

"Easy Beauty" by Chloé Cooper Jones Is a provocative memoir.

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Chloé Cooper Jones's Debut Memoir, *Easy Beauty*, Holds Up A Mirror to the Able-Bodied World

The author writes of what it takes to move through the world in a disabled body, and reminds us of all we take for granted.

By Arianna ReboliniPublished: May 9, 2022

About halfway through Pulitzer Prize finalist Chloé Cooper Jones's transcendent (and highly anticipated) debut memoir, *Easy Beauty*, she drops the meaning of the title. Recounting a former student's insistence that Jones *must* see Beyoncé live in concert, describing it as the moment of a life-changing epiphany, Jones instinctively dismisses the idea that she might experience anything close to profound at an event so obvious, so loud, so broad as a pop concert. "Anything of such mass appeal must be...merely facile pleasure," she writes, "or what British philosopher Bernard Bosanquet called *easy beauty*."

This rejection is a defense mechanism hard-won after a lifetime spent pushed (or, later, retreating) to the margins. Jones was born with a rare congenital condition known as sacral agenesis, meaning without a sacrum, the bone that sits at the base of the spine and connects it to the pelvis. People are quick to clock the visible effects of Jones's disability, and she notices them noticing her—first her height, then her walk, then "that [her] legs from the knees down and [her] feet are underdeveloped." When she was born ("a ball of twisted muscle and folded bone"), the doctors warned her mother that she might not live, and if she did, she'd likely "never walk, never stand unsupported, never have a pain-free life." They were mostly wrong; Jones can stand and walk, though pain, she writes, "plays a note I hear in all my waking moments." Those doctors were the first in what would become a long list of medical professional, teachers, strangers, and peers who would rush to predict her life's limits—including, significantly, the doctor who told her she'd never be able to have a child, about a decade before she learned she was five months pregnant.

Growing up, there was the high school crush who told her ("as your friend") that only "desperate or ugly" men will ever want to date her, the strangers who stared, insulted, demanded explanations for her body. She sought comfort in a notion she'd later find articulated in Bosanquet's definition of "difficult beauty"—one that required the "insight, endurance, and...attention" of the beholder.

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Jones's preoccupation with beauty — both physical and experiential — is one she shares with her father. He was an inconsistent and volatile presence in her childhood, leaving the family and returning, escaping into affairs and alcohol. He attributed his restlessness and unhappiness to an unquenchable desire for beauty, and in letters to Chloé as an adult included her in this diagnosis: "We are people who feel oppressed by the normalcy of life, who long for something more, something more beautiful." Her father instilled in her the belief that the pursuit of beauty is a higher calling. Even her PhD work in philosophy—studying thinkers who also contemplated the subject—focused on this yearning: Does a perfect beauty exist? Can it be defined? Can it reveal larger truths about the human condition? Underlying these questions is the possibility that seeing this beauty—really *seeing* it—can bring about profound existential transformation. At the onset of the memoir, Jones is propelled by "an operating belief that proximity to beauty was transformative." But underlying it all is a more vulnerable concern: Is this kind of deep, revelatory act of "becoming" possible for a person of "difficult beauty"?

The book is called *Easy Beauty*, but in many ways it's an exercise in the opposite. If difficult beauty "has the ability to disorder and confuse us by disrupting our habitual ways of thinking and doing and being," I'm hard-pressed to find a better descriptor. I felt an instinctive resistance while reading Jones's remembrances of countless dehumanizing interactions with strangers — the woman who "snapped her fingers as [Jones] passed by her table and said, 'Explain yourself'; the man who told a teenaged Jones, "Grace eludes you," as she walked up some stairs — and was surprised and dismayed by my knee-jerk reaction of doubt. Surely it can't be *this* bad, surely so many friends and strangers couldn't be *this* cruel, I thought, while knowing, of course, it can and they could. Witnessing struggle you'd prefer to pretend isn't as bad as it seems is uncomfortable, as is recognizing that the ability to limit your understanding of disability to theoretical exercises is a privilege that requires dismantling.

In keeping us close as she navigates the world, Jones lets us in on the effort required to move through it in a disabled body. She translates this effort to the page clearly, elucidating movement that able-bodied readers might take for granted. Just as Jones is "never not aware" of her pain, we are never not aware of her body, from her claustrophobic description of falling in a crowd to the gooseflesh rising on her arms at an opera in Rome. Labor comes through in the prose itself, too—Jones's sentences, insights, and metaphors are so precise

and evocative that they can only be evidence of rigorous mastery. Watching Roger Federer at the Indian Wells Masters tennis tournament, one of her fellow journalists says of his skill, “He makes it look easy,” and I couldn’t help thinking, *I’d more impressed by the work.*

But there, exactly, is the power of this memoir: Jones so closely analyzes the relationship between work and beauty, pain and pleasure, without ascribing a moral value to either, hinting at conclusions but then challenging you when you think you’ve settled on one. I found myself reading for a meaning I already believed in, or hoped I could. I wanted Jones to tell me: *Is the struggle worth it? Might it be beautiful in its own right?* Sure, maybe. Sometimes. But to get tangled up in these questions is to miss *Easy Beauty’s* quiet profundity. It’s a story more concerned with possibility than limitation. Jones sets off as a lone traveler but finds that solitude unsustainable and impractical. Within her utterly foreign experiences—not just as an American abroad but also as an academic trying her hand at sports journalism, or a newbie with a press pass at Peter Dinklage’s party, or a disabled woman at a concert she’s dismayed to discover is standing room only—Jones discovers she needs, and is able to accept, help. People are unavoidable; sometimes their cruelty is exactly what she expects but maybe their kindness surprises. What’s more, she’s forced to reckon with her influence on those around her. She’s able to disappoint, too — a power she’s never more keenly aware of than when watching her young son discovering beauty and wonder on his own, and refusing to get in his way. Jones’s genius lies in her fluency in ambivalence. If she lands firmly on any truism, it’s that nothing—and more significantly, no one—is just one thing.

Easy Beauty: A Memoir



