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The Hospital and the Wheelchair: Disability in Italian and Italian American Memoirs

Introduction

The reader of a disability memoir might reasonably expect medical spaces—particularly the hospital—to be a prominent and recurring setting in the narrative. This expectation reflects material realities: people with congenital and acquired disabilities often have ongoing needs that require frequent engagement with medical spaces, including surgeries, physical therapy, rehabilitation, and routine checkups. The hospital is a place of white coats, discourses of cure, the materiality of impairment, and even pain. It is no coincidence that disability studies, as an interdisciplinary field, emerged in response to the dominance of the medical model. After starting several disability memoirs, a reader might even notice that, while not all, many narratives of acquired disability begin in the hospital. The moment of diagnosis or injury, typically treated in the hospital, is often interpreted as the beginning of a new life, or rebirth, and a natural starting point for life writing. If a reader delves deeper, they will also find the hospital to be a symbolic space of confrontation, where individuals come to terms with their disabilities for the first time and many other times after, and sometimes a place of community based on shared experience, both for people with disabilities and parents of children with disabilities.

The term 'disability' here is understood through the now-canonical distinction between 'impairment' as a physical, cognitive, or sensory condition, and 'disability' as a social construct, created by social stigma, architectural barriers, inaccessibility to services, and policies of exclusion. However, rather than focusing on disability purely as a social category, this article will examine disability as a cultural category, engaging specifically with the cultural model of disability, or literary disability theory. As Lennard J. Davis contends in his seminal 1995 work, *Enforcing Normalcy*, the boundaries of disability as a cultural category are porous, varying across time and place, and continually expanding and contracting around a binary dynamic of 'us' versus 'them,' normalcy versus disability. In this understanding of disability as culturally constructed, literature functions both as a product of and a contributor to that construction, reflecting, reinforcing, and at times challenging dominant social attitudes.

In everyday life, disability is usually associated with a time-sequenced narrative, a story of how one acquired or was born with an impairment, a 'chronotope'[1] that tends to be sentimentalized. This narrative is implied in the meaning-making dynamic of the stare, creating 'a story of the starer's making',[2] but is often inquired out loud through the question, 'What happened to you?' bluntly asked by strangers who feel entitled to an explanatory narration. According to G. Thomas Couser, who established himself as the leading scholar on the subject, life writing for authors with disabilities becomes a means to take control over this

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[1] L. J. Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body* (New York: Verso, 1995), p. 3.

[2] R. Garland Thomson, *Staring: How We Look* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 7.

narrative, counterrepresenting and self-narrating their story. [3] This is the case of Nadina LaSpina's *Such a Pretty Girl: A Story of Struggle, Empowerment, and Disability Pride* (2019), Lorenzo Amurri's *Apnea* (2013), and Ada d'Adamo's *Come d'aria* (2023). In these memoirs, the hospital is the setting of critical moments of transformation in their lives and narratives, which profoundly shape their identities and their understanding of disability: for Nadina LaSpina, this moment is her emigration to America in search of a cure for her inability to walk, and for Lorenzo Amurri, it is the early months of intense rehabilitation after a skiing accident left him tetraplegic. Instead, Ada D'Adamo experiences the hospital from two complementary points of view: that of the cancer patient and that of the parent of a child with a disability.

All three of these works fall under G. Thomas Couser's theorization of *some body* memoirs, defined as 'the narrative of living with, in, or as a body that deviates from somatic norms'.[4] Couser distinguishes memoirs from biographies and autobiographies, arguing that memoirs are life writings that focus on a specific aspect of one's life (e.g., a period, theme, issue, relationship), in these cases, disability. He argues that memoirs are the most democratic literary genre due to their accessibility to minority voices, including the disabled. According to the scholar, there has been a boom of disability memoirs since the 1990s, which has continued over the past three decades in reciprocal relation with the rise of disability awareness, not only in quantity but also in quality, both in memoirs and in academic research. He reflects on the potential of disability memoirs to challenge the social model of disability and compensate for its limitations by providing firsthand accounts of the physicality and materiality of disability, a goal achieved by all three memoirs here analyzed. In the Italian context, Federica Millefiorini also argues that one of the objectives of literary disability studies is to examine autobiographical works by authors and relatives of people with disabilities, which have increased since the 2000s and have broadened the range of conditions represented.[5] These authors, including LaSpina, Amurri, and D'Adamo, use writing as a cathartic and therapeutic tool for self-knowledge and self-narration, but they also raise public awareness and receive public acclaim. Using the image of the wheelchair as a projection of their feelings towards disability, LaSpina, Amurri, and D'Adamo transform the act of writing into a safe space for rebirth away from stigma.

Such a Pretty Girl: A Hospital in Manhattan

While American disability literary studies was said to no longer be an emerging but an emerged field in 2012,[6] disability has only recently begun to attract scholarly attention in Italian American studies, with an unprecedented number of publications in 2021.[7] Nadina

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[3] G. T. Couser, 'Signifying Selves: Disability and Life Writing', in C. Barker, S. Murray (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Disability* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 199-211.

[4] G. T. Couser, 'Disability and Memoir', in S. B. Mintz, G. Fraser (eds), *Placing Disability: Personal Essays of Embodied Geography* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024), p. 10.

[5] F. Millefiorini, 'Letteratura e disabilità: Nuove prospettive di ricerca in Italia', *Esperienze Letterarie*, 48 (2023), pp. 105-124.

