Resources for Gender and Women's Studies

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Books

Memories, Oracles, and Art: Disability Counterstories and the (Re)Imagination of a Collective Future through Creativity

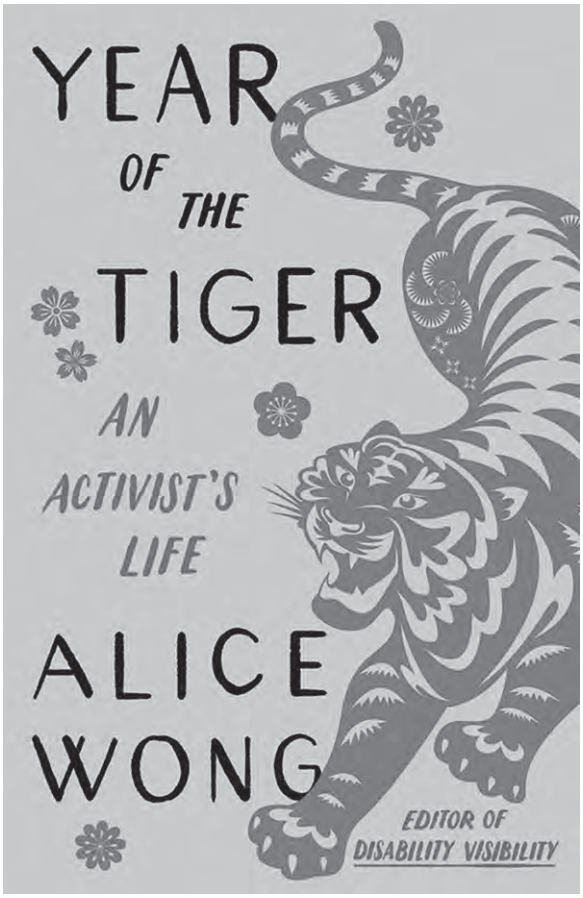
BY LIZ GRAUEL

Riva Lehrer, *Golem Girl: A Memoir*. One World/Random House, 2020 (2021 pap.). 448 pp. illus. pap., $20.00, ISBN 978-1984820327.

Alice Wong, *Year of the Tiger: An Activist's Life*. Vintage Books, 2022. 400 pp. pap., $17.00, ISBN 978-0593315392.

"Technology, accessibility, and a hard-core will to live shaped me into a cyborg oracle ready to spill some hot truths." (Wong, p. 267)

Alice Wong is an author, creator, and cat enthusiast; a disabled[1] Asian American woman who warns readers from the onset that "[t]his is not a singular success story about overcoming odds, about perseverance or resilience; this is not a 'diverse' or 'intersectional' book" (p. xvii). Her memoir, *Year of the Tiger*, is a triumphant departure from the disabled narratives that pepper the mainstream. It is inspiring but not inspirational, unapologetically political, and interweaving of all things Alice, centering her voracious appetite not only for the edible (though her descriptions of food may leave you drooling) but also for disability pride, justice, and identity; for community, care, and connection; and for liberation and love of self and of others.

