

**Review of Andrew Leland's *The Country of the Blind:
A Memoir at the End of Sight***

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Dr. Krishna Kumar S

<https://orcid.org/0009-0008-2141-0734>

Department of English, Gargi College, University of Delhi, New Delhi

Book Review

Andrew Leland's *The Country of the Blind: A Memoir at the End of Sight* is a personal narrative of the writer's decades-long transition from sightedness to blindness triggered by retinitis pigmentosa (RP), an eye condition that first affects one's peripheral vision and gradually results in total loss of sight. It is also an inquiry into the history, culture, and the sociopolitical discourse surrounding blindness. This combination makes the book a part of the tradition of American life-writing that approaches blindness both as a lived experience and a subject of historical inquiry. The said tradition includes Georgina Kleege's *Sight Unseen* (1999) and M. Leona Godin's *Their Plant Eyes: A Personal and Cultural History of Blindness* (2021), works that demonstrate the centrality of writing to one's understanding of blindness and emphasise that blindness is as much cultural and political as personal.

Leland, a Jewish-American writer, audio producer, editor, and teacher, writes from the perspective of a person standing at the interstices of sightedness and blindness. Being partially blind, he wonders whether embracing blindness "require[s] a wholesale rejection of sight" (Leland xxiii). Unlike the legendary Country of the Blind into which Nunez of H.G. Wells's sci-fi fantasy stumbles and eventually escapes from, the one that Leland enters is very much part of the larger sighted world and from which he cannot get away. As someone in the process of becoming "a naturalized citizen" of the blind country, he confronts the question: "How can this

new identity I've taken on be at once central and incidental?" (xv, 248). Grappling with this paradox (which he claims as uniquely American) animates his exploration of blindness.

The memoir is structured around three parts containing ten chapters along with an introduction and a conclusion, each part dealing with certain aspects of blindness that the writer learns anew. The design of the book mirrors his evolving experience and knowledge of blindness. The first part, entitled "Phantom Limp," presents his initial steps into blindness and his exposure to the blind community. "The Lost World," as the title of the second part suggests, concerns different kinds of loss that he incurs and must adapt to because of his attenuating vision: the ocularnormative notion of masculinity, the visual capacity to appreciate and produce art, his status as a reader of books, and independence in information access. In the third part, "Structured Discovery," he evaluates the medical and rights/Pride perspectives on blindness, and delineates his own self-discovered, rather ambivalent, approach to his newly acquired identity. Although the organisation of the parts seems linear, certain ideas and preoccupations recur throughout the book, making it a nuanced study of blindness.

Chapter 1 busts certain sighted myths regarding blindness and blind people: that blindness is an absolute, unmitigated darkness and, consequently, blind people endure wretched existence. Contra this view, it asserts that blindness is experienced in rich and diverse ways, and the blind have managed to adapt to the demands of the sighted societies in which they have lived over the centuries. Leland narrates the experience of stepping "across the border, into the country of the blind" after years of hesitation and inhibition (23). The crossover—as described in Chapter 2—occurs in the Orlando Convention of the National Federation of the Blind (NFB), where he begins to think of himself "as a member of a blind community" for the first time (26). In Chapter 3, he realises that ophthalmologists do not provide a positive picture of blindness because they believe that the latter tends to affect people's quality of life. Being declared as "legally blind" after numerous hospital visits, he feels that he can "own" his "blindness better" (62). The confirmation comes as a relief to a man who has been held in the interstitial space between sightedness and blindness for most of his adult life and encourages him to accept how much sight he is left with rather than mourn over how much he has lost.