[6] R. Garland Thomson, 'Disability Studies: A Field Emerged', *American Quarterly,* 65.4 (2013), p. 915.

[7] A. J. Gravano, 'Questioning the Italian American Palooka: Race and Disability in the *Rocky* and *Creed* Series', in R. Calabretta-Sajer, A. J. Gravano (eds) *Italian Americans on Screen: Challenging the Past, Re-Theorizing the Future* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2021); W. J. Connell, 'Paralysis, Piety and Miracles: An Agnostic's

LaSpina, the author of *Such a Pretty Girl: A Story of Struggle, Empowerment, and Disability Pride*, shared in a personal interview earlier this year that she was pleasantly surprised by the interest her memoir received from the Italian American community. An extract of her book was, in fact, included in translation in *E c'erano gerani rossi dappertutto* (2024), a collection of female voices of the Italian diaspora in North America edited by Valentina Di Cesare and Michela Valmori.

Originally from Riposto, in Sicily, Nadina LaSpina lost the ability to walk at sixteen months after having contracted polio, and then migrated to the United States with her parents at the age of thirteen in the early 1960s. In the eyes of LaSpina's father, American medical advancements could provide a cure that Italian doctors and healers could not find. He often repeated to his daughter: 'In America, *guarisci*, you'll be cured' and 'In America, *cammini*, you'll walk'.[8] As these quotations suggest, the American Dream is not here defined as social mobility or material wealth, like in most Italian American narratives, but as the pursuit of a cure that will make LaSpina walk again. The first experience of America is, in fact, the Hospital for Special Surgery in Manhattan, narrated in the second chapter, The Best Hospital. This title reflects the optimistic words of LaSpina's father: 'he had found *il miglior ospedale*, the best hospital for me'.[9] While she concludes the chapter stating that she was happy to be in America, in the best hospital for her, LaSpina shows a talent for narrating experiences in their complexity, juxtaposing conflicting emotions, positive and traumatic events, and resisting the oversimplified narrative arcs of some life writing.

In an interview with the New Haven Free Public Library, LaSpina admits to having written the traumatic scenes of abuse in the hospital before the childhood memories of her hometown of Riposto, narrated in the first chapter.[10] In the memoir, the author recalls being treated as an inanimate object of study, being spoken of and never to, being lifted without consent, and being undressed in front of multiple male doctors without consideration for her feelings of shame as a young girl. After also experiencing sexual abuse from hospital personnel, which marks her first, traumatic experience with sexuality, LaSpina questions the difference between the humiliating abuse experienced with doctors and sexual assault, as in both cases her body was stripped naked, inflicted with pain, and touched without her consent. The fact that these traumatic memories were written before others suggests the therapeutic and cathartic power of writing, which is highlighted by Federica Millefiorini as a central feature of disability memoirs.[11] Specifically, writing this chapter allows LaSpina to elaborate on traumas she was not able to share with her parents out of fear of disappointing and causing them pain after they had moved across the ocean and worked hard to afford her treatments.

Letter to Paul VI', in M. Gatto, A. Scorza (eds), *Teorizzare la diaspora italiana: saggi 2017-2020* (Rubbettino, 2021), pp. 137-89; M. J. Bona, 'Tina De Rosa's Ethnic Archive: Displacement, Disability, and the Writer's Life', *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, 40.1 (2021), pp. 273-306; E. Bordin, 'The Freak and "Disabled" Multiculturality', *JAM IT!*, 4 (2021), pp.16-34.

[8] N. LaSpina, *Such a Pretty Girl: A Story of Struggle, Empowerment, and Disability Pride* (New York: New Village Press, 2019), p. 15.

[9] Ibid., p. 20.

[10] N. LaSpina, 'Nadina LaSpina Discusses *Such a Pretty Girl* | BSI', *www.youtube.com* (25 May 2021). Available: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AynRbk0eSs8. Accessed: 9 July 2025.

[11] F. Millefiorini, 'Raccontare per "salvarsi". Scritture dell'io e accettazione della disabilità acquisita', in A. Casadei, F. Fedi, A. Nacinovich, A. Torre (eds), *Letteratura e Scienze: Atti delle sessioni parallele del XXIII Congresso dell'ADI (Associazione degli Italianisti), Pisa, 12-14 settembre 2019* (Florence: Adi Editore, 2021), pp. 1-7.

