



An Abled Life: Challenging the Limits of Polio

Thomas C. Wilczewski

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An Abled Life is an excellent, timely memoir about a lifelong illness, its consequences, and growing up with a disability in America's golden era.

The polio vaccine was patented in 1955. Eleven years earlier, Thomas C. Wilczewski was born; before he was school-aged, he contracted polio. The illness changed his life. *An Abled Life: Challenging the Limits of Polio* is a touching, unforgettable memoir about growing up before polio was nearly eradicated in the United States.

Wilczewski survived the polio virus, but severe health consequences lasted the duration of his childhood, and had a profound impact on his adult life. "I had severe scoliosis of the spine, a weak right arm, and legs that were useless," he recalls. "I was very thin and had little stamina." After spending almost a year in the iron lung, he was able to begin breathing on his own. Hot baths, torturous stretching exercises, a wooden wheelchair, and metal leg braces were all part of Wilczewski's treatment. His grueling recovery stands in profound contrast to the other, normal parts of his childhood.

Distinct and colorful memories of an orderly juggling hard-boiled eggs, his toy fire engine, and Laurel & Hardy fill the pages. Wilczewski incorporates timely details about his home, family, and neighborhood in a way that transports back to an earlier, simpler America—though one not without its own problems. His insights into immigration, public health, and social expectations are hard-hitting, in part because they're never made explicit.

Polio is a silent, influential presence throughout the book; it is Wilczewski's lifelong partner, enemy, and foil. *An Abled Life* shows that, for all its challenges, polio couldn't steal Wilczewski's sense of humor or his keen appreciation for the life he's led.

The book is well written, with beautifully crafted sentences. Wilczewski's descriptions are clean and to the point, often breathtaking in their unsparing language; he balances the joys and hardships of a life affected by polio. Wilczewski lets pain and happiness coexist without self-judgment or dramatization. Although there's no question that his life might have taken a very different course had he not contracted polio, Wilczewski doesn't sit in regret or play the victim. He simply supplies the story, and invites the reader to decide how they feel.

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