Re-Imagined Identity:

Construction of a “Usable Past” in the Works of Anne Finger

BY

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THESIS

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SUMMARY

In this thesis, I explore disabled feminist author Anne Finger’s use of the past in personal and social identity through a close reading and literary analysis of four of her works. Historians have recently argued for the importance of creating a disability history as an integral part of disability culture, highlighting the role of history in social identity and cultural and political change. Likewise, Finger uses her own definition of the past to re-imagine personal and social identity as shown through her memoirs: Past Due and Elegy for a Disease as well as her works of fiction: Bone Truth and Call me Ahab.

In both the fiction and memoir, Finger uses a multifaceted definition of the past, including historical events, social representations and narratives, family history, individual histories, and the physical and social past of the impaired body. Finger dismantles and reassembles these various parts of the past in order to make is useful to her identity construction as a disabled woman. Finger demonstrates how a re-interpretation of the past can allow for a re-imagining of current and future identity. She shows how cultural and personal stories live on to shape the social psyche, but shows that these narratives are subjective, thus allowing the past to become usable.
I. INTRODUCTION

Since at least the 1980s, historians have been challenging the way in which their academic discipline has approached disability. Disability studies historian Paul Longmore describes the importance of a “disability history” and calls for its intentional compilation in his coedited anthology *The New Disability History: American Perspectives* (2001), which includes studies from fourteen scholars whose work addresses “the pervasive presence of disability and its conspicuous absence from the historiography” (2). His collection of single authored works *Why I Burned my Book and Other Essays on Disability* (2003), brings together thirteen seminal essays Longmore wrote between the 1980s and 2000s. Also in 2003, Catherine Kudlick published an essay entitled “Disability History: Why We Need Another ‘Other’” that reviews the emerging historical literature from a disability studies perspective. Longmore, along with these others, has called attention to the paucity of a collective disability history, despite the fact that disability, in its various forms and understandings, has existed in every historical period. He points out, though, that historians often fail to consider how a period understands the social implications of disability and its lived experience, both of which play a significant role in any historical analysis.

When historians do consider disability, Longmore points out that they often apply current-day understandings of disability to the past, use it primarily as part of the circumstantial background, or frame it as an obstacle for individuals to overcome. Sometimes, historians characterize the disability experience as an awe-, fear-, or pity-inspiring physical quality rather than a cultural viewpoint or construction. Until recently, many histories written about disability were told in a specifically ableist context; by this I mean disability is included in histories dominated by able-bodied subjects and authors as an “other” or deviant from the prevalent
nondisabled norm. In other words, neither the disability studies community nor the disability community in general had the opportunity to make sense of, much less take ownership of, its own history. However, historians informed by disability studies are re-evaluating historical figures and events with a keen awareness of the disability paradigms of their era. As a result, scholars informed by disability studies have begun to create a collective disability history.

Longmore argues that this history would provide the groundwork for historians and activists to chart how the phenomenon of disability has changed over time and is an important element to consider in almost any historical study. This groundwork provides a powerful catalyst for future social change for people with disabilities. Longmore challenges historians to integrate a variety of minority perspectives, including those of disabled people themselves. The value of these perspectives has often been overlooked; in order to create a more inclusive history, these non-traditional histories must be incorporated into the larger historical canon. Just as other cultures and political movements have used history to emphasize injustice and call for change, disability history should provide the evidence necessary to support widespread social, political, and cultural progress. In the introduction to *Why I Burned My Book*, Longmore explains that many historians working in minority studies have called for the construction of “usable pasts” (9). He “take[s] that to mean the fashioning of historical explanations that can aid us in understanding our own present so that we can build a future that will be different, which is to say more just than it would otherwise probably become” (9). The usable past is self aware and intentional in that it relays a specific story through multiple viewpoints, including a disability perspective. By including disability as a necessary element of analysis, scholars, policy makers, and activists can make use of this disability history as a powerful vehicle for societal change.
What Longmore and Umansky call “new disability history” (2001) also provides a context for understanding how disability operates within our current political and social environment.

A strong disability history may lead to political progress, influencing the formation of policy changes, and open the doorway for the growth and acknowledgement of disability culture. In a sort of circular effect, disability culture then further informs and calls for the study of its past. Longmore expands upon the importance of this connection in his 1995 essay “The Second Phase: From Disability Rights to Disability Culture” (2003) in which he also acknowledges the importance of art and literature to the advancement of the disability rights movement. Literature, as well as other forms of disability art, can explore and challenge aspects of the culture, paving the way for further growth. Literature acts as a cultural critique, and historical studies explain the past and highlight areas of needed change. What can history, or the past, bring to disability studies literature? What roles can literary representations of the past play in the present and the future of disability culture?

Enter Anne Finger, born in the early 1950s, professional writer of fiction, short stories, and memoirs, active in both the literary and disability communities. Finger is a former professor of creative writing at both Wayne State University and the University of Texas. Her work focuses almost exclusively on the intersections of gender and disability. Finger has garnered praise in the literary community as the laureate of several awards for her fiction and short stories, including the Prairie Schooner Book Prize in Fiction for her collection of stories, Call me Ahab (2009). Finger was president of the Society for Disability Studies and continues to be active in the disability rights movement, remaining in demand as a public speaker.
Finger epitomizes Longmore’s description of the disabled artist as an active contributor to the disability rights movement. I will focus on two of Finger’s memoirs: *Past Due* (1990) and *Elegy for a Disease: A Personal and Cultural History of Polio* (2006) as well as two of her fictional works: *Bone Truth* (1994) and *Call me Ahab* (2009). In these works, Finger expands upon Longmore’s call for an intentional disability history through her own unique and eloquent take on what he calls the usable past. Finger’s usable past builds a dynamic sense of disability identity, an identity that evolves from past to present and future (not necessarily in that order). In this thesis, I argue that Finger’s understanding of the past is essential in understanding both her individual identity as a disabled woman, and the identity of the disability community as a whole. Finger is not a historian, but she often integrates facets of disability history directly into her work. She also depicts her personal past that in and of itself contributes to the canon of disability history. Finger uses history creatively, drawing on fact and the imagination. Therefore, I refer to Finger’s use of history as “the past,” to differentiate it from a typical academic sense of history and to indicate the poetic license she takes with it. Finger uses this sense of the past (both personal and social) as a lens through which to make sense of herself as a physically disabled woman. Finger’s careful construction of the past paves the road for future growth, for herself personally and for the disability community. Throughout all of her works, Finger blends cultural, social, and personal history, along with memory, in order to create a nuanced and complicated context for her writings.

Finger also practices what I will refer to as a *re-appropriation* of the past; in other words, she reclaims ownership of parts of the past which have been claimed by mainstream culture and institutions. For example, Finger argues that medical institutions have taken
ownership of the birthing process away from women who are giving birth and have claimed, or appropriated, it as their own, thus controlling the narrative around the experience as well. Finger shows that she and her characters can re-appropriate such experiences, or take them back in order to claim them as their own. By taking back parts of the disabled and female narrative from “outsiders,” Finger shows how this past can be “usable” for, rather than hurtful to, the communities to which it originally belonged. While Longmore and other historians refer to the need for a usable past, Finger provides a response to this need with her creative understanding of the past and its usefulness in re-imagining social and personal identity.

Finger’s work engages with a creative interpretation of history that encompasses more than a straightforward, disability-conscious, re-telling of personal or cultural events. Finger portrays the past using multiple combinations of the following five elements (not necessarily in this order).

First, Finger uses traditional academic history as background and context. By this, I mean the kind of history which Longmore and other historians compile and refer to. Historical events, such as the Red Scare, the emergence and prevalence of the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s, the Holocaust, and of course, the Polio epidemic, among others, run throughout and shape Finger’s narratives. This history provides a social context for the past and the experiences of Finger and her characters. While this is the most objective aspect of Finger’s interpretation of the past, Finger shows that even these established historical events can be remolded in order to be understood in a more manageable way.

Second, Finger engages with various representations of the past: the films, literature, and social stories that shape how we perceive history. The above historical events have been
documented through writing, film, and word of mouth. Helen Keller, for example, has been
written, narrated, and remembered into a sort of a dehumanized caricature, and it is this depiction
that comes to mind for most people when placing her in history. Current and past narratives
about history are extremely influential in the way the events are perceived and remembered.
Finger will show the power of the individual to question and influence these representations.

Third, Finger interacts with family history, her own and those of her fictional characters.
She explores past events that extend beyond personal experiences to include occurrences or
dynamics of the family before she or her characters were born or able to remember them. In her
memoirs, she studies and writes about her parents past, intentionally piecing together these
memories as part of her current narrative.

Fourth, Finger depicts individual histories in which she shares details of her or her
characters’ childhood, youth, and adult life, prioritizing memory and perception rather than fact.
This personal past is closely linked to and influenced by the family and social past, but refers
more specifically to events and emotions experienced by the individual, as well as how the
individual processes and synthesizes those events into the memory. For Finger, her childhood
experience of polio exists as she remembers it, despite how those memories may differ from the
actual occurrences.

Fifth, Finger describes the history of her own and others’ lived experience of impairment,
or a history of the body. Disease, impairment, and the individual body have their own physical,
as well as social, pasts. This concept seeks to express the dynamic and longstanding physical
effects of disease, impairment, and medical intervention on the body as well as the psyche.
Finger expresses the feeling of physically bearing hatred in her body through lasting childhood
surgical scars. This final aspect of the past describes the physicality of impairment as well that of traumatic experiences carried in the body.

Finger understands that academic and social history inform identity and create a background that contextualizes the individual’s experience of the past. However, she also recognizes and highlights the potentially limiting nature of these histories and the lingering effects they have on the ability of the individual to shape her own past.

Finger’s construction of the past forms a complicated and thorough framework for her literary exploration of identity while also recognizing history’s tendency to impose personal or social narratives upon all of us. Personal, cultural, family, and physical pasts influence expected roles and behaviors, a dynamic that can perpetuate a socially assigned and confining identity. Finger’s literature addresses this potential problem by treating the past with a large degree of malleability. Finger questions, dismantles, and rebuilds past events in order to challenge history in its traditional sense; she re-imagines everything from personal memory to widely accepted cultural narratives in order to experiment with different outcomes. Additionally, for Finger, memory is, in many cases, more important than actual occurrence; not the happening itself, but the memory of the event has the largest effect on both personal and community identity formation. I also argue in this thesis that for Finger, memory, not necessarily “objective” history, makes the past “usable” because it offers freedom from the confines of linear history, allowing for multiple understandings of the past and outcomes from the same event, and opening up new possibilities for the future.

In addition, I explore the ways Finger uses the past in her writing, while evading its problematically restrictive nature, to enrich her understanding of being both disabled and a
woman, as well as to situate that identity within disability and mainstream culture. I analyze her work by comparing and contrasting pieces of writing that seem to be in dialogue with one another, rather than in chronological order of their publication date. These juxtapositions illuminate how the different forms her writing takes have evolved over time.

In Finger’s memoir Past Due (1990), she uses a rather conventional straightforward memoir form to illustrate the influence of personal and family past on her experiences of abortion, pregnancy, and birth, a format that allows her to explore her identity as a disabled woman. Although Finger begins to play with memory by exposing its unreliability and transitions back and forth between adulthood and childhood, the form is mostly chronological, following Finger’s journey through pregnancy and ending as she begins to document her experience through writing. Past Due also incorporates her critique of feminist politics into her formation as a disabled feminist, making the political personal.

Sixteen years after she publishes Past Due, Finger writes a different type of memoir in Elegy for a Disease: A Personal and Cultural History of Polio (2006). This work complicates her identity by mixing personal history, memory, family history, disease history, the past physical experiences of the body, and social history. In Elegy, Finger uses a loosely chronological order, but starkly juxtaposes in alternating chapters her personal stories and memories with anecdotes about the history of the polio epidemic itself. This complex form is sometimes a jarring and disconnected experience for the reader; the reader must collaborate with Finger to make meaning for him or herself. Finger explains the unconventional, experimental form at the beginning of the book itself: “I do not want to give you just my story. It is not only that I’ve grown tired of the solipsistic tendencies of contemporary American writing--although that is true--but I also want to
write about the social experience of disability, not just the personal” (8). This transition from rather conventional and personal narrative to a complicated interweaving of the personal, political, and historical is mirrored in her fictional works.

Finger uses fiction to explore themes similar to those found in her memoirs; however, fiction writing allows her to move more clearly towards a re-imagining of the past and future. Her novel Bone Truth (1994) is written as if it were her protagonist’s (Elizabeth’s) memoir. She writes Bone Truth as a first person account of Elizabeth’s coming to terms with her difficult relationship with her father through processing her own experience of pregnancy and the birth of her son. Finger focuses on Elizabeth’s personal and family history, allowing her to dismantle complicated and challenging events and feelings in order to reconstruct an identity that both includes and defies these formative experiences. Many of Elizabeth’s life events correspond with Finger’s own life events as detailed in Past Due, written seven years earlier. When read together, the lines between fact, fiction, past, and future become even more blurred.

Finally, Finger dismantles social and personal narratives at a starkly more abstract level in Call me Ahab (2009). Finger moves completely away from personal experiences and focuses on disability and gender identity through re-imagining familiar pieces of canonical literature, narratives that make up a type of mainstream disability canon. By reconstructing familiar stories and characters, such as that of Helen Keller, Finger critiques social memory and common disability tropes in order to complicate formerly oversimplified representations of both. Her reconstruction of these stories and characters shows how every imagining of the past can render it more usable.
As a whole, this thesis explores how Finger effectively builds her individual identity as a
disabled woman by re-imagining the past, a strategy that Longmore recognizes as the artist’s
collection to social change. Finger’s literary exploration liberates the future from an ableist
past, which is essential for social and political change. As an artist, Finger can take poetic license
with the past and imagine the potential to form a more complicated and progressive disability
identity and community.

A. Literature Review

In this section, I outline key texts that have guided my literary analysis of Finger’s
writings. As I state later in the methodology section, my analysis relies strongly upon the work of
scholars from disability studies (including disability history) and feminist studies who theorize
identity formation and social change. In this literature review, I explain where in the thesis and
how they have informed my critical readings. I also point out how these theorists’ work can be
informed by Finger’s writing.

1. Identity making and disability

Throughout her career, Carol Gill, psychologist and one of the most prominent
founders of disability studies, has focused on disability identity and culture. She has written on
the formation of identity and presentation of the self, highlighting how people with disabilities
experience a sense of disconnect with society as a whole. The interplay of these two entities, the
individual and society, results in a difficult relationship that individuals, particularly those with
disabilities, must navigate in order to achieve “integration” of the self.

In the chapter “The Social Experience of Disability” (2001), Gill provides an overview of
studies on disability identity and its relationship to society. Gill highlights a common thread in
these studies: that people with disabilities “find central to their social experience” a “troubling disjuncture between the worlds of disability and nondisability” (352). The nondisabled world, according to Gill, ascribes stereotypical identities to disabled people. This leads to disabled people feeling that the identities that they have created for themselves are disregarded. She explains that disabled people “experience . . . a persistent and disquieting sense of mistaken identity” (353). Disabled people then have the responsibility of negotiating the gap between their ‘inner’ identities and the ‘outer’ identities prescribed by society. This quest for reconciling inner and outer identities can challenge and damage disabled persons’ psyches and may lead to the possible internalization of an externally-defined identity. This internalized ascribed identity may cause the individual to become alienated not only from society but also from the self. Gill asserts the need for individuals with disabilities to connect to one another and to connect to the larger society, forming “bridges” in reaction to these gaps (369).

In an earlier article, “Four Types of Integration in Disability Identity,” (1997) Gill describes the process through which these sort of “bridges” may be formed, leading to “integration” of the inner and outer identities or “the act of incorporating or combining into a whole” (39). Gill refers to “four types of integration addressed in disabled persons’ discussions of who they are and where they belong” (42). The first is “coming to feel we belong” or “integrating into society” (42). This refers to the desire and process of being included in society as a whole, the right to physical and social access to the mainstream. It also addresses a relatively recent shift in expectations of society; the onus is now on social programs and structures to be inclusive, rather than on the disabled person find a way in. The second, “coming home (integrating with the disability community)” (42) addresses the process of situating the self
within or identifying as part of the disability community. Gill describes the emotional and sometimes physical barriers to this connection, including “fears of stigma contagion” (42) and “acquiescing to society’s unwillingness to provide access to the mainstream” (42). Gill reports finding that this connection often leads to a sense of acceptance and understanding (43). Third is “coming together” or “internally integrating our sameness and differentness” (43). Gill is referring to the socially encouraged sense that the disabled person is split into disabled and nondisabled parts. The nondisabled parts are socially accepted as good, while those associated with the impairment are problematic. Gill explains “These unaffected parts would usually be referred to as ‘still good’, implying that the disabled parts were bad and should be forgotten” (43). “To reclaim our disabled parts and become emotionally whole, we have had to reject the values that reject our differentness” (44). The fourth is “coming out (integrating how we feel with how we present ourselves)” (45). This final type of integration refers to the ability, especially those who identify as minorities, to present the internal experience of the self to society as a whole, “allow [ing] the real self and the ideal self to reach congruence” (45).

