

Book Review

An Independent Man: Ed Roberts and the Fight for Disability Rights, by Scot Danforth.

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Reviewed by: Dr. Burgandi Rakoska, Directions in Independent Living

drburgandirakoska@gmail.com

Introduction

An Independent Man: Ed Roberts and the Fight for Disability Rights is a culmination of extensive disability studies research. For years, Scot Danforth (2018; 2020a; 2020b; 2021) has been the go-to disability studies scholar for research on Ed Roberts and the independent living movement. His passion and expertise are evident throughout this book. His work serves as an example and inspiration for genealogists and historians. This review focuses on three areas where Danforth excels: his amplification of Ed Roberts' voice, his spotlighting of other individuals and institutions who are central to the disability rights movement, and his exploration of intersectionality and cross-movement solidarity.

Ed Roberts: The Prickly Artichoke with the Big Heart

At the heart of this book is Ed Roberts, self-described as “an artichoke ... a little prickly on the outside with a big heart” (Danforth, 2025, p. 27). We drift down the swerving path of Ed Roberts life, just as The Rolling Quads drifted their ‘murdette’ wheelchairs down the swerving paths of California. Danforth details Ed Roberts' transition from youthful freedom to iron confinement, from encountering obstacles to demolishing barriers, from isolation to radicalization. As Danforth (2025) aptly states, Ed Roberts “would build castles in the air, and they would be fully accessible” (p. 124).

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Danforth strikes a meticulous balance between elevating Ed Roberts while maintaining criticality. The author openly critiques the “hero mythology” that depicts Ed Roberts as flawless and faultless (Danforth, 2025, p. 115). Danforth further encourages the reader to consider how glorification can contribute to objectification. Indeed, there is a slippery slope from idolizing Ed Roberts to the “inspiration porn” that activist Stella Young abhorred (Young, 2014: 04:21).

Mythologizing obscures the reality of the independent living movement. Danforth’s work, in comparison, invokes clarity and complexity. He captures the nuances of Ed Roberts and eradicates the myth about the “King of the Cripples” (Danforth, 2025, p. 41). This includes correcting the general assumption that Ed Roberts was the sole leader of the Center for Independent Living and broader movements. While his “fingerprints were everywhere,” the big-hearted artichoke was only one of many advocates who shaped history and modernity in relation to disability rights and independent living (Danforth, 2025, p. 335).

“Vegetables Unite!”

The physical copy of *An Independent Man: Ed Roberts and the Fight for Disability Rights* shows the titular individual on the cover. Opening the book reveals a plethora of photographs, each containing multitudes of disabled individuals. While Ed Roberts is the focus of this book, he is often not at the center of the page. This is intentional. Danforth highlights the myriad individuals and institutions who supported Ed Roberts and the fight for disability rights. In doing so, he turns one man’s story into an anthology.

Paragraphs and pages are dedicated to the Roberts family, doctors, nurses, researchers, administrators, propagandists, charity founders, American presidents, college presidents, professors, attendants, and the many crucial activists who founded

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The Rolling Quads, the Center for Independent Living, the Disability Rights and Education Fund, the World Institute on Disability, and more. While the volume of anecdotes can be overwhelming, these stories capture the magnitude of the disabled community and allies. Danforth (2025: p. 238) thus draws on Ed Roberts' humor by stating, "Vegetables Unite!"

Danforth is so meticulous that he outwrites Judy Heumann when detailing the events of her own life. Notably, in her memoir, Heumann (2020) discusses the intersections of disability and gender by stating, "People called me pushy. People never called Ed pushy" (p. 162). Danforth (2025) posthumously honors Heumann's request, calling Ed Roberts "both kind and taxing, gentle and pushy" (p. 282).

Danforth's Exploration of Intersectionality and Cross-Movement Solidarity

While focusing on the independent living movement, Danforth acknowledges the heterogeneity of the disabled community (Goethals et al., 2015). Intersectional analyses are woven throughout each chapter of this book, capturing the "multiple dimensions of individuals and the systems of oppression and marginalization in which they survive, resist, and thrive" (Annamma et al., 2016, p. 2). Danforth contrasts disabled people's experiences across ability, gender, age, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and more. He also highlights the cross-movement solidarity that emerged between advocacy groups fighting for their rights.

While exploring the intersections of disability, sexuality, and gender, Danforth highlights the gender discrimination of the mid-twentieth century. Pages are devoted to Zora Roberts' advocacy and the broader feminist movements in California and beyond. Danforth does not shy away from discussing the gender inequalities that occurred throughout the independent living movement. While Ed Roberts advocated for inclusivity, he often received higher accolades and salaries than his female

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counterparts. Danforth is explicitly disapproving of these choices, taking time to spotlight individuals who were historically pushed to the margins of the movement.

Just as Danforth spotlights the sexism that occurred in the movement, he explores the intersections of race and disability, ableism, and racism. He notes comparisons in the literature between Ed Roberts and James Meredith, both of whom attempted to gain admission to exclusionary higher education institutions in 1962. Danforth adds a poignant section on Clennon King, an African American man who tried to enter the University of Mississippi but was labeled insane and institutionalized. The similarities and differences in these experiences are why intersectional lenses are crucial. Sections of the book are also dedicated to the advocates who bridged the African American civil rights movement and the independent living movement.

While these analyses are appreciated, they may have benefited from comparisons to present-day intersectional disability advocacy. Future work can expand on this by drawing on queer-crip theories, DisCrit theory, and the disability justice movement (Annamma et al., 2016; Kafai, 2021; McRuer, 2006).

Conclusion

Throughout his book, Ed Roberts' milestones are framed as the beginning of an ever-expanding movement. Fittingly, the same can be said for Danforth's work. *An Independent Man: Ed Roberts and the Fight for Disability Rights* is a milestone—a culmination of years of passionate research. At the same time, Danforth paves the way for future work on disability rights in both history and the present day. These testaments must amplify the voices of those who have been silenced and spotlight those who have been shadowed. Doing so documents our continuous fight for “a future that includes us all” (Danforth, 2025, p. 287).

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