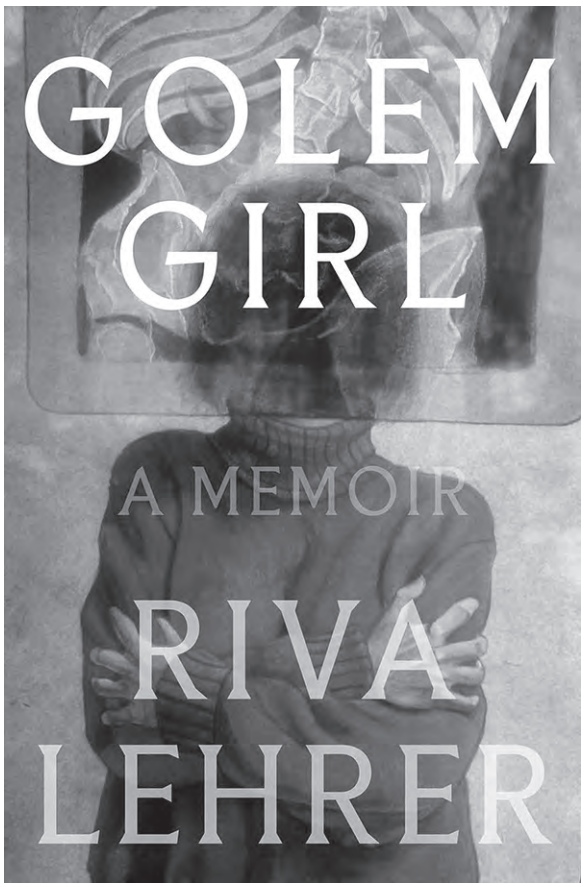


In a true counterstory, Wong brings together essays, illustrations, letters, lists, photos, games, and transcribed conversations that transform the idea of what a memoir can be. It is as much a "book of Alice" as it is a story of the connections and relationships that she has cultivated in her real-life world-building. In the book's "Culture" section, she shares dialogues and critiques of mainstream portrayals of disabled characters in film: tropes reinforce ableist assumptions that disabled people hate their lives, that disabled lives aren't worth living, and that disabled people seek a nondisabled future. Included here is a 2020 conversation with artist and writer Riva Lehrer, who describes a term she has coined: "'pain reading,' which... [means] as soon as somebody, a viewer, sees a wheelchair or a crutch or an adaptive device or whatever, it's like... in an ableist society, disabled lives are by definition full of suffering and misery" (Lehrer quoted in Wong, p. 177; brackets appear in Wong's text).

As an activist whose weapon is writing, Wong refuses to let the story of her life, her fire, and her joy be appropriated through an ableist lens that assigns a narrative of misery and toil to her power chair and BiPap machines, which she describes as extensions of her body (p. 121). Her rejection of "normal," as she responds to policy about issues ranging from health care to net neutrality, is meant to be engaged with. Wong knows that survival in a changing

world hinges on the power of imagination, of dreaming, of belief in a future that seems impossible according to the notions and ideas we are served by society.

Wong intends her writings to be immortal, leaving to future activists (and, if you ask her, being disabled requires one to be an activist to survive) a legacy that evades the erasure that has marginalized and excluded generations of disabled people. Nearly 20 years Wong's senior, Riva Lehrer captures the need for such collective community, complete with elders, in her own memoir, *Golem Girl*. "My own adulthood has only been possible for the last fifty or so years," Lehrer writes (p. 13). An artist, writer, and teacher, she is a Jewish woman with spina bifida from Cincinnati whose memoir is art interwoven with words. She tells the story of a girl who yearns to be lovable, desirable, and worthy within the constructs of "normal" but becomes a woman who rejects these ideals, replacing them with creation, art, and companionship.



Lehrer's story is often one of loss: of organs, of homes, of parents, of lovers. It is a memoir centered in Disability, but it starkly resists the ableist tendency toward pain reading. Among the losses Lehrer narrates is the loss of "normal," which most deeply colors the discovery and creation of joy.

There is a deeply intimate quality to Lehrer's writing; she expertly mingles her own history and geography with the hard facts and social realities of Disability in America: medical malfeasance, exploitation and sexual abuse, workplace discrimination, educational inequity, street harassment, and exclusion of myriad varieties. Through an unwrapping of her identity in Chapter 45 ("One of Us"), Lehrer poignantly describes the cult of normal that maintains these inequities and harms:

> Our true obstacle was not how our bodies or minds functioned; it was having to wrangle with physical and social environments that ignored our existence.... I had spent years fighting against misogyny, homophobia, and anti-Semitism, yet I'd so easily believed that I *should* be ashamed of my body that I'd never understood that shame was both the product of and tool of injustice. (p. 243; italics in original)

This realization was made possible through being in community with other Disabled folks. The art she creates and the training she imparts challenge the medical model view of Disability, demanding personhood and autonomy and casting new visions of beauty.

Although Lehrer is featured in *Year of the Tiger* and Wong sits as a subject for Riva's portrait work, their memoirs are distinct works of unique experience. Where they notably converge is in their timely and urgent messages about the creativity that disabled people have harnessed to survive and thrive and in their calls to acknowledge how this type of creativity is needed now more than ever in our pandemic of disease and climate chaos.