Gill’s work provides a useful lens through which to view Finger’s representation of disability identity development throughout her writings. Gill’s description of the tendency of ascribed identity to become internalized helps to explain Finger’s re-imagination of the past in order to deal with the narratives that worked to construct her internalized, as well as external, identity. Additionally, Gill’s study of integration applies to Finger’s process of re-integrating the identity markers of her past with her current and future identity. Gill’s four aspects of integration can be found at various times throughout Finger’s re-appropriation of the past in her writings.
Finger’s works show how her identity and those of her characters integrate the past with the present, refusing restrictive social expectations. Finger crafts alternative ways to deal with societal constraints as well as those created by her own past. She is thus able to present herself and her characters in a re-imagined way to the world.

2. **Personal identity**

Leading twentieth century sociologist Erving Goffman describes the formation of what Gill called “ascribed identity” as well as the role of history in this ascription in his book *Stigma* (1963). He explains that “personal identity” includes “identity pegs,” or elements that identify us to others, such as personal information that has been gathered about us or labels that society has assigned us and “the unique combination of life history items that comes to be attached to the individual with the help of these pegs for his identity” (57). Goffman’s idea of “personal identity” provides an interesting starting point for Finger’s analysis. A person may have the “identity peg” of being disabled, but he or she provides the history that attaches to it. Finger takes this idea further by incorporating a complicated understanding of these “life history items.” While Goffman’s idea of a combination of historical events or “items” is in line with Finger’s intricate web of the past, his idea of history is challenged by Finger’s use of the past as inclusive of memory and imagination. Additionally, for Finger, the assignment of “identity pegs” is an active, rather than passive process; she proactively works to redefine and recreate her own “life history items.”

3. **Feminist identity and the disabled woman**

Finger focuses on gender and disability as the main aspects of her personal identity. She continually finds her feminist politics in conflict with her disability politics, which
necessarily requires her to re-think and revise both. Finger sees these two identities working
against each other not only in her personal life, but in historical depictions of disabled characters
and the social expectations that stereotype them. While early feminists rejected the sexual
objectification of female\(^1\) characters, the disabled woman is often de-sexualized, a construct that
Finger both acknowledges and rejects through her writings. While Finger often points out the
conflicts between disability politics and feminist politics, she also acknowledges similarities
between the disabled body and the female body in general terms of their shared, yet different,
experiences of marginalized oppression.

Disability studies scholar and cultural theorist Rosemarie Garland Thomson\(^2\) clearly links
the women’s issues and disability issues in *Extraordinary Bodies* (1997), stating that, in both
cases, power, or lack thereof, is directly linked to the state of the body. She writes:

> Both feminism and my analysis of disability challenge existing social relations;
> both resist interpretations of certain bodily configurations and functioning as
deviant; both question the ways that differences are invested with meaning; both
question the enforcement of universalizing norms; both interrogate the politics of
appearance; both explore the politics of naming; both forge positive
identities. (22)

Garland Thomson’s “challenge” rings true in Finger’s works as well; Finger acknowledges the
physicality of both gender and disability as well as their resulting combination. She also

\(^1\) While I understand that the term “female” should not be interchanged with “woman.” I intentionally use
it several times throughout this thesis, where I feel that it is the most accurate term.

\(^2\) The title page and citation for “Extraordinary Bodies” spells Garland Thomson with a hyphen. However,
this is inconsistent with other citations. I continue to use the unhyphenated version throughout this paper.
challenges the narratives forced onto both of these identities, the meaning related to them, and their narrative origins.

In her review article, “Feminist Disability Studies,” (2005) Garland Thomson further explains the connectedness between feminist and disability studies. She explains the constructed nature of the identities that both these fields of study explore. Garland Thomson calls for a “re-imagining” of pre-existing disability narratives: “Feminist disability studies not only retrieves overlooked experiences and undertheorized critical perspectives, it strives to rewrite oppressive social scripts. The stories we collectively know shape the material world, inform human relations, and mold our sense of who we are” (1567). Garland Thomson offers the idea of situated theory as a response to these social narratives, which she describes as “complex, sophisticated explorations of disability issues elaborated not in the genre of the traditional critical study but rather as analyses that are thoroughly situated from the position of the disabled woman subject” (1569). She goes on to offer Finger’s Past Due as an example of writing containing situated theory. I further explore Garland Thomson’s assertions that existing narratives must be rewritten or re-imagined and argue that Finger does this throughout her works. However, re-imagining for Finger does not come primarily from addressing the current or existing narratives, but in re-creating the pasts that have lead to their very existence, it is in this sense that I use the term re-imagining throughout this thesis. Through reconstructing the personal and social past, Finger is able to alter the current narratives that work to define the disabled and feminine identities.
4. **Power structures**

As Garland Thomson suggests, past and current social and political structures attempt to dictate identity in many cases. Throughout her works, Finger names institutions such as the medical profession as well as historical narratives as such structures. Disability studies scholar and critical theorist Lennard Davis acknowledges that powerful institutions such as the medical industrial complex and neoliberal capitalist consumerism have oppressed all people. In his book *Bending Over Backwards: Disability, Dismodernism, and Other Difficult Positions* (2002), Davis distinguishes between systems of care: care of, care for, and care about the body. Care of the body includes all of the consumer products we are taught to believe we must buy in order to be whole. Care for the body refers to entities such as healthcare organizations that we have come to rely on. He discusses the historical and current control of social institutions over the identities of people with disabilities, a concept that Finger both acknowledges and resists her writings. In contrast, care about the body rejects commodification and focuses on the needs of everyone’s body. While Finger would likely disagree with Davis’ call to move beyond disability identity politics, she draws her critique of institutions from the same influences that Davis describes.

Psychologist and disability culture consultant Simi Linton redefines disability identity in *Claiming Disability: Knowledge and Identity* (1998). In the chapter “Reassigning Meaning” Linton examines the idea of “meaning-making” through language or “the linguistic conventions that structure the meanings assigned to disability and the patterns of response to disability that emanate from, or are attendant upon, those meanings” (8). For Linton, language is essentially a system of codes and symbols that has been used to construct the identity of disability as
undesirable. However, Linton points out that recently, the disability community has resisted this coding system, “reassigning meaning” to oppressive linguistic structures and “reclaiming” disability as a politicized identity instead of a pejorative category. Likewise, Finger shows how the past has created a similar coding system; language plays a part in building the past social and personal narratives that Finger examines. Linton essentially points out that language can be dismantled and re-appropriated just as Finger does with the past. Both language and narrative of the past, then have the ability to be re-imagined, not as domineering power structures, but components of a complex identity.

5. **Complex embodiment and the social/medical model dichotomy**

Disability scholars have shifted the focus from a medical model, or the understanding of disability as a principally bodily problem to be solved or treated by medicine, to a social model of disability. Tobin Siebers, a scholar responsible for helping to shape contemporary disability studies, explains these two models in his book *Disability Theory* (2008):

> The medical model defines disability as an individual defect lodged in the person, a defect that must be cured or eliminated if the person is to achieve full capacity as a human being. Unlike the medical approach, the emerging field of disability studies defines disability not as an individual defect but as the product of social injustice, one that requires not the cure or elimination of the defective person but significant changes in the social and built environment. (3)

However, concentrating on socially dictated identity and limitations, the social model tends to minimize attention to the physicality or lived experience of disability and impairment. The social model is extremely useful in pointing out society’s role in creating disability, but many current
disability scholars, Finger included, would likely say that the social model is overly simplistic, denying the space for the physical experience of impairment. Finger draws from both the social and physical aspects of disability in her writings.

The concept of identity has been common in the works of disability scholars as the field moves to re-examine models of disability. Siebers further addresses the cultural understanding of disability in *Disability Theory*. He explains how disability scholarship has pushed to define disability outside of the individual impairment and focus on social remedies, adaptations of culture, and environment in order to address disability not as a physical problem, but as a cultural construct. However, this social model is not exhaustive due to the inevitably physiological implications of disability. Siebers addresses this need by asserting that disability studies must now adopt a theory of “complex embodiment” (25). This merging of the environment with the physical aspects of disability is an important step in the study of disability and a key factor in Finger’s analysis of gender, disability, and identity.

Siebers’ “complex embodiment” offers an alternative ideology with which to approach disability and impairment, calling for a conceptualization of disability that continues to account for the social implications of being disabled, but also prioritizes the inclusion of the inevitable physicality of the human condition. Being a middle class, white, woman results in a different social and bodily experience than that of a man, or a woman of a different ethnicity or socioeconomic class—just as each specific impairment changes the physical experience of the person it affects. Additionally each individual does not possess a single, clear-cut identity, but rather multiple intersecting identities in unlimited combinations. Each identity affects the others; Finger’s impairment, in this case post-polio syndrome, changes experience of pregnancy and
motherhood while her pregnancy highlights different physical aspects of her impairment. This physicality, in turn, causes Finger to move towards identifying as part of the disability community. “Complex embodiment” refers then to the complicated and evolving way in which an individual socially, emotionally, and physically experiences or embodies his or her identity markers.

6. **Use of memoir**

Thomas Couser, a literary scholar who specializes in the role of autobiography, memoir, and life writing in disability studies and identity, acknowledges the need for a multidimensional approach to disability identity, an approach that he believes can be enriched by studying the life writings of people with disabilities. Memoir provides a medium through which individuals can share their complicated perceptions of identity and explore their understanding of themselves. Couser’s *Signifying Bodies* (2009) addresses the use of memoir in the understanding and assertion of disability identity. For Couser, the most useful memoirs, or “new disability memoirs,” such as Finger’s works, convey an understanding of both the social implications of disability and the physical implications of impairment (64). Couser argues that memoir can be instrumental in the embodiment of the disabled self and as a response to conventional conceptions of disability. In addition to referencing and expanding Couser’s close analysis of Finger’s writings (he uses her work as examples of exemplary life writing), I also follow his lead in emphasizing the form her work takes as well as its themes.

B. **Methods**

This thesis is a literary analysis that identifies common themes that run throughout Finger’s various works and analyzes how she experiments with form to create meaning. I began
by identifying noticeable themes and concepts that recurred throughout Finger’s works. Using inductive reasoning, I was then able to use these themes to compose what I take to be Finger’s unique understanding of history or “the past”. I further broke down Finger’s “past” into five specific areas, as listed in the introduction, by studying and organizing examples and excerpts from the texts. I then looked closely at how Finger uses this past to construct individual and social identity, specifically for women with disabilities. During this process, I saw a close connection between Longmore’s call for a “usable past” and the ways in which Finger uses a more literary or artistic interpretation of the past. I then began to look more specifically at the ways in which Finger’s interpretation of the past could expand upon Longmore and traditional history’s understanding of the importance of history in understanding and situating identity. After using the text as my main resource, I located and tied in supporting literature through outside research

I structured the study by comparing and contrasting how Finger’s memoirs and fiction writing progress from rather concrete to more abstract. Finger’s memoirs and her fiction are complementary of one another, but the strategies she uses to construct the past to make it usable in both differ. I structure my argument by beginning with Finger’s memoirs and then turn my attention to her fiction writing. Rather than a chronological progression, I have grouped the works in this way to show how she shapes the concepts of identity formation in each form. As I show the importance of conceptualizing and integrating a usable past in to a present identity, I start with a stronger focus on the personal past, through memoir and finish with a progression to the cultural past, through fiction. I show how the five components of Finger’s past (academic history, representations of the past, family history, individual past, and history of the body) run
through her works, connecting to both the personal and cultural. Although Finger shows, and I highlight, the connectedness of the personal and social pasts, beginning with the specific and moving to the general allows the reader to see the progression from the personal to the social. Each chapter, likewise, begins with the more personal and moves to the more abstract and social.

C. **Chapter Breakdown**

1. **Memoir as a tool: Situating the self**

   This chapter addresses Finger’s self-construction in her works of memoir; Finger reconstructs her personal history, relying heavily on the malleable nature of memory. Using the medium of memoir, Finger is able not only to explore complicated aspects of her own past, but also to situate her own identity within the larger issues of disability and feminist identity.

   Autobiography, as a form, is important to Finger because, as she writes, it acts as “an antidote to such neat formulations” that permeate much of disability discourse and narratives (*Elegy for a Disease*, 8). By conveying personal and physical details of an individual or condition, autobiography and memoir allow the author to share complex personal emotions that do not necessarily fit squarely into the medical or social models of disability.

   In comparing *Past Due* with *Elegy for a Disease*, I study topics such as memory, critique and re-imagining of the past, femininity, and, ultimately, construction of identity. I show how *Elegy for a Disease* creates themes around these topics as addressed in *Past Due*, in which Finger focuses mostly on a chronology of selected life events. Though the past, personal, family, and cultural, is essential in *Past Due*, her analysis of it applies mostly to the personal, rather than cultural, level. *Elegy for a Disease*, conversely, shows an intentional mélange of *autobiography* (or memoir) and *social* biography, broadening the factors that form identity. Finger sees herself
as part of a larger, complex, social machine, an idea that she mimics in the form of *Elegy for a Disease*, weaving together multiple narratives. Rather than a social history, historical (in Longmore’s sense) past, or even a complex personal past, Finger writes her history as a rich, non-static, intersection of multiple backgrounds and influences.

2. **Cultural and personal re-imagining through fiction**

While Finger’s memoirs work on a personal and social level, grounded (though not fixed) in reality, her fictional writings allow her to depart from this grounding and to completely dismantle and re-imagine history in order to move towards an alternative future. While Finger addresses familiar themes such as feminism, power relations, social tropes, and memory, her interpretation memory in *Bone Truth* and *Call me Ahab* has more freedom on a larger scale. Through novel form and short stories, Finger has the ability to not only critique and undo social constructs, but to piece together a reality based on social imagination and memory. This fictional form supports Finger’s objective of stepping away from the solely personal experience of disability and conveying an inclusive experience that is useful as a tool for social change for both women and individuals with disabilities.

Through comparison of Finger’s treatment of themes in *Bone Truth* and *Call me Ahab*, I show how these two works of fiction take different avenues to achieve the same sense of freedom of memory and resulting reconstructed present and future. *Bone Truth*, in the form of a memoir of a fictional character, shows an interesting experimentation with the past of family and the effects of transferring that past into the future. The novel allows Finger to imagine how a fictional character might react to situations and themes found in her own memoirs. *Call me Ahab*, provides the paramount example of malleable cultural memory, as Finger twists familiar
canonical stories and well known historical and fictional characters in order to deliberately undo the social narratives in which they play a part. Finger questions and rebuilds gender and disability roles as she rewrites these stories, thus effectively creating a literary world in which the prevalent social narratives no longer carry the same power. In dismantling these tropes, Finger is allowing for a complication of social identity. Just as the typically one-sided portrayal of characters, such as Helen Keller or Goliath, should be complicated and, thus, humanized, the role of woman or disabled woman is also complicated and humanized. In both of these fictional works, Finger shows how the past can be dangerously restricting, freeing her characters from that constraint by rewriting the past and, effectively, the present and future.
II. MEMOIR AS A TOOL: SITUATING THE SELF

In this chapter, I analyze Finger’s memoirs, *Past Due* and *Elegy for a Disease*, and the way she uses unconventional form to enhance this genre as a progressive exploration and assertion of self. In its nature, memoir is a study of the author’s personal past and, presumably, how that past worked to influence the author’s identity. However, I show how Finger’s unique interpretation of the past and innovative structure allows for her memoirs to work towards a re-appropriation of that past on a cultural, as well as personal, level. For Finger, the memoir is not entirely self-focused, but a way for her to situate her self within a cultural context. Finger’s understanding of the five interconnected aspects of the past as malleable and dynamic allows her to use memoir to reclaim the past not only for herself but for disabled women as a group. Using memoir, Finger explores complicated aspects of her individual past and situates that identity within the larger community of women with disabilities.

