for “cripping fan studies” (5). However, this by no means implies that the book rejects academic precision or theoretical grounding. To the contrary, it is fully consistent with the central commitments of disability studies, which center on lived experience and position disabled persons as the primary experts on disability. In doing so, she not only probes the multifaceted theoretical contact zones between the two disciplines—zones that she compellingly identifies with theoretical rigor—but also translates these into a range of heterogeneous in-depth analyses that illuminate the physical and social contact zones emerging within the fan practices of disabled persons.

For example, she analyzes the accessibility conditions of several sci-fi and fantasy fan conventions, including MegaCon Orlando, which she attended both as a presenter and as a guest and which, as she notes, proved to be an “access nightmare” (26). In addition to socio-material factors such as high attendance numbers, intense sensory stressors (particularly for those with hypersensitivities), confusing

or poorly navigable layouts, the absence of quiet rooms, and long distances between panel locations, Anderson Howell also identifies unclear accessibility policies on the part of organizers and the lack of dedicated awareness teams (or the failure to involve disabled persons in the design of accessibility measures) as deeply problematic. In the following chapters, she presents a wide range of examples that move fluidly between real-physical, digital, and fictional-narrative contexts.

She discusses the intersectional dimensions of Black fandom, hip-hop, and disability through the example of Kanye West fans. In addition, she examines the accessibility and algorithmic structuring of digital fan spaces such as Tumblr, Archive of Our Own, Instagram, and TikTok and their implications for disabled fans. And then she turns to gatekeeping and interpretive practices on these platforms, focusing in particular on the *Sherlock Holmes* fandom and the tensions between neurotypical and autistic experts/fans. This is followed by an analysis of the production and function of *The Witcher* fan fiction that explores the relationship between disability and pain. Then she continues with an examination of (disabled) body imaging, beauty culture and the production of visible difference on Instagram, and finally a discussion of anti-fandom, in which online communities organize systematic hostility toward disabled individuals.

One might criticize that Anderson Howell engages with so many disparate examples, each of which would require distinct theoretical and methodological approaches, ranging from discourse analysis and (auto)ethnography to platform and interface criticism to narratology, and that such breadth cannot be addressed comprehensively or with sufficient depth within the limited space of a single volume. Yet, as already noted, this is not Anderson Howell's aim. Rather, she seeks to open an interdisciplinary conversation and to bridge a significant research gap, making aware of these existing intersections. In this regard, Anderson Howell succeeds remarkably: the book is compelling, highly readable, and an important contribution to the field, offering a first glimpse into what will, one hopes, develop into a more fully articulated field of disability fan studies in the future.

