

Raising Adam: Ethnicity, Disability, and the Ethics of Life Writing in Michael Dorris's *The Broken Cord*.

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Abstract

Michael Dorris's *The Broken Cord* (1989) combines elements of several life writing genres—for example, Native American autobiography, autoethnography, parental memoir, and disability memoir. Its mixture of genres raises questions about the ethics of parental life writing and the representation of people with disabilities. Ultimately, despite its reformist intentions, the book echoes rather than revises traditional inscriptions of race and disability.

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Fatherhood does not confer surrogacy.
— Cynthia Ozick (80)

Michael Dorris's *The Broken Cord* (1989) can be read as several kinds of life writing—parental memoir, Native American autobiography, and pathography. Despite the urgency of Dorris's concerns and the power of his testimony, the book's combination of these various genres is ultimately in conflict with its reformist intentions. Disentangling some of the text's generic and thematic threads reveals its internal tensions. In particular, it raises questions about the ethics of parental life writing and of the representation of people with disabilities.

* * * * *

The Broken Cord invites us to read it first as a family memoir—more specifically, as a parental narrative of raising a disabled child. Family memoirs are necessarily relational, plural rather than singular in focus; inherently unstable, they oscillate between biography and autobiography. (The publisher's classification of the book acknowledges its fluctuating focus; on the back cover of the paperback edition, one finds the accurate but hardly adequate label "autobiography/child care.") As in all narratives that involve an intimate relation between author and subject, in *The Broken Cord* the author/narrator—as well as his ostensible subject, his son—comes under scrutiny.⁷

The politics and ethics of parental memoir are inherently problematic. At least in the sense that parents have privileged access to their children, the parental memoir is always a species of "authorized biography." Indeed, parents generally have access to aspects of their children's lives that the children themselves

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