I first show how Finger engages with a more individual past in *Past Due*, in which she details her relationship with and understanding of both her femaleness and impairment as she goes through pregnancy and the birthing process. This story is largely her own—a more traditional memoir in the sense that chronologically outlines a period of Finger’s own life events. However, *Past Due* is non-traditional in its integration of Finger’s understanding of memory and the malleability of her different pasts. Through her writing of *Past Due*, Finger shows that family history, individual history, and history of the body can be limiting, yet are subject to an active formation, and can be re-imagined to allow for a new understanding of the self. In *Elegy for a Disease*, Finger uses a similar strategy, but toggles between the personal and cultural history, integrating traditional and representational history with family, individual, and body history.
Finger constructs the memoir as a mix of all these types of history, interspersing the pasts of others within her own. Using this technique, Finger not only re-appropriates her own past but adds to the cultural disability history, showing the interconnectedness and malleability of the personal and cultural identities. She transfers the power of identity formation back to herself and to the culture as a whole.

A. **Analysis of Past Due: Reconstruction of the Personal Past**

*Past Due* begins with the revelation of Finger’s unplanned pregnancy and Finger’s description of coming to terms with that news as well as sharing it with her partner. Finger then takes the reader back in time, jumping to past events such as her work at a women’s clinic, her own past abortion, and her history with the medical system as a young child with polio. Finger jumps back and forth between the past and her current social, emotional, and bodily experience of her pregnancy. She highlights, in detail, how pregnancy interacts with impairment as well as her conception of herself as a part of the disability community. In the second half of the memoir, Finger focuses on her birthing experience: her attempt at a home birth and eventual cesarean section, a physically and emotionally traumatic event which, for Finger, once again highlights the medical control over both women’s bodies and disabled bodies. Finally, Finger explains her complex emotions as she both heals from the birth and thinks her newborn son may have a disability, stating that she begins to document these events through memoir as a way to process her experience.

I begin this section by examining Finger’s construction of identity in *Past Due*; Finger chronicles her pregnancy, work at a women’s clinic, participation in a women’s discussion group on disability birthing issues, and the process of giving birth, all of which are colored by her
personal (both physical and social) pasts. Finger expertly finds and explains the link between her understanding of the pregnant, disabled body and the childhood memories she holds of disempowering medical and rehabilitative polio interventions. Ultimately, Finger is able to synthesize her personal past with her developing identity, taking ownership of her personal and cultural past, using it to solidify her understanding, and what Gill calls “integration,” of the self.

1. **Identity as a woman and mother**

Of Finger’s works, *Past Due* focuses most explicitly on identity as a woman and feminist, an identity which enriches and complicates Finger’s understanding of disability identity. In her writing of *Past Due*, Finger explores how women have been historically defined and confined by both the medical community and the pervasive social narratives of femininity. She also critically examines the historical medical control of the pregnant body, as well as the birthing experience, drawing comparisons to the loss of control she felt as a small child with polio in the medical system. Finger confronts this loss of control both of her physical body and her identity as a woman by infusing her past with malleable memories, thus defining *mother* and *woman* in her own sense. By taking past events, and choosing how to remember and incorporate them into her current self, Finger makes the past subjective and dynamic, reclaiming it from the authority of the medical community and society as a whole.

As Garland Thomson (2005) agrees, the identity expected of a woman, as with any other identity, comes with centuries-worth of social narratives, a fact that Finger feels keenly as she begins one of the most historically and physiologically “female” experiences of life: the birthing journey. Culture dictates how a woman should feel about motherhood, and the medical profession tells women how they should appropriately care for their bodies. Finger
acknowledges the mythical nature of these extremely culturally confining tropes of womanhood by confronting them, pointing out how the actual experience differs from the historical narrative. For example, as she shares the news of her unexpected pregnancy with her partner, instead of embellishing the moment, she evokes and dismisses media stereotypes, noting “It was nothing like in the movies: he was not Cary Grant, I was not Myrna Loy. He did not look into my eyes and murmur, “Oh, my darling, I’ve never been happier’” (9). By drawing this (non)comparison, Finger points out the stark contrast between the idealistic feelings of a woman and man relating to pregnancy, emphasizing that the actual experience and feelings are complicated, involving fear and uncertainty. Additionally, by evoking the fictional romance of 1940s film characters, Finger begins to dismantle the historical narrative, making a place for her own story.

Finger goes on to critique the historically medically-controlled pregnancy and birthing process, a construct that she strongly opposes, in part due to her childhood experience in the medical world of polio as well as her past work assisting with abortions in a women’s clinic. In her “Feminist Disability Studies,” (2005) Garland Thomson speaks to Finger’s treatment of the medicalized disabled woman’s body, noting: “Past Due challenges the medicalization of bodies and birthing, countering that a sociopolitical interpretation of disability is a point of departure for feminist politics” (1572). Indeed, Finger demonstrates how, from the first knowledge of being pregnant to the process of giving birth, the medical system claims control over a woman’s pregnancy. During her current pregnancy, Finger recalls a past abortion and the similarities she between that experience and undergoing surgeries as a child with polio. In that instance, as Finger describes, even the hard fought choice to have an abortion requires submitting totally to the medical profession: “My abortion, which after all meant my right to my self, had felt like just
the opposite: a surrendering of myself to medical control” (23). Finger continues to struggle to maintain body autonomy throughout her current pregnancy and her painful “failed” home birth. The power dynamic between the medical professionals and the patient, with medicine historically claiming control over the body, is a common and damaging relationship according to Garland Thomson³ and Davis: “In the case of the patient, the doctor, with the help of the laboratory, takes on the function of informing the patient whether she or he is not healthy . . . In either of these scenarios, the autonomy of the individual is weakened, as is any sense of agency” (Bending Over Backwards 114). Davis’ point is particularly powerful in reference to bodies that are viewed as subordinate, such as the disabled and woman’s bodies.

For Finger, medical control over pregnancy evokes the loss of control she felt as a child with polio, and through this comparison to her current experience with the medicalized world, Finger learns that, even as an adult, power is still stripped away from the consumer. Finger emphasizes her loss of control over her body as an adult with flashbacks to her childhood in hospitals. By slipping back and forth between the two in her writing, Finger emphasize the lasting painful nature of her personal past: “On the O.R. table, I am a child again, a six-year-old child, and I cannot--(goes back)--No. You are not a child any more. You are not a six-year-old who had polio three and a half years before, . . . You are a woman now. This is an abortion. I have chosen this. I am an adult now . . .This is mine. I have earned it. I have chosen it” (22). For Finger, the two ordeals are so similar that she actually feels like that child and has to proactively, and potentially falsely, convince herself that she has more control in this situation. In this case,

³ Garland Thomson speaks to this in her Feminist Disability Studies (2005): “Nowhere is this will to normality more evident than in the medical protocols directed at three regularly occurring, if infrequent, forms of human variation: intersexed newborns, conjoined twins, and people whose bodies are deemed deformed” (1580).
Finger highlights the long-lasting effects of personal past on current experience; her childhood time in the hospital affects her experience and understanding of medical procedures as an adult. This personal past lends to Finger’s sentiments about her pregnancy as well.

After her son’s birth, as a woman moving from pregnancy into motherhood, Finger describes her feelings about her identity and her body as complicated, rather than fitting into neat stereotypes; additionally she approaches her lived experience of pregnancy and birth as malleable and subjective. Memory continues to play a central role in her processing of events, as she discusses “memories” which have not actually occurred as well as memories which she has un-remembered: Events around the birth that either did not happen, such as the perfect home birth she had imagined, or events which she knows took place but she has removed from her memory. Finger highlights the validity and power of both these types of memories: she mourns for the home birth that did not happen, for the nondisabled child she assumed she’d have. The acknowledgement and subsequent loss of these memories is very important to her reality in the first days of motherhood: “And I cry every day. I cry over the loss of the beautiful birth I had hoped to have. I cry over the loss of the dream of a perfect child, of the perfect parent I had hoped to be” (169). The loss of her ideal birth and child, the memory of events which did not take place, affects Finger’s conceptualization of the future. Thus, these memories are valid because they have the power to shape Finger’s reality and contribute to her continuing conceptualization of the birthing experience.

Candid about the difficulty and pain of her pregnancy, Finger does not shy from expressing the painful physicality of her experience; rather she documents this pain through writing as a part of her past, as an integral factor in her lived experience. She explains her
complicated relationship with her body as she begins to feel the physical interaction between
being a woman and her impairment. She writes: “I want my body back, I want my life back. For
the first time in my life, I feel my disability as a physical reality, not just as a social condition . . .
I am sick of being tired. I am sick of being heavy. I am sick of waiting” (86). For Finger, the
experience of pregnancy initially seems at odds with, or at least complicating to, her disability,
causing her to re-imagine her physical body as well. Finger’s exploration of this interaction
between impairment, disability, and being a woman continues to pervade her narrative and form
a framework for her understanding of identity. As Garland Thomson points out, Finger’s
rejection of the purely medicalized and physical conceptualization of the disabled woman’s body
allows for a broad and shifting understanding of Finger’s identity.

2. **Identity as a disabled woman**

Scholars have long linked the social and physical conditions of women’s bodies
and disabled bodies. In the introduction to his *Why I Burned my Book and Other Essays*,
Longmore writes: “The deeper I delve into disability history, the more I am persuaded that issues
of gender are central to the historical and contemporary experience of disability. Gender, it is
clear, has been a key factor in social constructions, social perceptions, policy definitions, cultural
representations, and political advocacy regarding disability” (Introduction, para. 10). Longmore
and others have acknowledged the close yet complicated relationship between gender and
disability. Further, disabled individuals and women share in the state of being the physical
“other”: long defined by stubborn perpetuated narratives. Looking at these two identities in
conjunction not only leads to an enriched understanding of the influence of the societal narratives
and ideologies that work to define both, but offers a nuanced lens through which to re-
conceptualize these identities. As Garland Thomson (2005) explains: “Feminist disability studies questions the dominant premises that cast disability as a bodily problem to be addressed by normalization procedures rather than as socially constructed identity and a representational system similar to gender” (1559). While Longmore and Garland Thomson emphasize the social representations of gender and disability, Finger incorporates the physical as well—the effect of pregnancy on her body, as the initial link between her gender and disability. It is her pregnancy that, as she puts it, makes her feel the physicality of her disability for the first time. For her, it initially feels like the two are incompatible, exacerbating one another. However, pregnancy also allows Finger to confront and come to terms with her identity in a way that she hasn’t before.

Pregnancy causes Finger to see her body dually: as “disabled” for the first time and as a source of pride. Considering pregnancy, Finger writes: “I wanted something perfect to come out of my imperfect body . . . I needed to have control over my body: instead of letting it grow more frail, letting it lose its power, I wanted to make it grow, to do more, not less . . . The world tells me to divorce myself from my flesh, to live in my head . . . I didn’t want to be fleshless” (18). For Finger, becoming pregnant, often seen as the ultimate feat of the woman’s body, is something she wants in order to feel more in control, to feel strong in her body. However, while the experience of pregnancy does, in fact, test the strength of her body as she imagined, it also brings changes that she does not expect, challenging the idea of a primarily social model of disability: “Who else has broken bones as a side effect of pregnancy” (80). Finger’s acknowledgement of the physicality of her disability through pregnancy is a prime example of Siebers’ idea of “complex embodiment.” Finger’s bodily experience as a pregnant woman melds with and affects her bodily experience of being disabled. She actually physically feels her impairment more
acutely due to her pregnancy. Finger’s disability is made up of a variety of factors that are embodied by the individual, rather than simply of social constructs outside of, or separate from, the body. As a reaction to the longstanding over-medicalization of disability, many scholars and disability rights advocates have cautiously avoided addressing the physicality of disability in favor of emphasizing the social model. However, Finger’s embodiment of disability is central to her story.

Finger further emphasizes that the body itself can hold memories of which we are not always consciously aware, acting as a link to the past. As previously discussed, Finger’s bodily experience as an adult in the medical system evokes memories of the physicality of polio and related surgeries as a child. She recalls these memories as intrinsic to the physical experience, almost as if the body itself is calling up the memories, rather than the mind. She writes: “On a personal level, the whole notion of extending medical control over women terrifies me: I could be made a child again, subject to the whims of gods with knives” (182). As an adult, the trauma of her medicalized childhood body evokes a clear sense of the threat posed by the medical institution. Finger experiences this loss of agency that Lenard Davis refers to not only as a child, but as an adult, when she should have power over decisions regarding her body. As she describes, the medicalization of her pregnancy recalls memories in the physical body, remembers the familiar pain and victimization.

Finger is uncomfortable with the ideology behind the idea that her body, both in childhood and adulthood, needs to be fixed or regarded as a medical problem; a sentiment that disrupts the expected way of conceptualizing the disabled woman’s body. She explains: “Disabled people are supposed to overcome our bodies, not be them. I wanted to be my body,
wanted to go where it had to go, without the doctors, without their scalpels. But I
couldn’t’’ (182). Finger describes her childhood memory in relation to similar feelings of
powerlessness as a pregnant patient. While pregnancy caused a sense of loss, of ideals and
control, Finger’s birthing process, while not what she pictured or hoped for, does allow her to
experience and know her body in a way she did not expect: “Knowing the self I knew in an
unmedicated, wild birth--that animal self, beyond reason, common elemental--taught me a truth I
could not have learned in any other way, a truth my body had to teach me” (201). Through her
pregnancy and choice of birthing, Finger expressed a desire to re-appropriate control over her
body. Despite the eventual necessity of medical intervention, Finger is still finds that she is able
to know her body in a new way through this process.

While Finger comes to synthesize the physicality of being a woman with that of her
disability through her pregnancy and giving birth, she explains how the possibility of her child
having a disability forces her to struggle with her acceptance of “being disabled” and its related
social implications. Throughout the memoir, Finger describes her historical rejection of the
disability community as well as her later integration with this community and defensiveness of
“disabled” lives. However, confronted with the possibility that her son might have a disability,
Finger finds herself considering the concept of disability alternatively. She deals with unexpected
feelings of loss and complicated guilt: “I have not been able to give Mark a healthy child . . . I
thought that he might leave us, two cripples, an embarrassment. Here comes that poor man,
saddled with a gimp lover and a retard son. I know what those feelings are, they’re internalized
oppression; there are words for them too” (136). While she draws power by recognizing the
origin of her thoughts and is able to attribute them to years of internalized social narratives, as a
mother concerned about her son, Finger acknowledges her reaction and does not omit it from her story. She shows that, as pride in her body is important to her sense of identity, difficult feelings of doubt and shame are also vital to her retelling and thus self-conceptualization. Finger later concludes: “Health, physical well-being does matter. It’s my own internalized oppression that makes me fear having a disabled child, but it’s not just that. It’s the knowledge that being nondisabled is easier than being disabled . . . But to admit that disability and illness are hard doesn’t mean that they are wholly negative experiences, meaningless” (201). Pregnancy and motherhood allow Finger to consider disability and the her body in ways that she has not before, leading to a more complicated, messier, and probably more comprehensive viewpoint. It is important to note, however, that Finger does not instantly process her experiences as they occur. She chronicles her difficult emotions about her past and present through the act of writing, which she begins in an effort to make sense of her experience.

3. **Memoir and the usable past: A strategy for integration**

As Finger struggles to make sense of her complex emotions in the aftermath of the birth of her son, she explains that she begins to write *Past Due*: “Slowly I start to write this book--at first just putting words on a page for myself . . . It comes back to me in fragments: a word here, a phrase someone said there . . .” (176). Writing then takes on two important roles: it allows Finger to critique and synthesize her thoughts along her journey towards motherhood, to assume those thoughts and emotions into her new identity, and it allows her to make a place for her thoughts, for her identity, within the cultural context, to connect her own experience to the social experiences through writing. In the act of life writing, Finger examines her personal
history and re-appropriates it as part of the past which helps her to understand her social identity of mother, woman, and disabled mother/woman.