LaSpina's experience in the hospital is life-changing for positive reasons, as well, and a rebirth of sorts. For the first time in her life, she meets other children with disabilities, absent or hidden away in her Sicilian hometown. In particular, LaSpina remembers never having seen not only children but even adults with disabilities before: 'I understood crippled grown-ups had to have wives, sisters, or daughters to take care of them, and had to stay home all the time because they were too heavy to be carried'.[12] As Rosemarie Garland Thomson argues in *Staring*, the extended absence of disability in the public sphere has made it seem unusual and unfamiliar, rather than the universal human embodiment it is in reality.[13] In this Manhattan hospital, LaSpina finds her best friend, called by the fictitious name of Audrey, and reminisces on how her mother used to reassure her that in another town there was a girl just like her. The same hospital where she experiences emotional and sexual abuse is here described as 'a cheerful place, with colorful pictures on the walls',[14] with young teenagers chit-chatting, racing their wheelchairs down the halls, and encouraging each other before surgeries. This community of peers is also where LaSpina first learns English: 'The first English words I learned were the names of their disabilities'.[15] Significantly, LaSpina takes a recurring theme in Italian American literature—English and the language barrier—and uniquely explores it through the lens of disability and the setting of the hospital. Reflecting on her own disability, she writes: 'I was glad that in English my disability was called the same as it was in Italian: polio. I didn't know what I would have done if I had one of those hard-to-pronounce disabilities. I figured polio was the best disability for me'.[16] Thirteen-year-old LaSpina is kindly assigned to the same room as Rosa, an Italian American girl who also speaks Sicilian, and rapidly learns English by listening to her friend's music records. The connection between a community of young teenagers and her first clumsy attempts at English set the stage for hilarious misunderstandings caused by the language barrier. One day, for example, LaSpina asks her friends how to greet the doctors so that they will acknowledge her presence instead of speaking about her as if she were not there. Following their suggestion, she unknowingly swears at the surprised doctors, intending to say 'nice to meet you.' Even when slightly teased for the hilarious mistakes of her broken English (e.g., 'sheet' pronounced with a shorter vowel), LaSpina finds comfort in the kinship with other children with disabilities: 'Their laughter came at me like soap bubbles, bursting and disappearing on the air. It didn't jab me like the Sicilian children's derisive laughter had'.[17] In the hospital, LaSpina finds for the first time a sense of community.

The medical space is also the setting of LaSpina's first encounter with the wheelchair, which is love at first sight: 'I fell in love—with the wheelchair'.[18] Always having to be carried or pushed by her parents in Sicily, for the first time in her life, LaSpina acquires a sense of independence with 'a heavy, ugly hospital wheelchair'[19] with shiny chrome and green vinyl. Despite the unappealing exterior, this wheelchair represents autonomy, freedom, and the start of her new life in America. Beyond the material necessity of an aid, in fact, LaSpina's descriptions of her wheelchairs throughout the memoir are symbolic of her relationship with

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[12] LaSpina, *Such a Pretty Girl*, p. 17.
[13] Garland Thomson, *Staring*, p. 20.
[14] LaSpina, *Such a Pretty Girl*, p. 22.
[15] Ibid., p. 22.
[16] Ibid., p. 23.
[17] LaSpina, *Such a Pretty Girl*, p. 24.
[18] Ibid., p. 22.
[19] Ibid.

disability and her sense of self in the journey towards acceptance and pride. By contrast, her father looks unhappy as he sees her in the wheelchair, still hoping it is only a temporary solution. A similar sentiment is expressed by another notable literary father in *Nati due volte* (2000) by Giuseppe Pontiggia, considered one of the foundational texts of Italian disability studies. In a scene between father and son, Paolo asks his father for a wheelchair to visit a museum. The father looks at him disappointed and tries to convince the son that he does not need it. Paolo simply explains why he wants one: 'Perché faccio meno fatica',[20] because it is easier for him.

For many of her adult years, LaSpina internalizes the same ableist expectation and walks with braces and crutches despite the fatigue and broken bones caused by the many falls: 'I was made to believe that I had to walk, no matter how heavy the braces are [...]. No matter how good it feels to use a wheelchair'.[21] This is especially true in her father's house, where she continues to use crutches despite having embraced the comfort of the wheelchair in the outside world after the onset of post-polio syndrome. The return to the wheelchair is prompted by the realization that this internalized sense of inferiority is caused by outside prejudices, not by the necessities and materiality of her impairment. Well-versed in the language and concepts of disability activism, in which she continues to actively participate to this day, LaSpina openly states: 'Symbolically, my new wheelchair marked the end of the pretense. No more struggling to walk, no more dragging myself up steps. No more bending over backward to be accepted. Never again would I feel obligated to pursue the oppressive and absurd ideal of 'normality''.[22] The description of her new wheelchair, at this later stage of her life, is also symbolic: an 'ultralight, ultramaneuverable, bright red, beautiful little number',[23] mirroring her newfound confidence in being seen as a woman with disability and openly challenging the idea that disability requires a cure in order for life to be considered worth living.

The healing of childhood wounds is further marked by two events involving the wheelchair. Firstly, when her father passes away in his home, LaSpina sits beside his bed in her wheelchair and asks him to look at her. Secondly, she decides to return to her hometown of Riposto in a solo journey of reconciliation, rolling in the wheelchair beyond the street that confined her as a child, ironically called Via Libertà. The reaction of the *paesani* who had pitied her in her childhood, feeling sorry for her and shaking their heads, was this time one of marvel for never having seen someone like her: 'I was a witch flying on wheels'.[24] This scene suggests that embracing the wheelchair can lead to a positive transformation—not only for the author herself, but for the *paesani*, as well. As Rosemarie Garland Thomson's theorizes, 'staring is a conduit to knowledge'[25] and can be a positive opportunity for the staree to be known and recognized by the starer.