> [W]hat defines strength, in a time of crisis? In the coming decades, humanity must reimagine how to do every damned thing in the world. Disabled people are experts

> in finding new ways to do things when the old ways don't work. We are a vast think tank right in plain sight. A bottomless well of ingenuity and creativity. (Lehrer, p. 370)
>
> Adaptation is care work. Adaptation is survival. Adaptation is a negotiation between the past and the present. Adaptation is a science and art. Adaptation pushes boundaries and creates new futures. (Wong, p. 131)

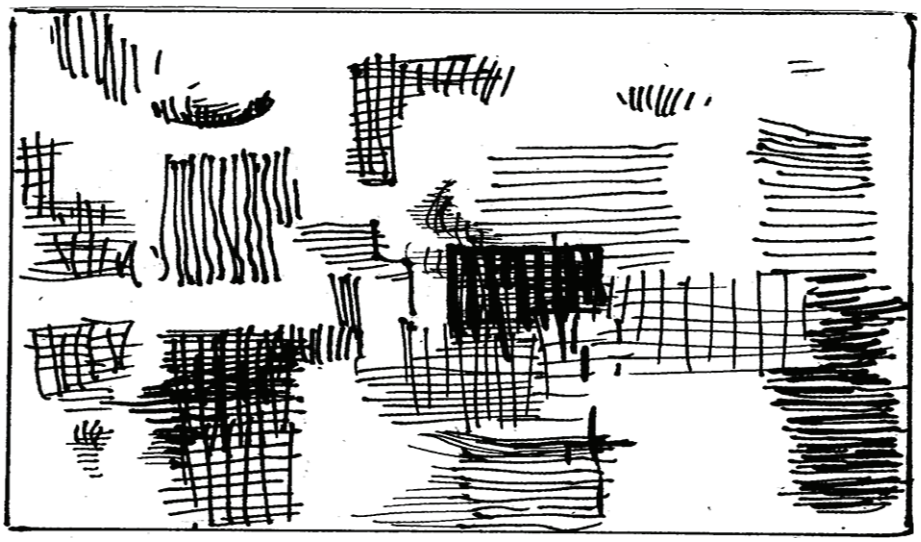
Such assertions, however — including the suggestion that the hard-won, life-supporting creativity of Disabled people has the potential to be of service to the able-bodied — are not meant to imply that Disabled people's worth and value depend on providing such service. They are, rather, a nod to the demands both of these memoirs make for radically inclusive futures with collective values: futures in which we not only imagine different ways of living, but decenter dominant stories of normal, prioritize safety and accessibility, and abolish institutions and social constructs that stand in the way.

With varying use of explicit language but equally powerful narratives, *Year of the Tiger* and *Golem Girl* call ableism out and call readers in to activism, advocacy, and radical acts of collective inclusivity. These modern, first-person sources of lived experience and social commentary can inform and guide students, scholars, and researchers in gender and women's studies (and in intersecting fields) into a broader, deeper, more expansive view of the world and center the labor and contributions of disabled folks — labor and contributions that create new, abundant possibilities for all.

Note

1. This review honors the vocabulary, terminology, and capitalization used by both Wong and Lehrer, whose practices sometimes differ, and is guided by Riva Lehrer's notes on language on pages 242–243 of *Golem Girl.* For example, Lehrer notes that "[f]rom here on out, I will use capital-D Disabled when it refers to the political identity.... The use may be somewhat inconsistent, since whether or not the appellation is appropriate can be a hard call, particularly when referring to someone else" (p. 243 note); meanwhile, in Wong's book the word *disabled* does not begin with a capital D in running text.

Liz Grauel is an assistant professor and digital pedagogy librarian at the University of Dayton. She is a recent graduate of Dominican University's M.L.I.S. program with special focus on social justice and critical race information theory. Beyond scholarship and work, Liz can be found reading, spoiling her pets (Pete and Orla), and trying new kitchen experiments with her husband.



Miriam Greenwald