

CALLING THE BLUFF ON SHOW-DON'T-TELL

a review by Laura Hope-Gill

James Tate Hill. *Blind Man's Bluff: A Memoir*. W.W. Norton & Company, 2021.

LAURA HOPE-GILL directs the Thomas Wolfe MFA Program at Lenoir-Rhyne University and is the founding director of Asheville Wordfest. She was diagnosed in 2001 with bilateral sensorineural deafness and is a North Carolina Arts Council Fellow for her writings on deafness, which she is developing into a memoir entitled *Deaf Sea Scrolls* (Pisgah Press, forthcoming). Read her essay on narrative medicine in *NCLR* 2021. She was named poet laureate of the Blue Ridge Parkway by the National Forest Service and Blue Ridge Parkway Foundation for her collection, *The Soul Tree* (Grateful Steps, 2009), which also won the one of the first Okra Pick Awards by the Southern Independent Booksellers Alliance. She has written two architectural histories of Asheville, *Look Up Asheville 1* and *2* (Grateful Steps, 2010). She has produced two short films with Climate Listening Project (*Earth People Words*, *Planet Prescription*) and *God's Promise*, a play by Palestinian playwright and director, Ahmed Najjar, at Cockpit Theatre in London, England, the first in a series.

A resident of Greenboro, NC, **JAMES TATE HILL** is a columnist for *Literary Hub*, a fiction editor for *Monkeybicycle*, and a Professor of writing at North Carolina A&T State University. He is also the author of *Academy Gothic* (Southeast Missouri State University Press, 2015), which won the Nilsen Literary Prize for a First Novel.

COURTESY OF CYNTHIA BICKLEY-GREEN



As a disability memoir, *Blind Man's Bluff* by James Tate Hill deepens the treads left by other vehicles exploring this off-road world of the body gone wrong. Some that have gone before include *Lucy Grealy's Autobiography of a Face* (1994), Tom Andrew's *Codeine Diary* (1998), Jean-Dominique Bauby's *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* (1997), Kay Redfield Jamison's *An Unquiet Mind* (1996), and more recently Haben Girma's *Haben: The Deafblind Woman Who Conquered Harvard Law* (2019). Hundreds of titles fall between, each one harnessing the power of the personal discovery we find when our limbs, senses, cells, and minds drive us into it. Articulating that discovery, Hill selects scenes of friendship, dating and relationships, and solitude and switches point of view from first to third

person, adding to the theme of relating to others by drawing the reader into his point of view, making it ours. The choices he makes follow the rules of contemporary memoir where abiding by simpler methods of storytelling might better serve the story he tells.

While Hill presents conversations and uncomfortable social situations in novelistic precision, generous with dialogue and character, the best sections of *Blind Man's Bluff* arise when he is engaging the mentation of the memoirist revealing the interior life of disability. In these sections he proffers wisdom and eloquence, which are lacking in the telling of what happens. Luminous sentiments only occasionally break through the mundane, then vanish under the more prosaic, showing rather than telling. With Hill's sensibility and

insight, telling would push the book deeper into its purpose, to illuminate the experience of overcoming one's own ableism in an ableist world. The necessary problem (and the unwritten law of the memoir) is how much time we must spend showing how many messes we make before we have a realization.

In structuring *Blind Man's Bluff*, Hill respects this imperative as he tracks his journey to divorce and through a chronology of concealment, from himself and others, of the reality of his disability, blindness. When Hill tells a Cracker Barrel cashier he can't use the touchscreen, it's a revelatory moment that only happens in three sentences. This moment, a moment iconic for people with hidden disabilities, could start the book for its weight and meaning.

The book is about one man's search for a partner, and he happens to be blind, when it could be a book about the power of disability to transform us and our lives, even if it means letting go of people who won't help us.

The imperative of memoirs keeping the narrator ignorant of their own awakening really lets Hill and us down. The story is framed meticulously by the impending doom of the marriage, whereas it ought to be framed by the acceptance of help from others and the question, don't we all need this? Also, the narrator's decision to live a big life opens the final chapters to a richer narrative told in a warmer, more introspective voice, almost as though Hill is relaxing into the memoir's gift of reflection. That's the book that would place the narrative in an essential question, rather than

in a recounting of a dating-and-marriage-and-divorce history. In every scene, that question of help lies at the center. Why not bring it to the fore? By focusing on the trappings of "good storytelling" – dialogue and scene – we lose Hill's voice, which when he writes honestly about blindness and love and life draws the reader into his interior world. From that vantage, all experience in the memoir shimmers with lessons that the current structure withholds to meet what seem to have become the requirements for memoir.

Another imperative of contemporary memoir often leads us to experiment with form. For three sections, Hill jars the reader into second person point-of-view. The technique adds variety but little else, although one could argue that it symbolizes the narrator reaching out to have his experience seen through other's eyes. Readers don't work that hard, though. Hill overestimates the appeal of his subject-position. Second person narration barely worked in *Bright Lights Big City*, and it is perhaps too gimmicky for a memoir, a genre in which vulnerability and honesty ought to champion quip and wit, these latter two of which *Blind Man's Bluff* has plenty. These chapters, as with the whole book, could be heartbreaking. In the flash of contemporary narrative fashion, we miss out on the beauty Hill is capable of rendering but renders too seldom, a beauty that needs simply to be told the old way, from beginning to end, in one voice, one perspective.

As is the case with most books, there is another book hiding behind this one, a book about *being blind*. Hill's insights

are gorgeous on this topic, as are his details of the switches and levers a blind person learns to use in order for the world to work for him. But would W.W. Norton pick up such a book? Are we there yet in the world of (disabled) letters? Books that sell are about *change* more than they are about *being*. (Movies about being gay are usually movies about coming out.) The all-powerful narrative structure costs us in this regard. Virginia Woolf observes this in her essay on being and non-being ("A Sketch from the Past," 1939–40) and in all her works, wherein the reader loses herself in pages of gazing into a tidepool by the sea.

Viewers and readers in the status quo need their antagonists and their conflict and often prey, as a result, on our years of adjustment more than on our tales of just being disabled and having lives. At what point on the map of the world of letters will the genius of being disabled be the story rather than an elegy on "normalness"? While we wait, *Blind Man's Bluff* warrants a place in the literature insofar as it maps the presence and experience of a person with a disability. This library can always expand with our journeys, our stories, our exhausting efforts to make our way in an ableist society, our anxieties regarding relationships, our impulses to give up on all of it and just dwell in solitude, our hope that we will find people who will keep us connected to the social world and jobs that will keep us connected to the economy. All of this is in *Blind Man's Bluff*, related in blistering clarity, just in too short bursts through the dominant narrative of finding love, itself a tale worth telling. ■

ABOVE *Lady Bug/Covid Two*, 2021 (acrylic paint on Arches watercolor paper, 12x16) by Cynthia Bickley-Green, another work from the series featured on the covers of *NCLR's* 2021 issues, which featured *Writing Toward Healing*