A key merit of *Such a Pretty Girl* lies in its ability to present a counter-narrative of acceptance and pride, achieved through LaSpina's civil participation as an activist, without losing the materiality of the impairment. Couser points out that 'the social paradigm has been justly criticized for suppressing testimony about impairment itself: the experience of pain, fatigue, and physical deterioration that are intrinsic in some disabilities (as distinct from the

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[20] G. Pontiggia, *Nati due volte* (Milan: Mondadori, 2021), p. 192.
[21] LaSpina, *Such a Pretty Girl*, p. 136.
[22] Ibid., p. 166.
[23] Ibid., p. 164.
[24] Ibid., p. 317.
[25] Garland Thomson, *Staring*, p. 15.

disabling aspects of the environment, which are extrinsic)'.[26] LaSpina's commitment to materiality is carried out throughout the memoir, from operations and recoveries to the amputation of her legs and post-polio syndrome, as well as the everyday necessities, her relationships, marriage, and even intimacy. LaSpina also avoids falling into a reassuring narrative of overcoming or supercrip, where a person's impairment is overcome by exceptional success or qualities, or, more precisely, where one overcomes the impairment but not disability as social stigma. In our personal interview, LaSpina stated that this was an intentional objective, as she hoped her intended audience—the disabled community—could see themselves reflected in the reality of living with a physical impairment and her conflicting experiences and feelings, in a non-Manichean interpretation of disability. With this aim, LaSpina expands the potential of self-narration from a personal act of rebirth beyond stigma to a collective experience shared by the community of readers.

***Apnea*: A Rebirth in Switzerland**

Not as well-developed as its American counterpart, but more advanced than its Italian American equivalent, Italian literary disability studies took the first important steps as an emerging research field in the 2010s with the notable publication of Federica Millefiorini's critical work *«E quasi incredula mi aprivo alla speranza»* (2010) and Salvatore Ferlita's anthology *Diversamente Eroi* (2012). As one of the founding scholars, Millefiorini argued that Italian academia lagged behind other countries in the field, and its analyses remain focused on individual authors, lacking more comprehensive investigations.[27] Italian literary disability studies have been growing in the 2020s with an increasing and promising number of publications, including the collection of essays *Oltre il limite* (2022), the monographic issue *Dal margine al centro* (Cuadernos de Filología Italiana, 2024), and Silvia Pacelli's extensive study on disability in children's literature, *Figure della diversità* (2025).

Apnea by Lorenzo Amurri is briefly mentioned by Millefiorini among works by Italian authors who have acquired a disability as a result of a serious accident and use writing to understand the meaning of the experience and thus come to terms with it, as well as to take on the social mission of sharing it with others and raise awareness.[28] On a similar note, Francesca Caputo defined Amurri's memoir as symmetrical to one of the founding memoirs of Italian disability studies, *Sirena (mezzo pesante in movimento)* by Barbara Garlaschelli, republished in several editions since 2001. As Caputo points out, both Amurri and Garlaschelli acquired their disability at a young age due to an accident (one while skiing, the other while diving) and describe the body and pain as central dimensions of their experience, while also including moments of lightness and self-deprecating humor. [29] Notably, both memoirs align with Couser's definition of *some body* memoirs, focusing on the specific timeframe and theme of the first months of rehabilitation in the hospital after the accident.

Narratively, Amurri's *Apnea* begins in the hospital, after briefly mentioning the skiing accident in just a few sentences. In particular, the narration starts with the transportation to the

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[26] Couser, 'Disability and Memoir', p. 13.
[27] Millefiorini, 'Letteratura e disabilità', p. 110.
[28] Millefiorini, 'Raccontare per "salvarsi"', p. 1.
[29] F. Caputo, 'Narrare la disabilità negli anni duemila', in V. Spinazzola (ed), *Tirature '19. Tuttestorie di donne* (Milan: Gruppo Editoriale il Saggiatore, 2019), p. 134.

hospital, alternating lucid reality and a dream-like state created by slipping in and out of consciousness. Although these dreams are creations of his unconscious, they already incorporate aspects of his new condition that his reason will slowly have to accept, softening the awareness of tragedy to make it more bearable. The author marks this transition through the concept of a new consciousness, whose first awareness is the irreversible loss of the ability to walk: 'Paura spazzata via pochi istanti dopo, dalla prima domanda della mia nuova coscienza: 'Non posso più camminare vero?''.[30]

While initially treated in Terni, Italy, Amurri is transferred to Balgrist University Hospital in Zurich, Switzerland, which is the primary and most complex medical space in the memoir. The materiality of the healing, the treatments, and the pain are essential elements in narrating the hospital experience of someone who is no longer self-sufficient and is confronting a transformed body. After two and a half months bedridden, the first encounter with the wheelchair is telling of Amurri's emotional state; he writes: 'È viola, un colore che detesto'.[31] Like LaSpina, Amurri describes the unconcealable sadness in his family's reaction to seeing him in a wheelchair for the first time: 'Leggo nei visi dei miei un misto di felicità e tristezza: sono contenti di vedermi seduto, ma l'impatto con la carrozzina, con la concreta disabilità è forte. Non riescono a nasconderlo'.[32] While they are pleased to witness the milestone of him sitting up for the first time in the prolonged recovery, their expressions focus on the wheelchair, presented here as the universal symbol of disability. Not only the author, then, but also his relatives seem to project on the wheelchair their feelings towards disability as a cultural concept.

