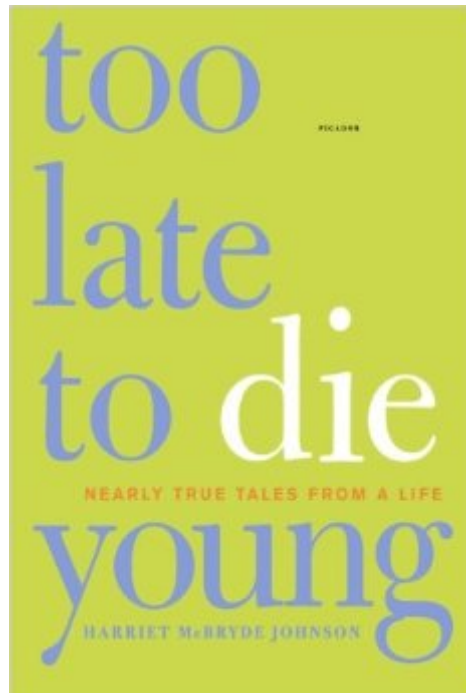


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# Too Late To Die Young: Nearly True Tales From A Life



## Synopsis

A Washington Post Book World Rave Harriet McBryde Johnson's witty and highly unconventional memoir opens with a lyrical meditation on death and ends with a bold and unsentimental sermon on pleasure. Born with a congenital neuromuscular disease, Johnson has never been able to walk, dress, or bathe without assistance. With assistance, she passionately celebrates her life's richness and pleasures and pursues a formidable career as an attorney and activist. Whether rolling on the streets of Havana, on the floor of the Democratic National Convention in Chicago, or in an auditorium at Princeton debating philosopher Peter Singer, Harriet McBryde Johnson defies every preconception about people with disabilities, and shows how a life, be it long or short, is a treasure of infinite value.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Rarely have I read a book with so many compelling reasons to be read. First, it is a wonderful read, full of fabulous prose, compelling personal stories and humor. Second, it addresses topics that currently transcend just a "disability" story. For people just recovering their sensibilities after the excesses of the Shaivo case, or others of the "better dead than disabled" school the simple "normalcy" of the author's life will entertain, shock and amaze you. This woman is, after all, just like most everyone else. With the exception that the author does not let you forget that she is a southerner, proud of Charleston, fond of regional cuisine and appaled by such things as confederate flags and pity. But what makes Johnson's tale stand out is her personal analysis of

mainstream culture's preordained attitudes on disability. Whether she is trashing the "telethon-pity-do-gooder" ethos or demonstrating the limits of freedom for a person with a disability in a for-profit economy, Johnson rejects most commonly held views and specifically the "snivelling for nickels" school of so called advocacy that forces people to become more and more dependent on the whims of public policy decisions. There is nothing tragic here. In fact, Johnson is very, very funny. Disability has been around a long time but rarely has it been portrayed with such honesty, humor and analysis. Do yourself a favor ... read this book!!

This new book by Harriet McBryde Johnson, a civil rights attorney in Charleston, SC and disability activist, is a must read! Her book, *Too Late to Die Young*, provides insight into aspects of her life and career, but the author states upfront that "This book doesn't have a tidy message." Ms. Johnson is a gifted writer with a provocatively tilted perspective that is worth hearing. She accurately describes herself as a story teller in the great tradition of southern story tellers. I knew her stories were worth reading when, early on in the book, in describing a German doctor's bedside overnight care, she wrote "Now I remember how he kept vigil at my bedside so my parents could sleep and then fell sleep himself. As I listened to his deep, barrel-chested rumble, I imagined he was snoring in German." Later in the book, Harriet, after having noted that her normal viewpoint of most people is at crotch level (due to her posture), described her first impression of someone she met: "It's love at first sight - at my first sight of his shoes." Wonderful! This easy to read book (a mere 258 pages) includes the bulk of the text of *Unspeakable Conversations*, a 2003 New York Times Magazine article she wrote that described her conversations with Princeton Professor Peter Singer about his beliefs that the severely disabled, in some circumstances, can justifiably be killed. Interestingly, she is conflicted about the accommodating and courteous man versus his "evil" ideas. She acknowledges that she stands outside the radical mainstream simply for having engaged Mr. Singer in a conversation. Sundry other topics this self-described "crip" covers are her personal crusade against telethons, her atheism, her battles with the Secret Service, caustically amusing anecdotes from the 1996 Democratic Convention in Chicago, a trip to Cuba, and battles with a New York Times photographer who wants to shoot her nude ("nekkid" in her parlance) and does -- but not for publication, and many more amusing and unsettling stories. If you want to read a sweet story about a courageous and noble fight against disability that profiles an individual who overcomes great obstacles to achieve self-fulfillment, this IT NOT the book to read. Johnson's book isn't about her disability (adamantly so)...but the fact that she is disabled inescapably colors her stories in powerful ways. You won't necessarily fall in love with Harriet, her politics, or all of her causes, but I think you

will love her passion for what she believes, what she does, who she is, and why she does what she does. Ms. McBryde is a new and profound voice (at least to me) that is worth listening to.

In her "Unspeakable Conversations" piece, Johnson distills all the Disability Rights Movements' often academic arguments into "We enjoy pleasures...We have something the world needs." In so doing, she frees herself (and us) from the depressing statistics about bigotry/discrimination/incarceration/murder and instead makes the importance of this human rights struggle's triumph seem to have a chance of success. It's a completely different approach than Rachel Carson's "Silent Spring" but with any luck could have a similar effect on society. By telling stories that have been honed through repeated smaller-audience repetitions, she gets the essentially exultant message of our shared humanity across in great style. If you wondered "why the caged bird sings" (thank you, Maya!), this collection provides lots of answers. From the heights of chutzpah of invoking (with absolutely no basis) a set of bodyguards from the Fruit of Islam through the prima donna encounter with the Times' photographer (and the tasty accreditation of her in the acknowledgements), she lays bare why we hope her rationality/humanity might even sway Prof. Singer from unfortunate sociopath to advocate. Love.

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