Finger’s use of memoir and acknowledgment of the writing process works not only to allow her to synthesize her experience for herself, but to express that identity to others. Couser explains that memoir and autobiography stand as an important medium through which personal identity can be asserted and work to form disability culture. Couser explains: “Long the objects of others’ classification, disabled people have only recently assumed the initiative in representing themselves; in disability memoirs particularly, disabled people counter their historical objectification (or even abjection) by occupying the subject position” (7). Indeed, the act of writing becomes a powerful action for Finger, a way of asserting her complicated, evolving identity through her experiences. Finger’s understanding of herself as a new mother and as a disabled woman does not fit the appropriate narratives, rather she forges a new narrative through what Couser terms “new disability memoir.” Additionally, Couser believes that memoir can be an important entity not only personally, but for cultural and political change: “I hope to illuminate the complex status of disability rights by exploring a number of ways in which personal narrative, cultural narrative, and law may inform and shape each other” (148). As I previously note, personal narratives, particularly those that challenge existing social perceptions work to define the social narratives that in turn make up a cultural past and identity. Couser agrees with Longmore’s belief that cultural identity and influence is an integral foundation for policy. Finger’s emphasis on the importance of memoir is both a personal and cultural expression of a complicating conceptualization of identity, an object that makes up a piece of the
background of contemporary disability culture. Additionally, Finger is documenting her own past and her son’s past, making that personal past usable for both the personal and cultural future.

Finger notes that much of her pregnancy, birthing, and initial motherhood was painful and difficult. This painful past, however, is a part of her identity as Max’s mother, and rather than hiding or repressing her difficult personal memories, she processes and shares it through her writing. Struggling with the idea of facing the past, she originally avoids it, explaining: “I know I am focusing on the next birth as a way not to think about the pain of this one: wanting to rush into the future rather than deal with the past” (179). The idea of dealing with the past, particularly a past that did not go as planned, was not as clean and neat as she had hoped, is difficult for Finger, however, she is also compelled to document the past, first by simply documenting Max’s first year milestones in a journal, then by writing her memoir. Through writing, Finger is able to piece together and reflect on her personal past, making it a useful processing tool both for her and eventually for her son.

Through memoir writing, Finger is also able to share her various thoughts and truths, the difficulties of her unique experience with others, one of the values of disability life writing, according Couser. He provides a synthesis between the “complex embodiment” theory of Siebers and the genre of memoir: “What links these books is the fundamental endeavor to de-stigmatize various anomalous bodily conditions. Disability memoir should be seen, therefore, not as a spontaneous self expression but as a response--indeed a retort-- to the traditional misrepresentation of disability in Western culture generally” (7). Finger does not view pregnancy, birth, motherhood, or her impairment in simplistic, easy-to-process terms. Some of her thoughts are not pretty, some of her opinions of disability might be surprising, such as when
“[Finger] had moments of not knowing whether [she] wanted [her son] to live or not” (137). However, sharing these thoughts through memoir allows her readers to access her personal truth, offers an unaltered understanding of experiences. As Couser hopes, in this case, the memoir form counters social narratives as well as gender and disability stereotypes. As Finger grapples with her own thoughts, she is better able to assert her interconnected identities.

For Finger, the memoir form of *Past Due* provides a way for her to acknowledge and deal with difficult experiences in her past. She addresses her distant and more recent past through writing, documenting her thoughts, feelings, and struggles. Additionally, she documents events and feelings that did not occur but are nonetheless part of her experience. In addition to providing a medium through which individuals can appropriate and share their understanding of personal experiences, memoir and autobiography provide a link between the individual and society, which is particularly important for individuals with disabilities who are often seen as “deviant” or “other”. In, writing down her experiences, Finger is not only synthesizing her life events for herself, but she is sharing her past with society as a whole, as well as creating a future way for her son to access her, and his own, past. Couser believes that memoir’s connection between the individual and the social is important for situating disabled identities within society: “The larger point, however, is that disability life writing has not sprung up in a cultural or legal vacuum but rather responded to, and helped to create, greater opportunity and access to public life” (5). Because voices and histories of individuals with disabilities have historically been repressed, or at least altered, the opportunity for the individual to share a personal past, without censorship through life writing, is vital to disability’s place in society. Finger continues to
explore this link between the individual past and the collective, or social, past in her writing of *Elegy for a Disease*.

**B. Analysis of *Elegy for a Disease*: From the Personal to Social**

While *Past Due* begins to address Finger’s personal past, rendering it “usable” both personally and culturally, the events Finger examines within the memoir are primarily her own, meaning that they happened to or were enacted by her. She does include cultural context, but predominantly as it applies to her as an individual. Conversely, in *Elegy for a Disease*, Finger sets out, very intentionally, to write not only a memoir of her own experience with polio and post-polio syndrome, but that of others with disabilities and the history of polio itself. She writes: Finger compiles her memoir using a mix of loosely chronological personal narratives, contemporary cultural facts and sentiments, and the experiences of others with disabilities acquired both from academic sources and casual conversation. In this way, Finger writes her past not only as her own, but as that of her generation, her gender, and those who experience impairment or disability, creating, and situating herself within, a collective cultural identity through memoir.

In *Elegy for a Disease*, Finger moves back and forth between her own experience with polio and the experiences of a variety of others, from Franklin D. Roosevelt, to *Heidi*, to Sister Kenny, a self-proclaimed pioneer in the disease’s treatment. This structure, moving between all five types of the past, allows Finger to emphasize the joint ownership of the disease, the cultural as well as personal experience. Finger outlines her own experience growing up with polio, from young childhood to adulthood, although not in a chronological order. She describes her difficult relationship with her parents as well as her body, detailing the abuse she endured at the hands of
her father and the criticism and lack of support from her mother. In addition to her embodiment of her impairment, Finger also depicts her experience with mental illness and an eventual suicide attempt. Finger’s story concludes with a description of her gradual acceptance of the disability community and involvement in disability rights.

Throughout the memoir, Finger repeatedly stresses that this story is not exclusively her own, but that of many others. She includes these other voices throughout the memoir, emphasizing their role in creating the history and identity of polio. Finger’s structure, switching between time periods, voices, and narrative subjects, allows for a portrayal of a shared past, and a shared identity.

1. **Memoir evolved**

   In *Elegy for a Disease*, we see the form of life writing working, in many ways, as it does in *Past Due*: memoir, as a medium, is important because it allows for the sharing of a messier, more comprehensive rendering of disability and the self as well as a connection between the individual and the social. However, in *Elegy for a Disease*, Finger takes more ownership of the genre by sharing her own thoughts on the importance of memoir and intentionally including a broader definition of the past. Her memoir, then, becomes a collection of pasts, working to acknowledge the necessity of a variety of experiences and perspectives to form a cultural, and thus individual, identity. Couser calls this type of memoir the “new disability memoir” (165). While, he would also term *Past Due* such a memoir, *Elegy* clearly possesses all of the defining characteristics: “a proud sense of disability identity, a sharp sense of disability history, and a sophisticated sense of the poetics and politics, the ethics and aesthetics, of disability memoir” (190). Naming “disability consciousness” (165) as the key defining aspect of this new
disability memoir, Couser asserts that this new phase in disability life writing intentionally steps outside of typical memoir and enters the realm of Garland Thomson’s “situated theory.” *Elegy* is Finger’s presentation of personal and cultural past, carefully situated within the framework of disability theory and aesthetics.

Finger explains the choice of a non-traditional form as an intentional move to include the stories and experiences of others, because, according to her, these stories belong to not only their individuals, but to the culture as a whole. She explains: “. . . I also want to write about the social experience of disability, not just the personal” (8). She goes on: “Autobiographical works--including recent memoirs by Nancy Mairs, Leonard Kriegel, Kenny Fries, and Steve Kusisto--provide an antidote to such neat formulations, presenting the lives of disabled people in their complexity and variety” (8). Finger’s self-awareness and intentionality in the collective form through which she tells her story emphasizes her perception of the interconnectedness of the cultural and the individual, the social and the personal aspects of identity. Additionally, as we saw in *Past Due*, memoir mitigates many of the limitations of other types of writing. Finger knows that a memoir has the ability to tell a story in its intricacy and allows a freedom to the author to construct identity as she desires. As Finger points out, one personal story about disability is not everyone’s story, and memoirs do not claim to be. In *Elegy for a Disease*, Finger shows both that a cultural history can still be intensely personal, an examination of how one individual experiences society and its constraints and that the interconnectedness of multiple personal histories can work to construct a personal and cultural understanding of the past.

As Finger chooses to write a collective memoir in order to embed the individual experience within the social, she is also making a place for her identity within the social identity,
a concept closely linked to Couser’s ideal of a connection between disability and society as a whole, or Gill’s concept of “integrating into society.” Gill describes the importance of integration because of the culturally historical tendency to impose a duality on individuals with disabilities:

Taught to disown our disabled parts and to avoid our disabled sisters and brothers, we have been profoundly handicapped in securing our rightful place in society. After all, we have been split into good and bad selves, split from each other, and split from greater society literally through environmental impediments and symbolically through feelings of invalidity. If the identity theorists are correct, the splitting must be healed through integration if we are to grow and prevail.

(46)

Finger uses her re-imagined memoir to reconcile the cultural and physical pasts, to show how an intentional rendering of the past leads to integration.

Finger’s self-declared social form of memoir in Elegy for a Disease can be read as intentional progress towards integration. Through memoir, Finger is reconciling the various aspects of her identity internally as well as connecting with the disability community and presenting herself to society as a whole. As Finger actively confronts historical constraints, she demonstrates that memoir can offer this sense of personal and cultural healing, or wholeness, paving the way for progress and new possibilities for the individual and cultural future.

2. **The personal past**

While Finger makes a point of including a variety of perspectives in her memoir, she does spend a considerable amount of time on her individual past, tying it into the cultural past. While I have already discussed the interconnectedness of the personal and cultural past, and
while I argue that a personal past is, essentially, cultural as well, what I refer to as Finger’s personal past includes her own memories, her family memories, and her body’s memories. In *Elegy*, Finger illustrates how an individual’s past can be restrictive in itself, as she began to explore *Past Due*; she then uses non-traditional memoir form to address these personally damaging or restrictive memories. It is also important to note that Finger paints memory and the past as malleable and subjective; the past is not a static entity, set and unable to be changed. Rather, Finger takes control of her personal past through her writing and re-imagining to dictate its influence and effect on her life, leading towards an evolving sense of personal identity that she then can incorporate into the cultural memory.

In *Elegy for a Disease*, Finger pieces together memories from her past, family memories from before she was born, childhood memories as a young girl with polio, her struggles with physical abuse at the hands of her father, depression in young adulthood, and becoming a mother. She focuses on key memories and interactions with her body, her disease and its later effects, and others around her to make up a comprehensive personal past. Many of the memories she shares are painful events that continue to affect her identity formation into adulthood, such as her confusion and pain at the hands of medical professionals as a child and the physical abuse she experienced within her childhood home. Additionally, Finger acknowledges and shares with her readers that some of the memories and events that make up her past, did not or may not have happened the way she remembers them, an idea that stresses the power of memories in themselves, rather than historical or factual events. These memories dictate, to a great extent, the way that Finger continues to experience the past. In one passage Finger describes herself as a child just after her diagnosis: “During the initial bout with polio, I must have been in the grip not
only of unremembered pain and unremembered fever but of some wild forces at work deep in my brain” (58). Although these recollections are not intact in her mind, Finger recognizes the lasting psychological effect of her experience, even as the “memories” are no longer fully there. Finger begins to question and play with memory: the fact that she cannot remember does not negate the experience. As she describes these early days of her disease, she fills in memories that she no longer has, and describes others in bits and pieces, allowing the reader to feel the fogginess, yet lasting presence, of this part of her past.

While Finger’s recollections of the past powerfully influence her evolving sense of self, Finger’s treatment of such memories as malleable, rather than static and rigid, demonstrates the power of the individual to find agency within the context and integration of the past. In many cases, Finger’s understanding of memory allows her to take control of these personal recollections, which have the potential to inflict lasting damage, by infusing them with a uniquely malleable sense of the past. In one instance, while describing her early awareness of polio through news stories, she writes: “While I was writing this, I considered going to the library in San Francisco and getting copies of those articles. I decided, though, that I wanted to leave my memories as I remember them: those days when the disease seemed something sad but remote” (15). Finger chooses how to incorporate these historical artifacts, objects of the cultural memory, into her personal memory and writing, actively and intentionally shaping her own experience of the past.

Outside of Finger’s personal memories of disability, the AIDS epidemic stands out, not only as a cultural marker of Finger’s early adulthood, but as an overarching presence in her personal past. She describes watching multiple friends fall ill and succumb to the disease, and
again, Finger describes the memories of her friends, not necessarily as they actually occurred, but as they exist to her. Reminiscing over a trip she and one such friend had planned, she writes: “Later, after he died, I supposed that when I was eighty I’d have forgotten that he never actually made it. The fantasy would grow seamlessly into memory, and it would be no different than if he had come and stood next to me there, smelling the earth, looking out at Sassafras and Ebony and the wild irises” (26). As Finger writes, the past that actually occurred subtly morphs into something else, the possibility that she will remember it differently in the future, and that different memory will be a part of her reality. By choosing how to re-incorporate these difficult and potentially damaging memories into her story, Finger takes ownership of the past and controls the way it fits into her construction of identity.

Throughout *Elegy*, the intentional act of life writing in itself acts as a vital part in the process of reconstruction and incorporation of the personal past, helping Finger to understand and form her conceptualization of various aspects of her identity. Besides shaping her memories of her individual experience with disability, this process allows Finger to freely discuss and analyze her struggle with acceptance of the disability community at different stages of her life. Finger describes how she initially had a hard time accepting and reconciling the disability community with her own identity. However, through the process of writing, Finger expresses how her conceptualization of her body and the disability community evolved, eventually allowing her to “integrate with the disability community,” one of Gill’s important pillars in the process of self-understanding. Finger recalls the emotions of fear and anger that she used to feel around other individuals with disabilities: “I got angry at other disabled people I saw on the street with their clunking, awkward crutches and braces. They always looked ugly to
me . . .” (259). “If I hadn’t been so fearful of other disabled people, I might have asked them how they had negotiated the surprisingly perilous journey into the world of work” (227). As a younger woman, Finger is almost able to “pass” as nondisabled. Before her pregnancy and before she began feeling the effects of post-polio syndrome, her impairment minimally affected her daily life. However, as she ages Finger begins to feel the physicality of her impairment and to feel the past of her body. She explains: “An identity held at arms length: I was no longer the one reaching out to embrace the identity of “disabled person;” now the disease was reaching out to embrace me” (268). Her physical past pushes Finger to face her impairment as well as the disability community as she ages, pushing her to come to a new understanding of the connectedness between her physical identity as a woman and her impairment.

Through the process of unconventional memoir writing, Finger is able to shape her past by directing the effect of painful memories and coming to a more evolved understanding of her physical past. Finger strongly rejects the medicalization of her disability and criticizes the techniques used when she was diagnosed with polio. She frankly discusses this and other painful memories in conjunction with her resulting complicated feelings towards her impairment, including her fears of the physical aspects of post-polio syndrome as well as the survival instinct instilled in her by her early childhood illness. Because all of these experiences continue to affect her, her personal past has the capability of being confining, of dictating her current and future identity. However, Finger expertly deals with these memories by taking control, and choosing how to re-conceptualize them. As all these experiences are part of Finger’s personal past, they are also inextricably linked to the cultural past that acts as a contextual framework for her understanding of self.
3. **Cultural and collective past**

In addition to personal memories, Finger weaves cultural and collective memories throughout her narrative, many of which have the power to affect, and sometimes threaten to control, Finger’s conceptualization of self. This past is, in a sense, more complicated than the personal past because not only is it made up of composites of multiple viewpoints and individuals, but it is influenced by institutions, media, and longstanding rigid social narratives. Finding the historical “truth” in the collective or social past is nearly impossible because there is no single experience. However, that this view of the past can stray from actual history easily with far-reaching effects, particularly when it comes to disability and gender. Social norms and cultural memories, no matter their accuracy, dictate expectations, enforcing feelings of alienation and inadequacy when those expectations are not met. While the cultural past can restrict individuals, when synthesized into identity, it can also shape lived experiences and can be helpful in understanding the self, even acting as a source of pride. Finger expertly examines and dismantles parts of her collective, or social, past, including the cultural past of polio, analyzing how this past affects her understanding of identity, while also treating the collective past as malleable, something that can be constructively adapted based on understanding and intended usage.

The most prominent collective past on which Finger focuses is that of polio, as evidenced by the full title of the memoir: *Elegy for a Disease: A Personal and Cultural History of Polio.* Finger’s intention in writing this memoir was to share an integrated version of her evolving relationship with her disease, based on her individual past within the space of polio. Unwilling to make polio a uniquely personal experience, Finger immediately acknowledges that she does not
have sole ownership of the disease, that it belongs to the culture, to all who were affected by it. Finger reconstructs the past of polio by carefully dismantling the different aspects and ideologies that make up the modern understanding of the disease. Beginning her narrative, Finger writes: “Polio belongs not just to those of us who were paralyzed by it but to our mothers and fathers, our sisters and brothers, our partners and our children; to those who cared for us, to those who brutalized us . . .” (6). Finger credits the conceptualization of the disease to the evolving narratives and myths surrounding polio. These myths and “truths” that act to define polio are made up of a web of social and personal narratives involving medicalization, pathology, patients, doctors, individuals, families, and media. As she did with her personal past, Finger shapes the social history by acknowledging accepted ideologies, then questioning and reconstructing them.