The first ride around the hospital, unlike LaSpina's, ends with Amurri's request to be returned to his room, after feeling stared at, possibly for the halo device, a very noticeable crown-shaped brace pinned to the skull that supports his neck and head. Like for LaSpina, however, the first experience in the wheelchair marks the beginning of a new life. His brother, in particular, notices that when they sit him down, Amurri's eyes are wide as if he were seeing the world for the first time. The author replies, concluding the chapter with this impactful phrase: 'Era proprio così Franco, la prima volta da disabile'.[33] At this point, the rides on the wheelchair are not frequent, and Amurri jokingly compares himself to Italo Calvino's Baron, who lived in trees, while he lived in beds. Amurri also recalls the pain of sitting in the wheelchair during those first few attempts, along with the effects of pain medication and episodes of involuntary bodily functions, always describing the material and practical reality of his new condition. Nonetheless, his writing style is also deeply introspective and emotionally aware of his transformed mind, as well as his transformed body. Through writing, Amurri makes sense of his contradictions: on the one hand, he expresses a curious desire to explore his surroundings and even to breathe fresh air; on the other, he admits that the idea of leaving his room is a source of anxiety, as he is afraid to leave this protective shell, his 'guscio protettivo'.[34]

The second wheelchair Amurri tries is electric and faster, aimed at improving the independence of his movements. Initially, he states: 'È comunque una carrozzina e

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[30] L. Amurri, *Apnea* (Rome: Fandango Libri, 2013), p. 11. Translation: The fear was swept away just moments later by the first question from my new consciousness: 'I can't walk anymore, can I?'

[31] Ibid., p. 47. Translation: It's purple, a color I hate.

[32] Ibid., p. 49. Translation: I read in my parents' faces a mix of happiness and sadness: they're glad to see me sitting up, but the impact of the wheelchair, of the tangible reality of disability is strong. They can't hide it.

[33] Ibid., p. 50. Translation: That's exactly how it was, Franco, the first time as a disabled person.

[34] Ibid., p. 55.

rappresenta il male'.[35] However, thanks to the nurse's positive disposition, Amurri admits to having fun for the first time since his accident and even sneaks out of the hospital without permission. By contrast, the first time truly venturing outside the hospital is a frightening experience. Amurri fears the reactions of strangers and being looked at as a deformed monster; therefore, when confronted with their pity and surprise, he suffers a panic attack. On this occasion, Amurri describes the hospital as a 'grembo materno', maternal womb, and an 'invisibile placenta',[36] a safe place. This womb, or shell, expands from being just the room to the hospital as a whole, but nonetheless, it underlines a clear separation between the protected and protective world of the hospital, tailored to the needs of one's disability, and the unknown and often judgmental outside world, made of strangers and stares.

The third wheelchair is a downgrade to a manual one again: 'La sensazione è di essere passato dalla Ferrari a una macchina a pedali'[37] and it is so exhausting to move with his arms that he sometimes faints from the effort. As mentioned before, the episodes with the wheelchair in Amurri, as in LaSpina, are most likely real events, but the author's description and projection of emotions onto the assistive device are introspective and symbolic, as well. In this part of his journey, Amurri is struggling with the exhausting confrontation with the outside world and the return to a life beyond the safe walls of the medical space. The hospital is defined as a 'prigione dorata',[38] a gilded cage, and Amurri is rebellious by nature against its schedules and rules, but his return home triggers uncertainty, even when the doctors assure him that his anxieties are shared by many.

After the gestation period of nine months, Amurri is discharged from the Swiss hospital and this exit is symbolically interpreted as an inevitable but frightening rebirth. This imagery is used by the author himself, describing the hospital as a 'cordone ombelicale',[39] an umbilical cord that nurtured him for months, and is a common rhetorical device in literature about disability. While, according to Angelo Castagnino, '[r]eferences to disability as initiating a new life are innumerable'[40] in Italian disability literature, the founding example is the aforementioned *Nati due volte* by Giuseppe Pontiggia, whose title translates in English as *Born twice*. This concept of rebirth is applied by Pontiggia both to the children who, in his case, are born with a disability and the parents: the first birth is the natural one, while the second one is the introduction to life with a disability, intended not as an impairment but as a social stigma.

While not pertaining to the medical space specifically, the wheelchair used by Amurri at home also symbolizes adjusting to life outside the hospital. Despite this kind of wheelchair being commonly referred to as *sedia comoda*, comfortable chair, for the hole in the middle that allows its use in the bathroom, for Amurri it is anything but comfortable. Happy to have him back home, his family shows again tangible sadness in seeing him in a wheelchair, as it marks even more definitely the reality of disability outside the medical space. Nonetheless, the home becomes a new safe and maternal space when compared to the uncertainty of his outings with friends, though only partially safe, given the difficult interpersonal dynamics within it.

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[35] Ibid., p. 57. Translation: It's nonetheless a wheelchair and represents evil.

[36] Ibid., p. 70.

[37] Ibid., p. 79. Translation: The feeling is like going from a Ferrari to a pedal car.

[38] Ibid., p. 92.

[39] Ibid., p. 124.

[40] A. Castagnino, 'Mythopoetic Bodies: Representations of Disability in Contemporary Italian Narratives', *Incontri*, 38 (2023), p. 5.

Overall, Amurri's *Apnea* is an honest diary that focuses on the self as well as on the material changes of his body and the practical changes of his life in the first months after his accident. Sharing his rock and roll–like nature and not shying away from swear words and crude comments, it nonetheless presents an exceptional introspective quality. Even after an excessively graphic description of difficult intimacy, for example, Amurri shifts to a deep introspection of what that experience meant as a man with an acquired disability and its social implications. Amurri openly shares his inability to ask for help, the way his pride closes the door to the connection with other people and mines his relationships, and his several suicide attempts. Unlike LaSpina, who has been a militant disability activist and teacher of disability theory, Amurri remains personal even when approaching theorized concepts like the dynamic of staring and the reaction of pity. For example, based on his experience in a bar with friends, Amurri dedicates a reflection on the role of the staree to ease the starer's reaction, a burden that falls on the person with disabilities, which closely aligns with Garland Thomson's theorization in *Staring*. As the scholar argues, 'staring is a high-stakes social interaction for everybody involved',[41] and people with unusual appearances often develop strategies to mitigate tension, anxiety, and other negative repercussions of staring by using friendliness and humor. Amurri writes: 'È proprio questa la chiave, allora: mostrare serenità per fare sentire a proprio agio chi mi sta davanti'.[42] Amurri mentions having to hide his sadness and struggles to make others feel more at ease, yet his emotions call to be expressed and shared, not locked away. Unable to express himself to others, Amurri uses writing as a cathartic tool to make sense of his first encounter with disability and release his emotions with honesty. Therefore, with a small leap, one may consider writing as one of Amurri's safe spaces and places of rebirth, a protected womb alongside the hospital room, the hospital, and the home—despite the wheelchair never becoming one of them.

