

Philip Kirby and Margaret Jean Snowling

*Dyslexia: A History*

Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2022, 280 pp.

The book *Dyslexia: A History* was published in 2022—the same year in which the Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC) released its *Right to Read* report, which aims to secure “an equal opportunity to learn to read” (2) by launching an inquiry “focused on word-level reading” and “phonics programs” (5) and by recommending that “the Ministry of Education, faculties of education and school boards explicitly recognize the term ‘dyslexia’” (9).<sup>8</sup> The timing of the two publications is an interesting coincidence. The report insists on a “science of reading” (3) and also recommends that “dyslexia” be regarded as “well researched and understood,” (8), “the most common learning disability” (9) and the most prevalent special education exceptionality” (9). In contrast, *Dyslexia: A History's* “central ambition” is to “prevent mistakes of the past from being repeated” by offering an “understanding of the different sides of dyslexia’s fascinating story” (x) and historically situating the agents behind dyslexia’s complex conceptual development. This historical account appears, then, just as school boards across Ontario have been tasked with implementing the OHRC’s report’s 157 recommendations including twice-yearly mandatory screening of young students for signs of dyslexia which treats dyslexia an individual problem. At a time where a more singular version of reading and problems with reading are being institutionalized as a scientific fact, “well researched and understood,” *Dyslexia: A History* serves as a necessary and timely reminder of other possible interpretations of reading, readers, and problems. Its authors, Philip Kirby and Margaret Jean Snowling offer a contrasting interpretation to the singular view of the government report since they show how people are not disabled “by their own personal difficulties with reading or writing, but by the almost universal requirement in high-income countries for certain levels of literacy to obtain educational and career success” (8).

This book details a (mostly) UK-based history of the medical, psychological, and educational factors that have constituted the meaning of dyslexia. The authors make clear how dyslexia is a condition tied to the assumptions upon which the structures of mass education and mass literacy are based. When read alongside current reports on reading that regard dyslexia as unequivocal fact, well researched and understood, Kirby and Snowling’s *Dyslexia: A History* serves as a necessary counter-narrative expanding our collective relations both to literacy and to those who have problems with reading. This understanding includes a focus on the many professional people involved in identifying and treating problem readers as this plays out in the lives of children at a time when countries base governance and professional participation on literacy.

Regarding dyslexia as a history still in the making, Kirby and Snowling’s book

8 Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC), *Right to Read: Public Inquiry into Human Rights Issues Affecting Students with Reading Disabilities: Executive summary*, (Ontario: Government of Ontario, 2022)

shows how this individualizing category of human trouble is tied to a host of social, political, and economic factors:

A person born with dyslexia in the West today will engage with a myriad of views on the condition during their lifetime, from teachers, educational psychologists, child psychiatrists, parents, employers, journalists, filmmakers, and others—those with dyslexia and those without... The scope of dyslexia at the start of the 2020s is vast. Different interpretations of the condition exist in science and education, in provision and politics, in media and advocacy (163).

The socially situated character of dyslexia is highlighted throughout but made especially prevalent in the final and fourth part of this book, “Legacies.” Dyslexia’s legacies are traced in three main ways: through representations in popular media, in discourses tied to middle class mythmaking and educational policy, and most recently through the neurodiversity movements. Like any legacy, dyslexia’s legacy is ongoing and related to how it began.

In “Part One: Foundations,” (1877–1917), Kirby and Snowling provide a fascinating account of the historical transformation of “word blindness” (22) into a condition called “dyslexia” (26). Knowledge of this condition becomes one more imperial export, unevenly distributed, throughout the globe (1925–1948). It is in “Foundations” that the figure of the otherwise “bright and intelligent boy” (24) of means who struggles with “his letters” is introduced (29). The “otherwise bright and intelligent” figure does not fit neatly into any of the disability-categories at play with the advent of mass literacy and eugenics, in otherwords the idiot, imbecile, or moron (24). Nonetheless, the otherwise bright child struggling to read is a troubling figure since with the advent of mass literacy as foundational to governance and the professions, obtaining comprehension through reading seems crucial for securing one’s power and/or place in literate societies.

“Part Two: Evidence” (1962–1972), charts the interpretive chain that follows as “word blindness” disappears as a concept through to where dyslexia appears as a keyway to mark a gap between a child’s brightness and their lack of capacity to read in a way similar to their peers (63–85). Of course, brightness, like dyslexia, has its social and political grounds and “Part Three: Recognition: The Example of Britain” (1962–2010) discusses the history of recognition surrounding “the dyslexic” as it is influenced by class, gender, and race. Through the recognition imparted by ever-developing medico-bureaucratic structures, dyslexia gains its official status as a mental difference that signifies a disorder occurring about sixty years ago. In *Dyslexia: A History* we do not so much meet the experience of difficulty with reading as we do get fully acquainted with those “moral entrepreneurs” who established the phenomenon of dyslexia in its various manifestations.<sup>9</sup>

In under 150 years, dyslexia has been established as the primary condition shaping

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9 Howard S. Becker, 1963. *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance* (New York: Free Press Glencoe, 1963). 147–153.

how we might experience educational difficulties. Meanwhile, a singular focus on reading as a strictly individual capacity to decode and comprehend has overtaken the mystery of reading. The culture of reading for reading problems is now understood as a science and the norms, agents and structures upholding literacy are de-historicized, or almost forgotten.

*Dyslexia: A History* offers a necessary counterbalance to current cultural assumptions about dyslexia as an ahistorical category. This book engages a wider interest in the culture of literacy and mass education, necessary for any teacher, parent, or in fact any reader to appreciate the cultural complexity of belonging in societies that base participation on individual reading ability. Allowing the complex mystery of reading to emerge through engaging the history of dyslexia's conceptual development might lead to something other than the recognition of dyslexia as the problem it is already taken to be. Dyslexic people, including myself, as well as anyone else concerned with the question of how best to comprehend this situated character of reading in literate times will benefit greatly from *Dyslexia: A History*.

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