Finger’s examination of the very early conceptualization of polio revolves around the medical: doctors, treatment, and the methods of the formidable “Sister Kenny;” Finger points out the convenient simplicity of historical narratives of the period and places a disability studies lens on this history. Finger’s portrayal of Sister Kenny’s story stands as a prime example of Finger’s dismantling of accepted cultural history. Kenny, who claimed to be an expert in the field of polio treatment, created much of her own story and credentials through the writing of her memoir. Her harsh and, ultimately damaging, methods were accepted and used as a plausible and effective treatment for children with polio. Finger explains: “The story of Elizabeth Kenny, as told in the 1946 movie version of her life and in her autobiography, is the story of a noble crusader, a solitary and scorned bearer of the truth” (92). However, Finger goes on to point out: “She was also someone who didn’t let a little thing like the truth get in the way of a good story” (93). Finger questions Kenny’s legitimacy while also acknowledging her role in the creation of “polio”
and polio “treatment.” In dismantling Kenny’s story, however, Finger is able to use this narrative to better understand the cultural past, as well as her own experience, of the disease.

Finger acknowledges and demonstrates how the medical conceptualization of polio worked to create a cultural understanding of the disease. Powerful in its claimed authority over all things related to the body, the medical community has taken it upon itself to define disability and illness, thus often detracting from the lived experiences of the affected individuals. Explaining how this process works, Finger writes: “One of the steps in the creation of polio as the disease that could be overcome with hard work, hard work, and more hard work, the disease whose survivors were usually accepted back into their communities and families--was to define it as a disease whose effects were limited to the obvious and the physical” (253). Finger’s assertion both acknowledges the power of the medical authority, exemplifying the influence of the historical narrative of polio and underlining its constructed nature, and links medicalized mindsets with cultural and personal consequences. Through understanding of how the overarching narratives were originally pieced together and evolved, Finger begins to re-conceptualize the components of the social understanding of polio and to situate personal identity within the cultural context.

Similar to the personal, the collective past also has the ability to evolve, to change and take on new meanings as time goes on. A dynamic entity, it can transform as new ideologies dominate the culture, leading to new understanding, losing or gaining meaning, and taking on new symbolic properties. Finger highlights this malleable tendency throughout Elegy for a Disease, particularly in its relation to the cultural construction and memory of polio. Writing, for example: “Sister Kenny, like polio, had faded out of our collective memories, becoming a
footnote to a disease that had itself become a footnote” (92). This example shows the natural progression of a cultural memory, losing valence on its own as time progresses. Kenny, along with polio itself, no longer stands as a well-known presence; the image that Kenny worked hard to create has almost disappeared.

Sister Kenny’s story and the idea of polio itself are no longer prevalent cultural narratives. However, the remaining perception of polio, as a disease of weakness that needs to be overcome with hard work and strict routines, continues to affect those who experienced it and lingers in the related social memory. So, while cultural memories can, and often do, fade naturally, those affected by a particular construction of the past continue to feel the need to take on the power to forcefully change a cultural narrative, an idea brought to life in Finger’s description of Franklin D Roosevelt and his polio:

Shortly after Roosevelt himself became disabled, a friend of his mother’s asked, “Now (that) he is a cripple, will he ever be anything else?” Roosevelt was to spend the next decade of his life cobbling together an answer to that question--at first by trying to “Unmake” himself as a cripple; later by creating the story of himself as a man who, through personal heroism and grit, had “overcome” his disability. (224)

Roosevelt’s effort to redefine himself might be more accurately understood as an effort to “unmake” the collective memories and resulting social narratives that define him, although he probably would not have qualified it that way. Roosevelt’s self-understanding and presentation as arguably polio’s most public figure in turn influenced the cultural narrative of his time as well as the continuing collective memory of polio and disability. While Roosevelt’s example is not the
most progressive or productive for the disability community, Finger’s understanding of Roosevelt’s ability to shape his own story is indicative of her conviction that the collective memory is malleable, constructed, yet valid and able to effect real consequences or impact on individuals and cultures.

Finger’s description of Roosevelt exemplifies, not only the power of the individual to change his own social narrative, but conversely, the power of the collective memory over the individual’s formation of identity. Roosevelt was so aware of the social narrative surrounding polio that he knew he had to actively work to change his own presentation of identity. Roosevelt does not appear to experience Gills’ concepts of “coming home,” “coming together,” or “coming out”; adamant that he not identify as “disabled”, Roosevelt is apparently not able to identify with the disability community, personally reconcile his impaired qualities with his non-impaired qualities, or to fully synthesize his sense of self with the self he presents to others. Roosevelt’s hyperawareness of his presentation of self came, in part, from an internalization of the cultural memory, and thus social narrative, of polio as a disease of weakness. As Sister Kenny believed, those who were strong enough, who worked hard enough, could overcome the effects of the disease. Finger is candid with her own struggle with internalized ideology surrounding disability; because of this internalization of the cultural past, and resulting expectations of disability, Finger spends much of her younger life rejecting the disability community, as noted previously. This internalization of collective conceptualization of disability is prevalent not only within individuals, but in the cultural subconscious as well, as we see in Finger’s description of an image she encounters of an intentionally framed lone disabled man: “The notion that disabled people should be alone, isolated, not in community with others, is so deeply entrenched that we
know the picture is a better picture with him on his own” (9). Cultural memories lead to a collective ideology, internalized by both the disability community and those outsiders who conceptualize from a distance, both powerful players in the social perception of disability. However, Finger’s writing through memoir demonstrates how the collective and personal pasts, along with their truths and fictions can be used, not to oppress or limit, but to situate the identity within a more complete understanding of these pasts.

4. **Response to the past: Integration and ownership**

Throughout *Elegy for a Disease*, we see Finger construct the past as the interplay between the personal and collective; official stories meld with personal and cultural memories to create a multidimensional understanding. Finger must then cope with this past in order to situate her identity, which she does by dismantling personal and social narratives, carefully examining the origins of its pieces, and reconstructing it in a way that better allows her, and the reader to understand Finger’s identity as well as the collective conceptualizations of polio and disability.

Finger is careful to highlight, rather than avoid, the potentially restrictive nature of the past, to closely examine the social narratives that have led to the internal and social perpetuation of ideologies. Finger’s unconventionality in form, chronology, and focus on malleability of memory mimics the way the past is created, different narratives pieced and blurred together. Using this technique, Finger actually demonstrates a refocusing of power back to the individual and thus allows for agency in the formation of identity. Throughout *Elegy for a Disease*, Finger engages with past memories, stories, and individuals, ultimately emphasizing how the past can be reconstructed, collectively and individually, into a usable identity marker.
C. **Conclusion: Memoir as a bridge**

Memoir, in form, is unique in that it both allows the author to explore her own past and demonstrates a clear intentionality through narrative construction. The genre of memoir in itself gives agency to the writer, automatically allowing for the assertion of self through exploration of one’s personal history. By telling the unique story of an individual, memoir does not usually claim to speak for a social group, thus naturally countering the tendency of other historical narratives to ascribe group traits to individual stories. Contrary to biographies, the subject of the narrative usually avoids being objectified or pushed, categorically into a pre-existing social narrative. However, as Finger acknowledges, internalization of these narratives can cause the author to write herself into a pre-set ideology or to attempt excessively to write herself *out of* such an ideology, thus potentially missing important parts of social identity formation. However, that conundrum encompasses the wonderfully subjective nature of memoir: authors write their own truths, whether or not “historically accurate.” This truth is valid in that, outside of the realm of fact-checking or historical reality, it works to shape the self-perceived and projected identity of the author.

Finger’s *Past Due* and *Elegy for a Disease* are particularly intentional and self-aware in the process of identity formation due to Finger’s intense focus on and reconstruction of the personal and collective past. Through her memoirs, Finger does not only assert her personal development and identity, but closely examines the personal and social pasts that have contributed to her sense of self as a woman with a disability. Finger then takes these pasts and dismantles them, thus re-appropriating and making them useful for self-conceptualization. Finger shows the readers how she has reconciled the past internally and how she continues to
interact with personal and social pasts, situating her individual identity within the collective identity of woman and disabled.

In the conclusion to her chapter: “The Social Experience of Disability,” Gill explains:

As disabled people warm to concepts such as disability identity, pride, and culture, they are reconstructing values about deviance and actively exploring rather than subordinating their interest in “physique.” . . . They are building connections to each other purposefully--not merely clustering with costigmatized peers by default--exchanging fresh ideas and patinated stories as well as continuing political goals. Graciously, they are sending word of this out to the larger world as they go. Still working hard to be known, they continue to form bridges in all directions: to the nondisabled world, to each other, and to the self. (369)

Finger’s use of unconventional memoir form as a vehicle for integration and for bridging the gap from the personal understanding of the self to the social presentation of self, clearly shows her grasp on the importance of the usable past. Through memoir, Finger demonstrates that she sees herself both individually and as part of a collective. Furthermore, she views her past as a social experience, a collective of feminist, disabled, nondisabled, social, and personal ideologies that work together to form markers for self-conceptualization.

Through memoir, Finger demonstrates that individuals can dismantle the past to allow for better situating of the self within cultural identity. While based in personal experience, Finger’s memoirs begin to criticize and re-assemble social narratives. They call for a critique of the structures that have dictated terms of her identity as a disabled woman and mother. The next step
then, is to delve further into imaginative examples of just how restrictive and ingrained social
and personal memories can be and how dismantling such memories can have widespread effects
for the future. Through memoir, Finger demonstrates how the past can be dismantled to allow for
better situating of the self; through her works of fiction, she explores how the pervasive personal
and cultural past can be used to re-conceptualize, or re-imagine the future.
III. PERSONAL AND CULTURAL RE-IMAGINING THROUGH FICTION

In the previous chapter, I show how Finger’s memoirs allow for a deep personal exploration of the past and a situating of her individual and collective identity within a cultural context. In this chapter, I move to an analysis of Finger’s fictional works, looking at how Finger further evolves her understanding of disabled and feminine identity through this genre. Not only does Finger’s use of fiction allow her to depart from a grounding in reality and to completely dismantle and re-imagine the past in order to move towards an alternative future, but it also secures a place in the patchwork of disability culture. As Longmore describes in his “The Second Phase: From Disability Rights to Disability Culture,” policy and culture are interdependent, working to perpetuate one another. Fiction has a unique place in culture in that it is both a place for establishing and changing social and cultural narratives. Fiction, whether written formally in novel form or just as stories retold over time, makes up a large part of the cultural past, thus becoming a useful and powerful tool. Fiction has a unique place in culture in that it is a medium for both establishing and changing social narratives. It allows the author freedom in that it does not necessarily need to be tied to reality or actual events. This freedom, however, can also work to perpetuate inauthentic or confining narratives. These narratives can then become accepted as reality, creating unrealistic expectations of individuals or social groups. Finger acknowledges the problematic nature of perpetuated fictional narratives, and at the same time, actually uses fiction to re-define these narratives. Through fiction, Finger addresses many familiar themes and uses techniques that we see in *Elegy for a Disease* and *Past Due*, though her treatment of these themes becomes more abstract and, arguably, further departs from the limits of her personal experiences. We see Finger moving away from the often self-centered nature of the memoir
format in both of her memoirs, a trend that continues in her fictional works. Fiction also offers freedom to the author in that she does not need to validate the experiences by proving that they are actually her own. She is able to re-imagine the past and the future without staying anchored to her individual lived experience. Finger’s fictional works, however, stem from a rejection of the same constraints highlighted in her memoirs: the potentially limiting and restrictive nature of social and personal pasts. Through her novel Bone Truth and collection of short stories Call me Ahab, Finger addresses these narratives and demonstrates their far-reaching effects, showing just how embedded they are in the social psyche.

Finger not only uses fiction to highlight the pervasive nature of the narratives and ideologies of personal and social past, but also reconstructs the past, eventually leading to new ways to use these narratives in the future. The novel Bone Truth acts almost as a memoir, written from the point of view of a woman similar in many characteristics to Finger. Becoming pregnant, Finger’s protagonist, Elizabeth Etters, must reconcile her troubled family past with her identity as a woman, a mother, and an individual with a disability. Finger’s depiction of Etters’ interaction with her past as well as Finger’s use of form, sliding between the present and Etters’ family past demonstrates the eventual need for a re-imagining of Elizabeth’s past in order for her to move forward. Finger’s collection of short stories, Call me Ahab, then moves even more towards the abstract, in the form of a twisted set of familiarly canonical stories. Finger takes these stories that have worked to perpetuate cultural narratives, and completely dismantles and re-imagines them, challenging traditional gender and disability roles. Both of these works use fiction to demonstrate the importance of the past for present and future understanding of individual and social identities.
A. **Analysis of Bone Truth**

In *Bone Truth*, a novel that could easily be mistaken for a memoir, Finger writes the story of Elizabeth Etters, a woman who is simultaneously dealing with the early stages of a surprise pregnancy and her relationship with her family as her abusive father is in the dying process. Elizabeth explores the family and cultural pasts that have shaped her understanding of herself as a possible mother, a daughter, and as a disabled woman. As I previously note, Scholar Goffman discusses the aspects of identity and the way that identity is categorized and perceived in his *Stigma* (1986). He writes that identity is a combination of “identity pegs” and “life history items,” meaning these two things: the current markers of identity and the individual’s past work together to define identity, as perceived both internally and socially. Finger’s Etters struggles with the effects of her past or “life history” on her current and future conceptualization of self and family. Specifically, *Bone Truth* shows an interesting study of the multiple facets that make up family past, and the risks of transferring that past into the future. Finger’s portrayal of Elizabeth’s interaction with and re-imagining of parts of her past leads to a reconceptualization of identity within the family and a reconciliation between a troubling past and a future for both Elizabeth and her unborn child.

1. **The restrictive past**

Almost immediately, the reader becomes aware of the seeming disconnect between Elizabeth’s struggle to cope with her past and her past’s strong lingering presence in her current life. Finger makes this apparent through the novel’s structure, as chapters that explain and focus on Elizabeth’s pregnancy and relationship are immediately followed by chapters delving into her family’s past, eventually focusing on her troubled relationship with her dying father.
Elizabeth tells the story of her past while emphasizing to her supposed reader, as the novel is in fictional memoir form, how her family past, from her parents childhood to her youth, has affected her conceptualization of herself as a woman and a mother as well as her understanding of her body and impairment. For Elizabeth, the past is a dangerous entity hanging over her and threatening her present and future.

Finger’s use of this halting form, switching almost every other chapter from Elizabeth’s present to an exploration of her past, demonstrates the connectedness between the two for Elizabeth. Focusing primarily on her family, Elizabeth reflects on her parents’ childhoods and school days as well as their subversive lifestyles as her mother raised the children while her father was away in Europe and on the run from McCarthian anti-communist authorities. Finger also injects stories and experiences from Elizabeth’s more recent personal past: her prior romantic relationships and young adulthood, highlighting the continued effect of these events. Elizabeth is constantly aware of the influence of her past and uses it as a lens to analyze her current and previous relationships, feelings, and conception of self. Finger writes Elizabeth as intentionally reconstructing and explaining her past to the reader in order to share motivation for feelings and actions. “And on the negative side? Just the past, that’s all,” (14) notes Etters as she compiles a pro and con list for continuing her pregnancy. Before she even begins to explain what qualifies her past as negative, she gives her imagined reader the clear idea that this past continues to affect her decisions and has the potential to wield power over her future.

As Finger continues to develop the character, the reader sees that Etters’ conceptualization of herself as a woman is greatly affected by both her relationship with her father and her experience with the medical system as a child with polio. These relationships and
their related experiences continue to alter Etters’ relationship with her body and impairment as well as her relationships with men. Elizabeth views both the surgical treatment of her medicalized body and the physical abuse she endured at the hands of her father as violations of her body by men, a sense that carries over to her later sexual and romantic relationships.