Come d'aria: The Waiting Room

While many memoirs about acquired disability begin in the hospital because of the treatment of injury, memoirs written by parents of children with disabilities often start with the child's birth. This moment signifies not only the literal beginning of a new life, but also the radical life transformation of parenthood and the additional changes brought on by disability, which all contribute to its choice as the start for life writing. While fictional, this is the case of the aforementioned founding masterpiece, Giuseppe Pontiggia's *Nati due volte*, as well as memoirs with more modest literary value, such as Anna Visciani's *Se Arianna* (2014). Especially in memoirs written by mothers, childbirth in the hospital is a particularly recurrent theme that marks the beginning of their new role as caregivers and often their first encounter with disability.

Ada D'Adamo's *Come d'aria* only partially adheres to this trope, and plays with chronology unexpectedly, which contributes to its literary value—the highest among the three memoirs analyzed here. While Amurri's *Apnea* was among the twelve finalists for the 2013 Premio Strega—the most prestigious literary prize in Italy—D'Adamo's *Come d'aria* was awarded the prize in 2023. The narration begins in the hospital, but not as a reader would

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[41] Garland Thomson, *Staring*, p. 84.

[42] Amurri, *Apnea*, p. 169. Translation: This, then, is the key: to appear calm in order to put the person in front of me at ease.

expect: the daughter Daria is undergoing surgery, which makes D'Adamo skip and then forget to reschedule her appointment for a breast check-up ultrasound. The first brief chapter—just three pages long—introduces the two conditions intertwined in the memoir: that of the daughter, who has a severe disability, and that of the mother, who has breast cancer. The title, in particular, is a play on words with the daughter's name (Daria) and the phrase 'd'aria' (of air), explained through another wordplay between gravity as the earthly force that the daughter does not experience vertically and as the severity of her condition. By the end, however, through a process of identification rooted in motherhood and illness, the title also becomes a play on the author's own name ('Sono Ada. Sarò D'aria').[43]

While the cancer diagnosis represents one of the key starting points of the narrative, the others are nonetheless pregnancy and childbirth, even though they are presented out of strict chronological order, with the narrative returning to them later to add further pieces to the puzzle. Daria's birth is described as the 'il mio personale cataclisma',[44] the author's own personal cataclysm, one she was not ready for. Notably, D'Adamo extensively describes the loneliness, the sense of defeat, and the guilt felt after delivering a child with a disability, and the restlessness of waiting for a medical diagnosis, which lead her to view herself from the outside. The author defines this loneliness as 'la Grande Fuga',[45] the Great Escape of friends, moms of healthy newborns in the hospital, and even her gynecologist, who all disappear after the news of her daughter's disability. As a new mother, D'Adamo finds no comfort in the hospital, as neither nurses nor doctors offer words of support, only orders and procedures that must be learned quickly. As within the hospital and similarly to Amurri, leaving the medical space also feels like a leap into the unknown.

In contrast with this loneliness, an important yet negative sense of community emerges in the hospital waiting room, which is interpreted as a space of encounters and identification. In the other children, D'Adamo recognizes her daughter, while in the other parents, she recognizes her own past, present, and future, as if mirrored before her: 'In loro ritrovo parti di me, prove di coraggio e momenti di fragilità in egual misura. [...] A volte quello che vedo mi fa orrore'.[46] D'Adamo describes sloppy and exhausted mothers, heroic mothers with superpowers, and hyena-like mothers always angry and ready to strike, as well as a particularly touching portrait of a dying boy diligently doing his homework. In this mirror of pain, her wounds (defined as sores, 'piaghe')[47] reopen in a multiplication of sorrow—both her own and that of others—to the point that she admits she was initially unable to bear these reflections, crying behind the shield of dark sunglasses. A similar sense of community, with instead positive connotations, is found in the digital space of a Facebook group for parents of children with her daughter's same diagnosis, where D'Adamo finds useful information and advice. By contrast, in the waiting room of the oncology ward, she only sees patients much older than herself. Lonely again, she questions whether that will be her future.

Inhabiting the medical space not only as a mother, but also as a patient, D'Adamo draws a connection between her own condition and that of her daughter in their shared status of second-class citizens, othered under the label of 'fragili'.[48] D'Adamo dedicates bitter pages

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[43] A. D'Adamo, *Come d'aria* (Rome: Elliot, 2023), p. 125.

[44] Ibid., p. 42.

[45] Ibid., p. 26.

[46] Ibid., p. 15. Translation: In them, I find parts of myself, proofs of courage and moments of fragility in equal measure. [...] Sometimes, what I see horrifies me.

[47] Ibid., p. 16.

