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**M. Leona Godin. (2021). *There Plant Eyes: A Personal and Cultural History of Blindness*.
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M. Leona Godin's *There Plant Eyes: A Personal and Cultural History of Blindness* is, as its title suggests, a combined memoir and narrative of cultural constructions of blindness and blind people. Godin is a writer, performer, and educator who teaches part-time at New York University, and the founder of *Aromatica Poetica*, an online magazine that explores smell and taste. Like me, she is a well-read Generation Xer with an acquired impairment who has persevered to master our impairments' associated arts: in her case, the white cane and braille; in mine, American Sign Language.

The book is organized into an Introduction and seventeen chapters that chronicle Western constructs of blindness, or what Godin, following Richard Dawkins' concept of "cultural replicators," calls "blind memes" (p. 271). Along the way, Godin makes abundant reference to works published by and about other blind writers and creators. Although Godin states in the Introduction that "this book is not about me and my decades of vision loss (which, similar to aging, has been almost imperceptibly slow, incremental, adaptive, and frankly a bit boring)" (p. xi), there is much about her experiences that I found useful and illuminating. While the book provides an erudite overview of blindness in Western mythology, literature, philosophy, and science, it also addresses matters of epistemic injustice and in so doing, becomes more personal. In some ways, I found these personal anecdotes to be the most compelling parts of the book. In discussing the prejudice and discrimination that

she and other blind people face in relationships, employment, art, and popular culture, Godin provides what Snyder and Mitchell (2005, p. 12) termed “a tool of cultural diagnosis.”

In Chapter 1, Godin begins with the legendary aspect of Homer’s blindness and relays that she began reading *The Odyssey* in grade ten but stopped due to her deteriorating sight. Resuming her study of the classics in college where she had access to technology that made reading accessible, she learned “to read metaphorical blindness against its realities” (p. 5). The figures of the blind bard whose poetic and musical gifts compensate for lack of sight, and of the blind seer or prophet, feature in “three millennia of Western literature” (p. 14). However, Godin writes, “it is the idea of blindness, not the experience of blind people, that is important to sighted readers and audiences” (p. 15). This theme continues in Chapter 2 with Sophocles’ depiction of Oedipus’ self-blinding, an event that recurs in Shakespeare’s *King Lear* (covered in Chapter 4). In Chapter 3, Godin analyzes depictions of blindness in the Bible that were shaped by “a Greek-speaking world” (p. 31) and by Socrates and Plato’s ideas of seeing and not-seeing, of physical and spiritual blindness.

While Jesus healed the blind and deaf alike, blindness has much more prominence than deafness in Christian theology and in Western literature. As Godin argues, the meanings ascribed to blindness are linked to how vision is perceived as both “the most useful and important sense” and “the most distracting, superficial, and temptation-laden sense” (p. 37). Helen Keller also avowed that to be deaf is worse than it is to be blind. However, as Godin reveals in Chapter 13 about discrimination in employment, the ableism that blind writers face is not so different from what I face as a deaf scholar. As she writes, when she brought her partner to a writer’s retreat to supplement her “indifferent mobility skills,” this “seemed to

indicate to my fellow writers that I was less professionally capable” (p. 211). The other writers present apparently preferred talking to Godin’s partner and found him more interesting. This certainly corresponds to my experience as a scholar and presenter where attention and accolades often fall on a sign language interpreter instead of me.

As Godin trenchantly notes in Chapter 10 discussing blind travellers and James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, “Sighted people tend to celebrate the quotidian skills in blind people they encounter and, at the same time, discount the information a blind person might obtain by means incomprehensible to them as sighted people” (p. 168). In other words, despite the fetishization of blindness in literature and culture, blind people are subject to epistemic injustice where their knowledge is disregarded because of the social position they occupy. For instance, John Milton, the subject of Chapter 6 (and from whose *Paradise Lost* the book’s title is drawn) was dismissed by T.S. Eliot as someone who “may be said never to have seen anything” (p. 87). Similarly, as Godin recounts in painful detail in Chapter 14, a 2018 episode of *Jimmy Kimmel Live* featured the actor Donald Glover making a string of jokes about Stevie Wonder. (Glover was incredulous that Wonder, who has long made advanced use of technology in his music, could read such items as text messages and TV scripts.) Epistemic injustice also discounts the specialist knowledge accrued by blind people and the ways in which their life experiences inform their sundry talents. For instance, had he not become blind in midlife, Milton would perhaps not have given up his anti-royalist political pamphleteering and, long before the invention of Braille, taken to composing and memorizing epic poetry in bed.

As Godin narrates in Chapters 5 and 7, with his invention of the telescope Galileo revealed the limitations of species-typical vision, and the philosopher John Locke recognized that blind people often know the world through touch. People learn to see in specific, culturally determined ways that are also linked to what Godin terms ocularcentrism, which “dictates that blindness, when literal, translates into not just a different but a lesser way of perceiving the world” (p. xi). In Chapter 7, Godin also discusses the limitations of various medical efforts to restore blind people’s sight, and, in chapter 8, she describes the founding of the first school for the blind in 1785 that Louis Braille (the subject of Chapter 9) attended. As Godin narrates, ocularcentrism has prevented many blind individuals from learning braille. Yet, Braille’s creation endures.

Chapter 11 describes Helen Keller’s career as a vaudeville artist and Godin’s own love of performance art that led her to create a play about Keller. Chapter 12 discusses blind people’s sexuality (including that of the canny Ray Charles). Disarmingly, Godin confesses that blindness “can make a person paranoid in the love department” (p. 204). Chapters 13 and 14 narrate the discrimination that blind people face in employment and art, while Chapter 15 discusses blind superheroes and the myth of the “superblind,” or the special powers of blind people. If I have one criticism of Godin’s book, it is that she has a tendency to finish a few of the later chapters with chirpy platitudes about overcoming ableism. However, her sunny ways also enhance the book, as does her clear prose. In Chapter 16, Godin discusses the limitations of perception and muses ambivalently about having her sight restored. Chapter 17 closes the book with a discussion of the “vast network of blind memes that dot our cultural landscape”

(p. 271). Godin also reveals that “During the writing of this book, I have lost most of the remainder of my vision” (p. 282).

In this review, I have but scratched the surface of Godin’s book with its richness, complexity, and myriad references to historic and contemporary cultural figures, blind authors, and more. This book uncovers many hidden gems. It deserves to be widely read and discussed. I recommend it highly for all disability studies and literary and cultural scholars as well as for anyone who is interested in our shared and not-shared understandings of the world.

References

Snyder, S.L. & Mitchell, D.T. (2005). *Cultural locations of disability*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.