Addressing a memory of her father, Elizabeth says:

There are flashes of the violence itself, of you, crouched on top of me, your hands around my throat, desperately choking, choking off my air. . . . Later with other men, men I loved, I experienced a sensation of melding: the pleasure of union, of two bodies becoming one. But earlier, with him, I was shit, dead like him, without arms and legs--they melted and swelled, into my filthy belly, my gut. When I went down under his hands, it was like going down under the anesthesia. (104)

Elizabeth’s understanding of her father’s abuse is linked in her mind with her loss of control as she was sedated before surgery as a child as well as with her later sexual relationships. While she does differentiate between her abuse and sexual experiences years later, the two remain connected in her mind, even in their opposite-ness.

Again, Finger addresses the connection between the treatment and imagining of the woman’s and disabled bodies, writing Elizabeth’s experience as similar to her own as expressed through her memoirs. Elizabeth looks back upon her early experience with doctors and surgery as almost equal, in its physical violation, to her memories of abuse, attributing the violence to the male figure and the not-quite-complicit role to the woman, as she presumably viewed her mother and father during her childhood. Elizabeth explains: “He went down to the bone. He cut away a
piece, pried it loose. These tools have different names, but they are hacksaws and chisels. A woman sponged splattered blood and bone dust from the forehead of the man. When he finished, he stitched me up with clumsy stitches, so that the scar will be fat and thick. He wrote his hatred of my body on my flesh” (108). Strikingly similar to how she describes her father’s abuse, the two are equally damaging and lasting in Elizabeth’s conception of her own body, as desecrated and hated, particularly by men, early in life. While she is able to separate this, to some extent from her later relationships with men, her body and mind carry an inherent cautiousness and defensiveness that sometimes take control. In one instance, Matt, her current partner recognizes this pattern and says to her: “Don’t . . . don’t do this to me. Don’t drag all this baggage from your past with you. I am not your goddamn father, okay? I’m me. Let me be there for you” (84). Although Elizabeth is acutely aware of the influence of her past, it continues to affect her internalized and external presentation of identity as a woman and partner.

Similarly, Elizabeth expresses fear that her father’s hatred and violence may somehow be physically engrained in her, a tangible “life history item” waiting to be passed on to her own unborn child, as sensation that instills fear in her as she considers whether or not to become a mother. She muses: “Daddy, will I find you living in my hands too? Will I someday slam my daughter’s head against the wall, repeating, after you ‘Bitch! Bitch! Bitch!’” (86). Not only does Elizabeth’s past abuse affect her understanding of her physical womanhood, but it instills a fear that clearly extends into the future and has the power to affect her future decisions. She fears that hatred has been physically passed on from one generation to the next, from her fathers hands, to her own, to her future child. In this sense, the memory of the body does not just hold the scars of surgery or the trauma of physical abuse, but the ability to hold violence as well.
As Elizabeth feels marked with the violence of her past, Elizabeth demonstrates a cyclical understanding of how the social and personal histories of her parents precipitated the damaging events in her own life. Elizabeth describes in detail her parents’ childhoods and backgrounds and situates their identities within the cultural context her parents pro-communist beliefs in the fifties. Unable to express this connection to a friend, Elizabeth explains: “I wish I could say to Cathy, I am the daughter of a man who fought for freedom in a country far from home, who made me a vessel for his hatred, of all that was weak and female, who sentimentalized the stalwart Spanish peasants who could do no wrong--a man who talked about freedom and then slammed my head against the wall” (102). These two things, her father’s political passion and Elizabeth’s abuse, while creating a seeming juxtaposition in terms of her father, are also connected for her. She sees her father’s past as a framework for his aggression towards her, at the same time making it all the more spiteful. Elizabeth also understands her mother’s intense anxiety and fear as born of the panic of the time, based largely on historical patterns. When Matt comments that her mother must have been paranoid to think she would go to a concentration camp for being a communist, Elizabeth counters: “. . . it had happened to the Japanese. It had only been twenty years before that it had all started happening in Germany” (48). Elizabeth understands her parents in the context of their pasts, cultural and personal memories that have affected their senses of self and projection of that identity onto their daughters.

The lingering nature of Elizabeth’s past is potentially so confining that it extends to the physical spaces and objects that surround her. Being in her childhood house, inhabiting the space of her past, draws up un-remembered details of her abuse: “Here is he door between the living room and the kitchen, the door against which my father pounded my head and pounded my head,
screaming over and over again, “Bitch! I’ll kill you! I’ll kill you!” (55). Somehow that past is infused within the space, whether or not Elizabeth has an active memory of it. In young adulthood, she moves far away from the sight of her memories, to England, and then out west, presumably to drastically remove herself from the location of her physical abuse. Describing her childhood homes, Elizabeth explains: “Nothing makes me happier than open space. In all those houses we lived in . . . in all of those houses, my father ruled . . . The front door shut and we were home, enclosed” (127). For Elizabeth, the past lingers on not only internally, but through the spaces in which she has lived and currently occupies, as an actually physically restricting entity. As her past holds her emotionally in its limiting grasp, she also sees the past as a physically enclosing space, shutting her in.

Finger writes Elizabeth’s past as pervasive and persistent, following her and drawing her back to it, both psychologically and physically. Elizabeth’s present and future are threatened by the past of her body, her disease, her father, and the physical space of her past. These personal narratives continue to affect her conceptualization of herself and understanding of identity. In an effort to escape the lingering influence of her past, Elizabeth attempts to disconnect herself from this past, both physically and emotionally.

2. **Futility of repression and dismissal of the past**

While, as Gill notes, an instinctual response to the restrictive nature of the past is to deny, or to attempt to dismiss, escape, or overcome, Finger highlights the futility of that approach through her characters in *Bone Truth*. Her characters attempt to evade the past through psychological or physical distance at multiple points, with mostly unsuccessful and sometimes almost disastrous effects. Both Elizabeth and her parter, Matt, attempt to remove themselves
from the past with physical space, and Elizabeth actively mentally distances herself from the
effect of her family and body history as well. While Elizabeth tries to escape the pain of her past
through separation, her mother plainly denies the troubled past relationship between her husband
and daughter, downplaying the abuse Elizabeth endured as a child. Ultimately Finger shows how
these efforts are temporary at best and futile most often, suggesting that denying the past without
engaging with it does not allow for a reconciling of the self within that past, and thus does not
allow it to be useful for future or present identity.

Early in the novel, Finger’s characters express attempts to separate themselves from their
family pasts. This separation comes in the form of intentional physical and emotional distance.
Both Matt and Elizabeth try to escape their families, albeit in different contexts. First, in an
attempt to outstep his mother’s shadow, “Matt went east to go to art school so that he wouldn’t
be his mother’s son” (12). Matt’s mother’s reputation, as a well known artist in the area, would
presumably attach itself to Matt if he had stayed to go to school nearby. However, after school,
he moved back west, back to the space inhabited by his mother and her artwork. In fact, common
knowledge of Matt’s mother is one of the first things Matt and Elizabeth discuss in their
relationship. Additionally, Elizabeth also makes several attempts in her young adulthood to break
from her father’s hold on her past: “And then when I was twenty-three, I said, I won’t live
anymore in the house of the daughter. I don’t want any more to be the one who came from my
father, who was born to prove that he wasn’t a ghost dressed in the skin and bone of a man. I said
No more” (19). Elizabeth describes making the conscious effort to remove herself from the
physical and emotional space occupied by her past with her father. She describes this space as a
“house,” an enclosed, claustrophobic space for her. However, now, years later, we see how,
although she has purposely removed herself from the past, the past has crept into her current relationship and continued to shape her sense of identity, the fear of becoming and influence of her father pervades her processing of her current pregnancy. Just as Matt’s mother’s is a part of him and he eventually returns to the space of her overwhelming presence, Elizabeth’s physical distance does not prevent her from internally, and eventually physically, reconnecting with her father’s influence.

While Matt and Elizabeth use space as a separation from their respective pasts, Elizabeth’s mother separates herself from the memory, and essentially the culpability, of her husband’s relationship with her young daughter. She urges Elizabeth to make peace with her father, downplaying the abuse she endured. “Your father’s a good man. He--he risked his life in Spain . . . He never came close to killing you . . .”, she protests (60). She denies the past using a twofold strategy by first choosing to highlight and remember other marker’s of her husband’s identity and second by undermining the damage inflicted by years of abuse. This approach is ineffective in that it not only disrespects a legitimately scarring experience, but it also causes a disconnect between mother and daughter. By denying this aspect of her family past, Elizabeth’s mother disengages with the past, choosing to construct her memory in a way that is less complicated and easier to navigate, but is ultimately not useful for healing.

Elizabeth’s past, and personal truth, persistently lives on not only in her psyche, but physically in her body, as her body’s memory even after she has worked to excise it. From her fear of a physical inheritance of her father’s anger, to the scars on her body, Elizabeth’s physicality holds onto a past of its own. She continues to perceive her body as defined by these memories, conceptualized through the restricting framework of the past. In school, as a classmate
describes the cyclical cellular regeneration of the body, Elizabeth remembers thinking: “Then why do my scars stay, my memories?” (140). As she gets older, Elizabeth realizes that the body cannot slough off its past like dead cells, that the truth of its past stays within, physically confined by the body; she calls this bone truth: “A truth that’s deeper than the truth of dreams: the truth of the body. Bone truth. Home truth: a truth that is searching, poignant, close. The Ango-Saxons called the body the banhau, the bone-house” (102). Again, Elizabeth imagines the past as confined and confining, using the imagery of a house. The past inhabits the body, and thus cannot be denied or brushed aside, as it is physically carried with Elizabeth.

While Elizabeth’s past does indeed have lingering physical manifestations, her effort to sometimes over-physicalize in an effort compartmentalize or make it easier to escape does not account for its long-term psychological effects. As a young woman, particularly, Elizabeth continually makes attempts to put it away through conceptualizing it as connected with physical space, as an object. If the past is manifested and survives principally through physicality, Elizabeth can then put physical space between herself and the past. However, Elizabeth learns that this approach is not productive as she moves to England in order to physically leave her past behind. She explains this distance: “When I was nineteen, I tried to strip myself bare of the past. I tried to make myself new” (138). This move ultimately ends in acute mental illness and a suicide attempt. Upon returning from London, she moves to the west, again putting as much physical space between her body and the space inhabited by the past as possible. Even as she goes back and forth to visit her family as an adult and mother to be, she emphasizes the plane rides, the distance that has to be bridged between her new and old life. This stress on physical distance exemplifies Elizabeth’s attempt to objectify her past; however, as she narrates the novel
and her experience of pregnancy, she comes to realize that the painful experiences of her past do not live in one place or time: “I folded up my past and put it away. I knew it was there; I knew what was there there. I took off that skin of shame and hatred and folded it up, sealed the trunk shut . . . Now it’s not so much that I return to it; it returns to me” (19). Elizabeth realizes that, while she can temporarily step out of her past, she cannot evade her memories no matter the time and distance of separation. Confronted with her pregnancy and the imminent death of her father, Elizabeth is also confronted by the effect of these memories, and she must deal with them alternately and willingly interact with them, rather than compartmentalize or deny them.

3. **A re-imagined past**

As Etters learns that she cannot move away from the past, she comes to realize that she must instead integrate the past with her present and future in order to transform it from harmful to useful. Through the perspective of Finger’s Elizabeth Etters, the reader sees a journey of intentional reconceptualization of the individual and family memories that make up the past. Through her youth and young adulthood, Elizabeth has learned that she cannot completely separate herself physically or emotionally from her past. Her memory carries the markers of the past that work to define and sometimes restrict her current identity. However, as she begins to deal with pregnancy and her father’s death, she begins interacting with, rather than attempting to escape, these memories. In her “Feminist Disability Studies” (1997), Garland Thomson suggests that, through the feminist lens, embedded social perceptions of the woman and disability can be challenged by a “re-imagining” of these images and narratives. (1568) This strategy of feminist disability studies extends to the personal level in Etters’ treatment of her own past. Etters takes ownership by re-imagining, rather than denying, the stories and events of her family past, her
childhood, the disabled woman’s body, and even the historical evidence that acts to make up the “facts” of the past. Through this reconceptualization, she is able, not to escape the past, but to reconcile it and use it to positively define her identity.

Before her pregnancy or relationship with Matt, Elizabeth has already started the process of redefining the body of the disabled woman through her artwork. She describes her work with the bodies of women with disabilities, taking photos as a response to the memory of the disabled body as medical property, something to be examined (5). In using photography, the same medium that the medical world has historically used to objectify the woman’s body, Elizabeth is dismantling this cultural construction and remaking it into a useful tool for understanding of the self. Elizabeth recognizes the restrictions of the past in terms of the current view of a woman with a disability and works with that boxed-in image in order to re-imagine her own body and allow others to do the same. Pointing out, “. . . when you are a disabled woman, the equation woman equals sex does not apply to you, you are breaking the role assigned to you (become a social worker, develop inner strength, be a wonderful aunt) when you dress like you love your body” (90), Elizabeth experiences the liberating feeling of breaking these expectations in her own treatment of her body. Dressing up for her first date with Matt, she points out: “I felt crippled and sexy. Finally” (91). By interacting with, rather than simply denying the cultural, historically constructed, conceptions of woman versus disability, Finger is able to re-imagine her body as well as those of other women with disabilities, and thus reclaim ownership of her physicality.

As Elizabeth uses her artwork to re-conceptualize the images of women’s bodies, she also interacts with portrayals of her family’s past that perpetuate inaccurate narratives, in order to
reconcile that image of the past with her current reality. By intentionally reclaiming and reconstructing her memories of the past, Elizabeth finds her personal truth within these family narratives that are made up of historical components: photographs, newspaper articles, her father’s obituary. In one instance she examines a family photograph, a piece of evidence from her past, which immortalizes an incomplete picture of the past: “In the yellowing photograph cut from the newspaper, we look like one of those Catholic families that march in the St. Patrick’s Day Parade, all seven of us, Dad on one side, Mom on the other, the kids in order of age neatly in between” (40). The photograph is just one example that Elizabeth uses to demonstrate the break between perceived reality and the actual past and its lasting effects. By using these objects differently, interpreting them in a new way, Elizabeth changes their meaning and intentionally reconstructs the past and its influence. Elizabeth examines other historical artifacts, injecting her father’s memory into these items to piece together a version of him before she knew him, to reconstruct his history. While snapshots and artifacts from the past do not tell the whole story on their own, they help Elizabeth imagine an image of a father to whom she can relate. “Daddy, I have remade you, remade you out of scraps of memory and imagination, out of the photographs in the old album, old newspapers read on microfilm. I have seen you sitting in your dorm room at MIT as the rainy weather moves in from New York, seen you reading an article that I read almost fifty years after, Dead Girls Linked with Suicide Pair” (217). By using these objects to re-imagine her father and create a new link through which to relate to him, Elizabeth is able to step out from under his suffocating presence in her past. She intentionally gets to know him alternatively to how she has always known him. She begins to see him not as her father, but as the man who she has pieced together: “I must see not just the dead man who fathered me, the
shell of bone and sinew and muscle, but see the man who smiles back at me from the passport
photo” (218). Through re-imagining her father’s past, Elizabeth does not deny her father’s the
painful parts of her childhood, but creates an alternative way in which to view her father, a
conceptualization that she can use to move forward.

Elizabeth recognizes her father’s effect on her relationships and acknowledges her
enduring tie to him and to her painful past. However, she also recognizes the stifling nature of
this characterization, and in doing so achieves the first step to reconciling these perceptions with
her current reality. As she embarks on a mental and physical journey to re-imagine her father,
traveling to retrace his steps and conjure his life in Spain, Elizabeth constructs a different image
of her father, and is able to build her own memories of his past. Finally, she is successful in re-
creating the lingering image of her father: “Daddy, for the first time I dreamed of you not as I
saw you when I was a child. You weren’t the troll under the bridge preying on the three billy
goats gruff; you weren’t the giant living at the top of the beanstalk in the clouds. In the dream,
you looked at me, and I looked at you” (246). Elizabeth’s dream symbolizes her new way of
seeing her father, thus making room for her to move forward with her relationship, pregnancy,
and individual identity.

While Elizabeth’s attempt to move further away from her memories physically, to tuck
them away, does not lead to closure or any true progress, her outright engaging of the past allows
her to re-imagine herself in light of her past. As she took ownership of the body through her
artwork, she takes ownership of her past by dealing with it on her own terms. She directly
addresses memories of her family, writing as if she is talking to her memories of her mother and
father. She starts at the beginning, with her parents’ pasts in order to construct a new past for
herself. This collection of memories, imagination, and cultural artifacts leads to a manageable and healing interpretation of Elizabeth’s past, creating a process that she uses in order to move on with her life. The reader clearly sees how the past cannot be escaped or repressed, rather it needs to be dealt with, head-on, in order to allow room for progress.

