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**Rod Michalko (2017). *Things Are Different Here*.
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Reviewed by Kristin Snoddon
Assistant Professor
School of Linguistics and Language Studies
Carleton University
kristin.snoddon@carleton.ca

Reading Rod Michalko's first short-story collection, *Things Are Different Here*, brings to mind of deaf anthropologist Annelies Kusters' (2017) description of what happens when "the sensory ecology is not reciprocal" (394). In Michalko's work, as in Kusters' study, the lack of reciprocity causes disability to be a site of creative production; blind interlocutors negotiate their environments and interactions with other participants in ways that can appear unconventional to sighted observers. Michalko's representation of these negotiations, in the form of twelve short stories, set mainly in Toronto's Annex neighbourhood (but also in Chicago and Manchester), brings a fresh perspective to disability portrayals in literature. This feeling of newness is not only due to representations of blindness from the inside, but also because these stories interrupt what Lennard Davis (2006) calls the tendency of fiction "to pull toward the normative" (13), either by marginalizing disabled characters or by following arcs of plot that lead to the restoration of the normal.

While Michalko spares his reader from a normative plot, the stories also bring a sense of the ordinariness of everyday life. "Explain Yourself," the first story in the collection, is structured around a shoot-the-breeze dialogue of sighted and blind gym buddies Jason and Matthew stopping for coffee. With understated humour, this story turns to canny observations about the quirks of sighted Jason, who takes pride in being friends with Matthew and tells other people "all sorts of stories" (22) about how Matthew's blindness came about. The next story,

“Studio Apartment in D Major,” similarly revolves around humorous exchanges between Marcus, a blind aspiring blues musician, and sighted others jamming in a club. This story features both Marcus’ ambition—he censures himself for thinking of a woman he has just met “in practical terms” (47) of how good she is as a fellow musician—and enjoyment of his evening of song.

Other stories portray both the ease and hazards of the built environment. In “The Blended Curb,” “rolling stocker” Tony and “blind dude” Eli consume a few too many beers in a bar selected for its accessible washroom. As Eli observes, “No one even think about the bathroom. He gotta be blind or a gimp or some kinda crip ‘fore you even think ‘bout the bathroom” (58). Here, the friends overcome the consternation of the bar server and manager who worry about “those two drinkin’ and drinkin’ ... and havin’ some kinda accident” (69). Outside this environment, however, a tipsy Eli encounters a disorienting sidewalk that “tilted downward and blended into the curb” and so was “[g]ood for people in wheelchairs, but not for him” (54), as he is hit by a car. Reassuringly, Eli survives to drink again with Tony in a later story, “The Darkness,” where he also confronts his fear of being “enveloped in a darkness that he didn’t know” (122). Similarly, in the book’s title story, “Things Are Different Here,” unexpected flashes of light (in place of the “[t]iny, shimmering, brightly coloured lights” (254) that the main character habitually sees) throw him off balance. In this way, Michalko portrays blind people’s fears in place of the fears of sighted people: the worst aspects of being blind are not what the sighted imagine.

“Chasing Sight” and “Reliable Witness” both feature flirtatious exchanges between sighted and blind interlocutors that reveal the unexpected ways in which attraction works. In other stories, however, blind characters confront the ineptitude of the sighted, as when Jenny in

“For Her” recalls people who fail to speak to her directly: “Stuff like this happened ... more often than she liked ... It was the server, and yet many servers said similar things. ‘What does she want?’ ‘What will she have?’” (202-203).

In “What They Say,” Mary, a sighted university disability awareness training facilitator, seeks to involve Bradley, the blind main character, in a session “as *proof* that people with disabilities *have* abilities” (199, emphasis in original). Bradley, meanwhile, reflects to himself, “I need to be my disability. I need to live it” (200). In Michalko’s mellow writing, blind people are presented as ordinary living beings who reflect on and confront the vagaries of existence, both in ways like everybody else and in ways that are unlike anybody else. His book offers inspiration for other readers and writers seeking a non-normative plot. I wait with anticipation for Michalko’s promised next work of fiction.

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