[48] Ibid., p. 105.

to the Covid-19 pandemic as a missed opportunity to remind that everyone is fragile, which closely resonates with the foundational concept of disability studies that impairment is not an exceptional occurrence, but an inevitable and universal experience that will affect any person who lives long enough.[49] Instead of learning positively from the pandemic, people responded in ways that, according to D'Adamo, showed a generalized fear of illness and death, reinforcing a societal tendency to confine the ill and disabled to the category of the Other and to question their right to survive, in an outdated fight between the weak and the strong.

D'Adamo argues that her cancer diagnosis gave her full citizenship in the 'paese dei malati',[50] the country of the sick, though she was already an honorary member by virtue of being Daria's parent. She argues that when you have a child with disabilities, you become their hands, their eyes, their legs, and their mouth, and that is why many people have a Freudian slip and call her by her daughter's name in a process of inevitable identification. This identification is, however, also a loss of identity as an individual and as a woman, becoming a role and a function. D'Adamo beautifully writes: 'Non sono io, sono 'la mamma di Daria'. Anzi, sono 'la mamma' e basta. Entrare nelle corsie degli ospedali significa ogni volta smettere i miei panni e diventare 'mamma'. Così ci chiamano le infermiere. Non signora. Mamma. Non più donna, non più persona, sono un ruolo, una 'funzione di te''.[51] Through writing, D'Adamo seems to reclaim the complexity and wholeness of her identity while also sharing the dehumanization of her role as an ill parent of a disabled child.

The daughter's and the mother's conditions are intertwined in other ways, as well. The cancer and its treatments weaken D'Adamo's body to the point of no longer being able to lift her daughter and take care of her in the way she used to, throwing out of balance their unique bond of communication through the body. In one of several reflections on this destabilized dynamic, D'Adamo considers introducing a new hideous contraption ('marchingegno orrendo'),[52] into her home and reflects on it must first find a metaphorical place in her mind before it can occupy a practical space in her house. The assistive devices that entered her life include the wheelchair and the *sedia comoda*, onto which Amurri also projected his emotional response towards adjusting to disability in the home. Once again, the wheelchair is employed in self-narration as the symbol of one's relationship to disability, as D'Adamo explores the process of accepting her daughter's disability by accepting the presence of these devices, both small and large, which feel like an admission of incapacity, a defeat to accept, absorb, and move on from. That said, it is precisely through the progressive limitations imposed on D'Adamo's body by cancer and its treatments that the identification between mother and daughter reaches its culmination. As a knowledgeable admirer of the art of dance and former dancer herself, D'Adamo shows a great attention to corporality and uses the concept of incorporation to describe the transmission of knowledge between bodies. Not simply understanding and feeling but physically incorporating the daughter's limits in her body with

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[49] The concept of disability as both a universal human experience and a minority status that anyone may acquire through age, accident, or illness is often captured in the phrase 'temporarily able-bodied'. See Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy*. See also S. Wendell, *The Rejected Body: Feminist Philosophical Reflections on Disability* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

[50] D'Adamo, *Come d'aria,* p. 30.

[51] Ibid., p. 15. Translation: It's not me, I'm 'Daria's mom'. Or rather, just 'mom'. Entering the hospital wards means each time shedding my own identity and becoming 'mom'. That's what the nurses call us. Not 'ma'am'. Mom. No longer a woman, no longer a person, I am a role, a 'function of you'.

[52] Ibid., p. 28.

reduced vision and mobility, D’Adamo bridges the gap between her daughter’s body and her own.

Even more poetically, D’Adamo discovers in her search for beauty through dance a means of connection not only between herself and her daughter, but also between her daughter and strangers, finding the beauty in Daria’s appearance and resonating with a similar yet opposite reflection in LaSpina’s *Such a Pretty Girl*. D’Adamo reflects that, despite some features caused by her impairment, her daughter is a pretty girl (‘una bella bambina’)[53] and that her beauty is the reason she is alive, as malformations would have been detected during the ultrasound. D’Adamo is initially annoyed by the behavior of strangers who approach her daughter simply because she is pretty, going against what Garland Thomson defined as ‘civil inattention’,[54] the freedom to not be stared at. In the narrative created by scenes of staring, between the starer and the staree, D’Adamo takes the role of the observer, who wonders about the interest that sparked the stare. Ultimately, D’Adamo concludes that in a life of misfortunes, where each person receives at least one gift, beauty is her daughter’s gift. This gift, in particular, shields her from stares of unease, if not open disgust, which are often directed at people with disabilities. As Garland Thomson argues, an ethical stare is ‘a potential act of be-holding’,[55] a chance to hold the humanity of another being in the eye of the beholder, not only fostering empathetic knowledge but also potential social justice. With a similar starting point but different conclusion, LaSpina recalls the reactions of strangers in her hometown of Riposto during her childhood, where the *paesani* pitied her even more for being so pretty yet disabled: ‘‘*Che bella bambina*, what a pretty girl,’ they all said. And inevitably, they added, ‘*Che peccato!* What a shame!’’.[56] Contrastingly, while D’Adamo interprets her daughter’s beauty as an opportunity to bridge the gap between disability and others, LaSpina describes her mother’s reaction to these words as resembling the sadness of the Madonna Addolorata, Our Lady of Sorrows, which made her feel as if it would have been better to not have been pretty at all. By offering their life writing to the gaze of strangers, however, both D’Adamo and LaSpina open a space for ethical beholding—one could argue through the beauty of the written word.