4. **Conclusions: The power of individual re-imagining**

Finger’s memoir-modeled novel works to explore the potentially damaging and far-reaching effects of personal past: for Etters, personal past encompasses physical, social, psychological, and family pasts. Through fiction, Finger can experiment with different situations and reactions to the past, without necessarily having to tie them to her own experience. Because Finger is not claiming the story, she can further depart from her own reality, in a way that she could not through her own memoirs. Etters begins by attempting to avoid her past, but through addressing it and reconstructing it, finds a way to make it a usable part of her identity and to situate herself comfortably within her difficult past. Bone Truth both explores the power of the individual to sort through the past, to reconstruct its resulting identity and, as a novel, takes its place in the cultural history of disability, becoming a cultural artifact in itself. In her collection of short stories, Call me Ahab, Finger takes this recreation of cultural past further, highlighting how narratives of the past apply, not principally to individuals, but to widespread ingrained cultural perceptions. Finger’s short stories in Call me Ahab apply this critique of the past to a social exploration of historical narratives, demonstrating on a wider level the limiting effects that our cultural narratives can have on self-understanding.
B. **Analysis of *Call me Ahab***

We see that Longmore, as well as feminist scholars such as Garland Thomson, highlights and critiques the power of social narrative to define cultural as well as individual identity. As I previously discuss, many of these narratives are created and accepted by the dominant culture rather than situated in all their nuances by the group to which they pertain. Through *Call me Ahab*, her complicating and sometimes jarring compilation of short stories, Finger focuses on the often problematic historical roots of social narratives and how these narratives, whether they began rooted in reality or fiction, have worked to create a sort of subjective fictionality, morphed into expectations of how cultural groups such as women and individuals with disabilities are expected to act. Both fictional and historical figures naturally become simplified and fictionalized over time. Just as Finger describes Etters’ reconceptualization of her father’s character, Finger’s re-characterization and complication of the subjects of her short stories act to humanize them. Finger undermines the authority of widely accepted normative social narratives through the dismantling of literary characters and social representations of historical figures. These representations make up a sort of normalized canon of disability history. Finger weaves together narratives that are largely familiar to the cultural mainstream—but forcibly redefines these characters and narratives, thus inserting a sense of disability agency into these stories that have historically been claimed by the mainstream, allowing for a collective re-imagining of both disability and being a woman.

The basis of each of Finger’s stories is a historical or fictional cultural narrative that has been appropriated by the mainstream culture and many of whose characters have been simplified and used symbolically to tell a story or teach a lesson. In cultural memory, Helen Keller is the
wild uncivilized child who overcomes her blindness and deafness to inspire challenged 
individuals everywhere; Goliath is the evil giant who David smites with a small stone and the 
will of God; Mari Barbola, a surly dwarf who amused the Spanish royal family. As Douglas 
Baynton writes in the introduction to Longmore’s New Disability History: “Disability is 
everywhere in history, once you begin looking for it, but conspicuously absent in the histories we 
write” (2). None of these historical narratives are situated or directed by their subjects, rather 
they are objects of mainstream culture, forged into life lessons, entertainment, or feel-good 
stories for the able-bodied. These stories, in their unadulterated form, based in both fact and 
fiction, work as part of a past that continues to dictate mainstream ideology and 
conceptualization of femaleness and disability. Because these narratives are known and have 
been perpetuated by the dominant mainstream culture, they belong to society as a whole, in a 
sense. This collective ownership allows these narratives to have a far-reaching valence, to be 
powerful in the cultural consciousness, more so than the individual. Just as Finger’s personal 
memories are malleable in her memoirs and Elizabeth Etters reconstructs her father’s memory, 
Finger dismantles the resulting cultural memory of this “nondisabled” disability canon and 
reconstructs it in a way that allows a more nuanced and complicated view of disability and 
womanhood. These stories highlight the power of memory to change the accepted reality which 
then works to dictate identity. By twisting the cultural memory and re-appropriating this small 
sample of the past to make it a disability past Finger opens up possibilities for the future of her 
personal and cultural understanding of selfhood.

In this chapter, I focus on three of Finger’s short stories: “The Artist and the Dwarf,” 
“Helen and Frida,” and “Goliath.” Each of her stories can be studied and analyzed in detail and
adds to the richness of this discussion, however, this small sample works more concisely to underline the social narratives of being a woman and disability as well as the techniques Finger uses to undermine these narratives. I first explain in further detail the influence such a canon can have on identity and how its subjects work to define femininity and disability. I then analyze Finger’s stories, showing how they critique, dismantle, and rebuild the current social narratives. Finally, I discuss what this means—namely how these stories interact with and can be useful to feminist and disability ideology.

1. **Social narratives of the woman and disability**

I think that I must be a lesbian, a word I have read once in a book, because I know that I am not like the women on television, with their high heels and shapely calves and their firm asses swaying inside of satin dresses waiting, waiting for a man, nor am I like the women I know, the mothers with milky breasts, and what else can there be? (*Call me Ahab* 13)

Throughout her short stories, Finger works to dismantle existing social narratives, however, in order to understand this significance fully, it is important to first examine the power of such representations to influence and even define female and disability identity. Feminist ideology, such as the above outlined ideas of Gill and Garland Thomson, helps to inform this viewpoint as well as a closer look at constructivism as it pertains to feminism and disability studies.

As Finger constructs her collection of short stories, constructivism works as a key underlying concept. The original narratives with which she works, that is the mainstream or collectively accepted stories of Helen Keller, Frida Kahlo, or the dwarf in Velazquez’s painting,
have all been built throughout the past and molded according to mainstream ideology, without serious regard for the viewpoint or embodiment, the lived experience, of their subjects. Garland Thomson explains the importance of this idea in her article “Feminist Disability Studies”:

Feminist disability studies not only retrieves overlooked experiences and undertheorized critical perspectives, it strives to rewrite oppressive social scripts. The stories we collectively know shape the material world, inform human relations, and mold our sense of who we are. Because prevailing narratives constrict disability’s complexities, they not only restrict the lives and govern the bodies of people we think of as disabled, but they limit the imaginations of those who think of themselves as non disabled . . . To this end, much feminist disability studies centers on revising cultural narratives. (1567)

As Garland Thomson suggests, the stories behind Finger’s short stories work to construct the past as well as current definitions of the disabled female. Finger’s reconstruction of these stories within the context of a more complicated disability and feminist viewpoint works against these social narratives as I show in my analysis of the short stories.

In his Disability Theory, Siebers notes: “Whenever anyone mentions the idea of social construction, we should ask on principle to see the blueprint--not to challenge the value of the idea but to put in to practical use--to map as many details about the construction as possible and to track its political, epistemological, and real effects in the world of human beings” (33). So, how does social construction work in this context and how does it affect individuals? Specifically, in examining the intersecting identities of the disabled woman, the stories of Lia Graf and Mari Barbola lend to the construction of the “sideshow freak” performing her disability
for the amusement of the mainstream. The biblical story of the defeat of the monstrous Goliath supports the tendency of associating disability, or “disfigurement,” with evil. Helen Keller’s story is that of the innocent girl overcoming her disability, and Frida Kahlo’s sexuality eclipses her disability because the two clearly cannot coexist in one woman. These are all “nondisabled” disability narratives that live on and continue to dictate how society should view individuals with disabilities, particularly women with disabilities.

2. **Complicating structure**

*Call me Ahab* clearly marks a separation from Finger’s previously-discussed works; while it is similar, in its fictionality to *Bone Truth*, it remains the obvious outlier in this combination of works. At a glance, it does not fit with the rest, which is part of what makes its contribution so interesting. Finger focuses on familiar subjects through her short stories; however, it is the way she mimics and interrupts stories that are already part of the social psyche that makes her use of the form her particularly effective. Finger’s structure not only allows the reader to see and question the long term social ramifications of such narratives but also demonstrates the incredible power of re-imagining to change those memories and their continuing effects.

Finger’s first story in the collection is *Helen and Frida*, an exploration of the narratives surrounding these two women, but told from the voice of a younger disabled girl, directing the actors in a performance. Finger focuses on the construction of the woman in this story, but the story is broken up by various interruptions, lending to a disjointed aesthetic. Finger uses this form to highlight a breaking the conventional rules of the narrative of the disabled woman and to blur the socially enforced line between being a woman and disability. Placing the story in the set
of some kind of performance then works to suggest a sense of performing disability or performing being a woman. The story is told in first person, in the voice of a director sliding between times, sets, and people. Directing the performances of these two women differently forces a questioning and a change in their existing narratives.

In *The Artist and the Dwarf*, Finger again weaves together the stories of two women: Mari Barbola, a palace dwarf as represented in Velasquez’ painting, and Lia Graf, a dwarf similarly seen as a pet and known through circus performances. Mari’s story highlights the difference between the dominant narrative, that of the royals using Mari as entertainment, and a different story, taking Mari’s voice into account, painting the royals as ridiculous in finding entertainment in her mundane and clearly humorless presentation. In the mainstream narrative, Mari Barbola represents an object, both to the painter and to the royals whom she is commissioned to entertain. Lia Graf finds herself an object in a different type of painting, though her previous occupation was the same as Mari’s—to entertain. Finger describes Lia Graf as the subject of Holocaust-era medical drawings. Lia, like Mari, takes on a voice in Finger’s version, stepping out out of her given role. In situating these stories together, Finger focuses on the dynamic of looking or observing. In this dynamic, power belongs to the viewer—the royals, the painter, the doctors. Finger’s adaptations of both stories shift this power away from the artist by opening up the perspective of the dwarf. Mari Barbola and Lia Graf become the subjects rather than the objects. Interestingly, the power of the artist is questioned physically in both, as the painting “Las Meninas” historically nearly burnt with the palace and the artist in Graf’s case was a fellow inmate, the picture destined to be destroyed along with the camp. Finger intentionally highlights the tendency to objectify impairment by placing these two women within the frame,
under the observation, of an artist. However, in Finger’s version, the two are not simply silent objects meant to entertain.

As Mari Barbola and Lia Graf are seen as cute-but-sassy and sometimes seductive, meant to entertain, the biblical story of “David and Goliath” paints Goliath as a brute giant. No other information is offered nor has it been overwhelmingly called for. In this short story, Finger follows the rules of the biblical form, using similar language, in particular, and but telling a new story. Finger’s story mimics other Old Testament tales in the way it reads, however, Finger mixes modern sentiments and phrases in with the story, injecting a human element to its characters. This juxtaposition of human sentiment and nuance with the ancient language and form conjures a human connection between these characters and the reader.

The overall makeup of the collection of short stories, is important because it is just that—a collection. It allows for Finger to examine similar themes in a variety of different contexts. Rather than focus on the life of one person, Finger chooses stories that are familiar to many people, opening up the impact of a re-imagining of these narratives to a wider audience. She also mixes fictional and historical narratives, demonstrating that both have equal power to influence but also that neither is safe or fixed. The historical memory of both can be made malleable and formed into a new narrative. I now look, specifically, at how Finger reconstructs the woman and disability through these altered narratives.

3. **Reconstructing disability**

Finger’s choice to critique and reconstruct this overly simplified social canon of disability allows her to re-imagine, or recreate, these stories’ portrayals of disability. Through re-imagining disability in these stories, Finger is making a greater social statement. In a circular
structure, social constructions influence the cultural memory, while these constructions, in turn, influence these memories. Finger shows how unstable such constructions are, how malleable these cultural memories can be. She rewrites disability as a physical and social entity, as complicated and individual. Again, Sieber’s concept of complex embodiment further informs Finger’s depiction. Just as the social construction of disability cannot fully account for the physicality of impairment, historical memory does not allow for portrayal of disability in all of its complexity. Finger effectively applies the concept of complex embodiment to cultural figures and stories, showing how memory has the power to influence the past and current understanding of disability. By reconstructing the foundations, Finger lays a new groundwork from which to build a cultural understanding of disability.

Throughout history, one of the most prominent models of disability has been the medical model. Disability, viewed in this ideology as a problem to be fixed, has largely belonged to the medical world, an object to be studied and theorized scientifically, rather than a facet of an individual identity. (This concept is one of the examples of the greater issue of the objectification of disability.) Finger clearly depicts this view of disability in “The Artist and the Dwarf;” Lia Graff, who has been objectified, an object of entertainment, is in a new frame of objectivity as she is the star of medical drawings of her body while in Auschwitz. Expected to stand quietly for the artist, Graf defies expectations. Finger writes her character not as the passive, not as a body to be studied, but as a spunky woman, aware and critical of her situation. As an object of investigation for the doctors of Auschwitz, Graf is medicalized because she is drawn that way, because that’s what the doctors, those in power, say she is. However, by imagining a conversation between Lia and her equally marginalized and controlled artist, Finger retells the
story, shifting the focus away from the medicalized image and towards the condition of these two women in the death camp. Despite her circumstances, Graf has a sense of agency that she attempts to maintain as evidenced through her persistent discussion with the artist: “What is your name? . . . Where are you from? . . . How long? . . . Please. It’s important for me. To know” (54). Through this re-imagined scene, the reader sees the irony of Graf’s supposed objectivity both as the circus performer and medical object; while the situations are starkly different, Finger’s depiction paints Lia as maintaining her sense of agency in both.

While Finger’s writing veers away from the medical model, she emphasizes the importance of the physicality of impairment within these narratives. Seemingly similar, these two ideas (physicality versus medicalization) represent different approaches. The social model separates itself from the concept of disability or impairment as a physical or medical problem, but, as critics point out, the social model often ignores impairment as an unavoidably physical part of disability. Symbolic canonical representations, such as the Old Testament’s “David and Goliath” tend to ignore the reality of physicality as well. Physical aspects of disability have been conveniently twisted to mean whatever the cultural memory requires. Goliath’s gigantism avoids any implications for Goliath as a person, but rather symbolizes evil, a mighty force to be defeated. This rarely questioned view of Goliath is perpetuated almost every time the story is retold or alluded to. However, Finger retells the story of Goliath, focusing on the individual as well as the physical effects of his disability. Finger describes the chronic pain and discomfort associated with gigantism (98) and re-imagines Goliath as an outcast, even among his own family and soldiers who seem to value him only for his size. Finger’s choice to focus on Goliath’s impairment juxtaposes his re-imagined reality with how he is perceived by both his
contemporaries and modern audiences. In actuality, we do not know if Goliath was in pain on a daily basis, if he was afraid of battle, if he felt alone; however, this provides a contradiction, or an alternate and more complicated story, to the pervasive existing narrative.

Social narratives are accepted as reality because they are told and retold a certain way, with a specific meaning or lesson in mind. Goliath is the antagonist, his gigantism fearsome, because the narrator decided that image would be most useful to his story, a conceptualization then perpetuated over centuries. Lia Graf and Mari Barbola are entertainers because that’s the story told by Barnum and Bailey and Velasquez; they are objectified because that’s how they are painted and written. However, Finger plays with the idea of performance in identity and disability; the individual has the power to perform disability, which can be seen as both a source of agency or of repression, depending on the context or direction. In “Helen and Frida,” Finger demonstrates how narratives are changed based on who is directing them, who is telling the story. Helen Keller and Frida Kahlo are depicted as actors in a play, on a stage. The narrator is the first director, soon to be replaced; as costumes, props, and actors change, so does the story. In Fingers rendering, the idea of the repressive gaze becomes a chance to rewrite, to re-imagine the narrative. Finger shows how fragile the existing narrative of these two disabled women is, how easily it can be changed through a simple re-narration. Under this new direction, the retold story incorporates pain, complicated and intersecting identities, and the malleability of perceived identity. Similarly, Velasquez’ painting of Mari Barbola does not address the civil unrest and cruel-ness of humanity during the inquisition. The narration created by Velasquez is a fragile storyline weakly obscuring a much larger political situation. The country in crisis, and the royal family in financial ruin lies just beneath the social narrative of opulence and prosperity
perpetuated by the royal family. Finger draws attention to the weakness of these narratives by questioning their origins and authority; through dismantling these origins, Finger opens the door for a retelling or re-assigning of meaning.

4. **Reconstructing the disabled woman**

Women with disabilities, even more intensely than women in general, have been cast in the collective cultural imagination as inferior, lacking, excessive, incapable, unfit, and useless. In contrast to normatively feminine women, women with disabilities are often stereotypically considered undesirable, asexual, and unsuitable as parents. (“Feminist Disability Studies” 1567)

Garland Thomson explains the typical identity conundrum of the disabled woman in her article “Feminist Disability Studies.” Due to the otherness of both identities, the intersection of the two results in a particular type of marginalization. As in her memoirs, Finger emphasizes the connection between these two identities in many of her short stories, rewriting the character of the disabled woman within the context of this canon. For Finger, the body of the woman and disabled body are no longer contradictory; sexuality and impairment can, and often do, coexist. As Finger writes her characters in a new context, the previously ignored aspects of joint disabled-female identity come to the forefront.

Just as disability is performed, being a woman can also be conceptualized as performance. Women choose or are influenced to act out their gender within the social context. Finger plays on this concept, demonstrating how easily a change in this performance can dictate a change in perception. As a young girl, the narrator’s perception of herself is colored by screen
actresses, cultural representations of women. However, she then becomes the director, leading the interpretation of Keller and Kahlo. Helen Keller, asexual and innocent in most narratives, can be re-conceptualized quite simply, by placing her in a different context: “Put Helen in pale peach mousseline de soie, hand her a white gardenia; bleach her hair from its original honey blond to platinum, like Harlow’s was; recline her on a Bombshell chaise with a white swan gliding in front, a palm fan being waved overhead, while an ardent lover presses sweet nothings into her hand” (3). This easy transformation demonstrates the power of the social narrative to influence perception, namely the representations of women and disability in film and theatre. Finger’s re-imagining is not meant to assign Keller one rigid persona over another, but rather to show that neither of these imagined depictions is complete.

Finger reconstructs her female characters as complex and often defying the constructed normative and accepted narratives; they are embodied both as women and disabled. As in Finger’s memoirs, sexuality and disability coexist; Finger inserts these intersecting identities into the existing narrative, challenging the historical tendency to desexualize and simplify the disabled woman. Physicality is an important part of both identities and thus an essential part of the combined identity as well. Finger’s re-conceptualizations of her female characters do not avoid the undeniable inextricable physical implications of disability and femaleness. This combination results in imagery that the collective memory has avoided or painted as undesirable—the concept that to be female a woman must minimize her disability, while being disabled necessarily mitigates femininity. Finger illustrates this concept succinctly in her description of the audience’s surprise at Frida Kahlo: “She can’t be disabled, she’s sexual” (5). Finger’s re-imagined characters are not content to perform simply femaleness or disability; they do not
conform to certain roles or expectations out of respect for the comfort of others, rather they are decidedly and visibly disabled, women, and sexual. “No, in this movie the blind women have milky eyes that make the sighted uncomfortable. The deaf women drag metal against metal, oblivious to the jarring sound, making odd cries of delights at the sign of the ocean, squawk when we are angry” (5). This idea also calls up the importance of social expectations. Stories are told and retold in a way that is meant to make society comfortable, resulting, then, in the perpetuation of these stories. Society rejects, or at the very least remains cautious of, variant narratives, images and symbols that do not fit cleanly into an expected category. By blurring the lines between these categories with her re-interpretation, Finger sets the stage for a new kind of interpretation in the future.

5. **Re-imagining through social narratives**

Through our cultural narratives, history claims authority over identity as individuals perpetuate these identity-defining ideologies. Fictional stories become part of the cultural memory and psyche, dictating how we as a culture see identity. However, through her collection of short stories, Finger shows that these stories are not safe from her dismantling and re-imagining; we, as individuals, can gain agency by changing these stories, retelling them, perpetuating a new narrative. Finger continues her trend of questioning narratives and making them useful, but because she is addressing large-scale cultural narratives, they allow the possibility for cultural change. In highlighting the image of disability and femaleness through this perpetuated nondisabled canon, Finger intentionally steps outside of the personal. These stories show not only how the past shapes reality but also that even the most established and
accepted parts of our cultural past can be collectively re-imagined, allowing for a reconfigured future.

C. **Conclusions: From Personal to Collective Re-imagining Through Fiction**

Looking at *Call me Ahab* in conjunction with *Bone Truth*, we see how these books work together, moving from the personal to the cultural, to show how the past can be re-imagined. While Elizabeth confronted and reconstructed her past, Finger dismantled and re-imagined pervasive narratives in the cultural past. Both works demonstrate the power of re-imagining, free from the inherent anchors of life writing. Personal and cultural narratives, which work to make up the past, create and perpetuate cultural truths; however, the individual or culture has the agency to reclaim these narratives and to render them useful to current and future identity. While Finger’s memoirs point out how identity is entrenched in these narratives and call for a re-writing or re-integration, her fiction offers examples of deep social and cultural identity roots and highlights the power to alter those roots. Fiction is deeply entrenched in our collective cultural psyche, working with and influencing personal past narratives. For Finger, however, fiction and non-fiction are intertwined, both working to force identity, both equally as malleable and usable for positive self conceptualization.
IV. FINAL CONCLUSIONS AND REFLECTIONS

In the first chapter, I explore Finger’s evolving treatment of the past as an integral contributor to her own identity through her memoirs. Finger shows how the past can be uniquely sculpted to become a positive rather than restrictive force in identity formation. Finger’s inclusive definition of the past also highlights the interconnectedness of the personal and cultural structures, narratives, and paradigms that work together to situate the individual identity within the social. These identities inform each other and can both be dismantled and reconstructed through re-appropriation of the past. Moving to Finger’s fictional work in the second chapter, I discuss how Finger’s understanding of the past allows for a re-imagining of future identities, challenging the validity and usefulness of longstanding accepted social narratives. Stories, both fictional and personal, take hold and live on in the social and individual psyche; however, these stories can be re-shaped to become useful rather than limiting. As I mention, fiction has the advantage of freeing the author from the constraints of having to adhere to her own experiences, of the possible challenge of having to claim, validate, or prove her stories. It also shows how the cultural psyche has often solidified itself into well-known, and seldom challenged, social narrative. The past both informs and is informed by such narratives, as Finger shows throughout her works. However, choosing to look at these various forms together reveals a unique view of the importance of story-telling and narrative. By pairing Finger’s fiction and memoir, we see an interesting connection between the two genres and the meaning they jointly hold for the power of the past.
The Power of Story-Telling

The confluence of Finger’s short stories, novel, and memoirs begs the question: what is the connection between these various forms? How do they not only work to show the importance of the dismantled and re-imagined past, but how do they do this together? How do fiction, non-fiction, and the past work jointly to inform identity? Back to the introductory questions I pose at the beginning of the thesis: What can history, or the past, bring to disability studies literature? What roles can literary representations of the past play in the present and the future of disability culture? Through Finger’s writing, we see that the connection is circular and symbiotic; the past is a powerful pillar in identity; however it is not static. As literature acts as both an indicator of the social psyche and a vehicle for critique of social narrative, the past is integral in framing literature. The past forms the foundation on which narrative is created. Concurrently, Finger shows that while narrative can perpetuate the past, it can also build a new future out of a re-conceptualization of the past. The combination of Finger’s work is indicative of this concept in that it shows the narrative quality of both personal and cultural pasts; in Finger’s works both are subjective, both are equally influenced by the normative cultural paradigms and ideologies. Finger treats longstanding cultural narratives with the same malleability and criticalness as she does her personal memories of the past. Literature, then, acts as a tool of re-appropriation, a medium that both stands as its own artifact of the past and carves a new way of imagining the narratives we’ve grown to accept.

Finger’s writings work together to demonstrate the incredible power of narrative, the influence of story-telling, and its effect on memory. The narratives in Finger’s personal past are similar, in origin and influence, to those canonized by cultural acceptance and held as truth by
the cultural majority. Both types of narrative are a product of perception, the power of which is dependent on how these stories are retold and synthesized into identity. In Finger’s memoirs, the power of the past does not lie in the events themselves, but rather in how Finger carries those events, in how she remembers them. Likewise, in Bone Truth, Etter’s childhood relationship with her father lives on through the various forms of its memory. The importance is not simply in historical figures and cultural events themselves, but in the narratives that are told and retold about these events, turning them into stories and characters. The power of the past rests in its conceptualization. Finger’s work shows the blurry line between fiction and fact; fiction, often the result of normative social narratives and paradigms, exists both in personal and cultural re-telling and remembering of the past. One powerful tool we have to shape this fiction and to re-imagine its meaning is story-telling. Literature can work with the past to challenge, change, and re-create these stories, to make them a relevant vehicle for social and personal progress.

Finger’s five aspects of the past (academic history, individual, family, representational, and the history of the body) leave a framework and a myriad of pre-existing roles; Finger’s literature shows the agency of the individual to choose how to inhabit these roles and incorporate them into identity. Finger works with the past, using re-imagining and literature to make it into a useful building block, to situate the current stories in the space to which they pertain, reclaiming ownership. What we generally think of as fiction, the altering of events or the creation of stories, can actually work to forge identity on multiple levels. The power of the re-imagined narrative allows for a conceptualization of the past that is manageable and, ideally, positive.

Longmore acknowledges the importance of cultural artifacts as a situated entity within the greater disability identity in his “The Second Phase” (2003). Culture, here in the form of
literature, can act as a catalyst, calling for change in ideology and even policy. This relationship is circular, as ideology and changing policy then work to influence the cultural framework for literature and other forms of art. Finger’s use of literature and its narrative as a tool for personal and cultural reconceptualization echos this power and capability to effect widespread change. Not only does a re-narration of the past and subsequent re-claiming of the future allow for a more complicated sense of self understanding, but it situates that self understanding within the cultural context, providing a framework through which individuals, cultures, and policies can be re-examined and changed. Finger’s literature itself, in its existence, takes its place as a piece of re-appropriated past, as “situated theory.”

B. **A Connection in the Theory**

Narrative, with literature as its vehicle, clearly works to shape the past, in turn facilitating positive identity formation. I discuss in detail Finger’s answer to Longmore’s call for a cohesive and useful disability history; however, Finger’s literature and understanding of self-conceptualization through the past also works to inform, complicate, and exemplify some of the key theories outlined above, in terms of their contribution to ideas of the past, pervasive narrative, and personal and cultural identity. Most notably, Finger connects Garland Thomson’s feminism and Gill’s idea of self-formation and presentation, within the context of history and the past. As Garland Thomson points out the restrictive narratives that formulate the past and the importance of re-imagining these narratives, Finger gives an example of what this re-imagining looks like on a jointly personal and cultural level. Her literature also provides a medium through which Gill’s idea of self-understanding and presentation can be realized. Finger shows how literature can formulate the past into a tool useful in both these contexts.
Garland Thomson’s writings on feminist disability theory interact closely with Finger’s works; from the influence of social narrative, to the idea of re-appropriating this narrative, Finger’s thought and writing is no doubt informed by this theory. However, Finger’s understanding of the past questions the typically feminist thought: don’t see my gender as a disability. Much classic feminist theory works with the assumption that disability is negative, and attempts to distance the female body from the disabled body. For Garland Thomson and Finger, these two identities work together, denying the negative connotation that the comparison of the two usually creates. Additionally, both rely on the importance of re-imagining narrative in order to escape prescribed identity. Garland Thomson sees feminism in this context as relying on a re-conceptualization of both the female and disability identity and their defining social narratives. Finger demonstrates how this concept can be put to use, not by simply addressing existing narratives, but dismantling the past that has created and perpetuated these narratives. Finger effectively shows how individuals and cultures can go about this re-imagining; by considering and questioning the past and its influence both in the personal and collective realm. Finger actually offers examples of the “stories” that Garland Thomson refers to and demonstrates how they can be re-created. For Finger, additionally, these stories are not just cultural or collective, but can be unique to the individual or family as well; these individual stories have a similar power to shape identity and the similar possibility and sometimes need to be retold.

After recognizing the collections of narratives that make up our cultural and personal perceptions, the next step is to synthesize these narratives into the self, to make them usable so the identity can be created, solidified, and presented to others. We saw Gill explain this process in both “The Social Experience of Disability” and “Four Types of Integration in Disability
Identity.” Gill emphasizes the crucial social aspect of identity in both; identity must not only be individual, but connected to society, or situated within this framework. For Gill, identity is solidified and enhanced through connections or “bridges” both personally and socio-personally; identity making is the process of synthesizing or connecting various personal aspects of the self, and finally, presenting that self to society. The presented self is an important part of how an individual sees herself. Finger shows how literature, particularly memoir, can act as a tool to both bridge personal aspects of identity and to connect that identity with society, emphasizing the power that the individual has to hold a place in the collective cultural identity. Finger’s understanding of the past and its continuing influence works with Gill’s idea of integration; Finger is able to integrate difficult aspects of cultural and individual identity by challenging the narratives that make them up. By re-imagining these narratives, Finger actually connects with them in a useful way. Her joint conceptualization of the past and use of narrative highlights and reinforces Gill’s emphasis on connection and presentation while showing how an individual has the power not only to choose how to bridge these gaps but to actually re-create the various aspects of identity.

Finger’s writing not only interacts with these theories individually, but brings them together, showing how a re-imagined past influences the stories we live by and the connections we form. For Finger, the past has the power to affect the narratives that contribute to cultural and personal identity and to limit the connections made within these identities. However, the individual has agency in her ability to dismantle and re-appropriate these past narratives; the past becomes usable and malleable, rather than restrictive. The past is powerful, not simply in its
occurrence, but in how the individual imagines that past. Identity and connections can then be formed through these narratives.

C. **Return to a Usable Past and Questions for Future Thought**

Through her fiction and memoir, Finger gives one possible answer to Longmore’s call, demonstrating how the past is crucial to identity as well as the undeniable connection between the individual and social identity. Memoir and fiction play unique but complementary roles the appropriation of the past and the cultural situating of its resulting self-conceptualization. The combination of these two media allows for a cohesive understanding of the power of narrative within both the cultural and personal spaces. Because the past is both composed and perpetuating of narrative, the result of re-imagining social and personal narrative plays a part in an evolving social psyche and leads to a future that escapes traditional narrative confinement. As Longmore argues, an intentionally composed and situated disability history is powerful beyond the realm of personal identity, as cultural identity becomes a powerful player in social and political change. Finger is effectively redefining disability history and adding her personal experiences to the collective that creates this history. However, Finger’s understanding of the past pushes the common understanding of history in its inclusion of non-traditional pieces of the past and its insistence on malleability and the legitimacy of re-imagined events. Disability history is enriched by Finger’s inclusive understanding of the past, allowing for individuals to control how the past informs their identities as well as how it contributes to the cultural psyche.

To conclude, I return to the idea of the power of narrative and its ability to reformulate the past into something useful and cohesive. Finger and Longmore are both aware of the narratives we live by and the dangerous possibility of reinforcing and incorporating these
narratives, as they are, into the future of individual and disability identity. Finger’s work demonstrates the power of memory and the ability of the individual to shape memory in order to change the current cultural and personal narrative. Dismantling and re-imagining these stories allows for a self-conceptualization situated in, but free from the confines of pre-existing narratives.

The analysis of Finger’s writings within the context of the past and identity formation calls for several questions for further reflection and can continue to inform future reflections in this area. Finger shows that history becomes more useful and productive when it is broadened to include all aspects of the past, prominently including the subjectivity of its memory. As scholars within the disability field, we clearly have a responsibility to continue to be mindful of the stories which work to define culture. Narrative is powerful; it shapes our lives and how we perceive and inhabit our own identities. We should continue with a purpose to be aware of the power of the narratives we create and live while constantly questioning and redefining them. Several interesting and potentially problematic questions emerge from this line of thought. How can narrative and memory continue to define the past without devaluing history? We must be careful to avoid imposing our own evolving or contemporary mindsets on the lived experience of individuals of the past. Can this be completely avoided? Additionally, how does the influence or value of narrative change in a society where life writing is becoming increasingly more digitalized in the age of the blogosphere? We are constantly inundated with individuals desiring to share their own experiences; do these stories have as much value and contribute equally to the contemporary social narrative? How do we include these avenues for self assertion while taking into account the tendency of social media to present a glamorized or incomplete picture of the
self? It seems to me this prevalent cultural phenomenon must be somehow valued and given a place in our narrative. Finally, Finger’s stories are told from the perspective of a middle-class, white woman’s perspective; how can these memories be expanded to include even more identity intersections, and can these varied experiences come together cohesively?

These questions continue to respond to and expand upon Longmore’s desire for history and Finger’s addition to the consciously situated and evolving individual and collective memory. Freedom must continue to be given to the writer or historian to include these faulty and varying yet valuable memories in the cultural conversation and maturation process. While cultural history needs to be collected and arranged, it also needs to include the unremembered and the re-appropriated, the perceptions that can be shaped into a cultural identity, and the carefully reconstructed narratives that emerge from these memories.
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**Reviews**


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