The connection between Daria’s disability and D’Adamo’s cancer is further explored in the author’s introspective search for a reason and a culprit for her illness, and lies at the heart of the memoir’s structure and narrative style. D’Adamo finds the cause of her cancer in the guilt for having aborted her first child and the clumsy attempt to induce a miscarriage of Daria by recklessly riding a moped over potholes in the streets of Rome, which possibly caused her disability. Like a confession, atoning for her mistakes, the author brings dark thoughts to the page with graceful and touching honesty. To confront contradictions and personal faults that might otherwise be too difficult to reveal, especially surrounding her role as a mother, D’Adamo addresses her daughter directly in a second-person narrative, despite knowing that she will never be able to read these words. For D’Adamo, as for LaSpina and Amurri, writing serves as a cathartic and therapeutic outlet away from stigma; however, she goes one step further by finding a safe space not only in writing but also in reading literature. In the hospital, during sleepless nights, D’Adamo recounts reading books about illness and grief in order to cry for the characters’ suffering, which was impossible for her when

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[53] Ibid., p. 46.
[54] Garland Thomson, *Staring*, p. 35.
[55] Ibid., p. 194.
[56] LaSpina, *Such a Pretty Girl*, p. 3.

confronting her own pain. Notably, in a previous chapter, the author refers to reading *Lo spazio bianco* (2008), a successful Italian novel about disability by Valeria Parrella. D'Adamo openly praises Parrella for her ability to turn experience into literature, her depiction of suspension and uncertainty, and her composed tone. Interestingly, in both this novel and *Tempo di imparare* (2014), Parrella also depicts the hospital waiting room as a place of encounters for parents of children with disabilities or premature infants, in which the protagonists see their fears and questions about the future reflected in others. However, a key distinction between D'Adamo's memoir, marked by profound loneliness, and Parella's novels lies in the support rooted in the shared experience of disability that Parella's protagonists find in the community of other parents, similarly to how LaSpina finds kinship in other children with disabilities in the hospital. Rather than indicating a direct literary influence, these overlapping scenes and themes set in the hospital may simply reflect a shared lived experience among patients and parents of children with disabilities. Nevertheless, they underscore the potential of comparative analysis in the still-emerging field of literary disability studies, as the hospital becomes the complex and at times contradicting setting of life transformations, material encounters with disability, and potential identification of the self with others, all explored away from stigma through the safe space of writing.

Conclusions

Nadina LaSpina's *Such a Pretty Girl: A Story of Struggle, Empowerment, and Disability Pride*, Lorenzo Amurri's *Apnea*, and Ada D'Adamo's *Come d'aria* are compelling examples of *some body* memoirs that reflect the broader disability memoir boom, a growing literary trend of the new millennium identified by G. Thomas Couser and Federica Millefiorini, two leading scholars on either side of the Atlantic. LaSpina, Amurri, and D'Adamo all use the medical space as a central setting in their narratives, both structurally and symbolically. The hospital emerges as a place of materiality and physical suffering, a narrative starting point, and an opportunity for confrontation with the self and with others that, at times, fosters a sense of community and rebirth.

For LaSpina, the hospital is a place of abuse, sexual assault, and painful surgeries, yet it is also a vibrant place of community, filled with music, laughter, and the comforting presence of other children with disabilities, whose mere existence offers her solace. For Amurri, who acquired his disability in adulthood, the hospital becomes a maternal womb, a protective shell, and a gilded cage. It shields him from the uncertainty of the outside world, and his eventual discharge is framed as a rebirth, mirroring the way disability itself becomes a starting point for self-reflection and life writing. For D'Adamo, the hospital—and in particular the hospital waiting room—is experienced from two complementary perspectives: that of the patient and that of the parent. However, unlike LaSpina's community of children, the interactions with other parents and cancer patients do not generate a positive sense of solidarity or rebirth. Instead, they intensify her sense of loneliness by reflecting her pain back to her.

Much like the hospital—and often within its space—the wheelchair also becomes a symbolic projection of one's approach to disability. For LaSpina, the wheelchair becomes a symbol of freedom, first discovered during her time in the Hospital for Special Surgery in Manhattan and later embraced in adulthood. It represents her decision to prioritize what is best for her body, particularly after the onset of post-polio syndrome, rather than internalizing societal prejudices. For Amurri, the wheelchair is a new aid introduced after a lifetime of walking, onto which he projects various stages of his hospital experience: initial refusal, excitement about new possibilities, and the exhausting reality of everyday use, despite never becoming itself a vehicle of rebirth. For D'Adamo, as well as for LaSpina's father and Amurri's family, the wheelchair is a visible and tangible marker of disability, a projection of their feelings towards their relative's disability.

Lastly, for all the authors analyzed here, writing serves as an act of self-discovery, self-understanding, and self-narration. It is safe space where they find comfort before offering their work to others, positively met with public success. For LaSpina, writing becomes a means of coming to terms with traumatic events she was unable to share with her parents as a child and reaching a sense of acceptance and pride. For Amurri, it takes the form of a diary through which he explores the emotional impact of his body's transformation in a way that feels protected from the outside world. For D'Adamo, it is another opportunity to connect with her daughter by confessing her feelings and faults directly to her, fully aware that she will never read them. For all three authors, writing becomes a vehicle and metaphorical place of rebirth away from the stigma of staring strangers. Fortunately for us as readers, these authors chose to share their intimate reflections with the world, transforming personal writing into an opportunity for beholding and a potential rebirth away from stigma for us, as well.