In Chapter 4, Leland doubts if he would be able to effectively fulfil his roles as a husband and a father after the "damage" to his "manhood" (85). He knows that "cling[ing]" to his "old

sense of masculinity” will be “a path to disaster, like an Argonaut trying to sail on without replacing any of his ship’s broken planks” (106). He therefore resolves to “abandon [...]” the visual “trappings” of masculinity and evolve “a new form” based on his altered condition (106). For Leland, the major challenge for blind people is “access to information” (118). Chapter 5 points out how most of the “mediums” of the sighted world, such as “[b]ooks, magazines, leaflets, menus, labels, signs, maps, graphs, charts, spreadsheets, slide decks, whiteboards, photos, videos, blueprints, tables, diagrams, illustrations, figures” are “hyper-visual by default” (118). While tracing the history of reading and writing technologies in Chapter 6, Leland notes how the invention of braille in the nineteenth century freed blind people from sighted dependence. He learns how to use braille as well as screen reader; despite initially feeling alienated from the “page” by having to use the latter, he realises that blindness in itself does not spell doom to his identities as a reader and a writer (163).

Rather than merely being the beneficiaries of technological innovation, blind people have been at its forefront—contributing as engineers, designers, and technicians—a fact conveniently forgotten by the sighted. Chapter 7 details the accomplishments of such people. While no one is truly independent, disabled people are exclusively thought of as “need[ing] more help than everyone else” (190). Leland emphasises “interdependence over and above independence” because no one can ever be self-sufficient (192). He discusses Mia Mingus’s concept of “access intimacy,” which urges the able-bodied to “connect” with the disabled “on their terms” (193). In Chapter 8, he admits that he has “no interest in courting, extending, or preserving” his blindness despite feeling positive about it (212). He adds that he would take a cure if it came along the way. He justifies this self-contradiction by stating that such an attitude is common among the blind who, unlike their Deaf counterparts, do not view “research into curing their disability with the same animus that Deaf activists do” (212). He draws on the insights of disability activist Adrienne Asch to defend his position in Chapter 9. He notes how Ash advocated for flexibility in foregrounding one’s blindness and “let[ting] it fade to the background” as and when required (233). The context-specificity of this idea helps the writer deal with the “paradox” in treating his blindness as both “central and incidental” to his identity at once (248). While I concur with Leland’s assessment that this position is “far more easily articulated than enacted,” I believe that how one wants to present one’s blindness be left to the blind person themselves (248).

Chapter 10 recounts Leland's transformative stay at the Colorado Center for the Blind, which proves to be as influential as his first encounter with the blind community at the Orlando Convention. Compelled to wear sleep shades, he learns crucial experiential insights regarding blindness there. He resolves to "cultivate a half smile" while walking, a gesture that is neither combative nor meek, one in sync with his take on blindness (275). In conclusion, he discovers that blindness can be "absolutely ordinary," a fact that is unfathomable to the sighted (285). He comes to accept the "trappings of blindness" such as the cane, the screen reader, etc. (286). He concedes that "the separation between the blind and the sighted worlds is largely superficial, constructed by stigma and misunderstanding rather than any inherent difference" (290). It is the "misperceptions people have about blindness" that shroud the points of convergence between the two worlds (290). For all the differences, the blind and the sighted can very well cohabit together as they have done over the centuries.

As a blind scholar, I found Leland's occasional casting of blindness in tragic terms a little unsettling. Nevertheless, the memoir is engaging and historically informed. With its numerous references to prominent figures of blind culture and to the major moments of blind history (appended with copious endnotes), the book offers a fresh perspective on visual impairment. I strongly recommend the book to the scholars of literary and cultural disability studies and to the lay readership at large.

Bionote

Dr. Krishna Kumar S is Assistant Professor in the Department of English, Gargi College, University of Delhi, New Delhi. He holds a PhD in English Literature with a specialisation in Disability Studies from the English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad. For his doctoral study, he worked on the epistolary practices of blind writers from the early modern period to the contemporary era. He specialises in critical blindness studies and epistolary studies. His research interests include disability aesthetics, life writing, autistic writing, folklore studies, and contemporary poetry. He has peer-reviewed essays in *Sanglap: Journal of Literary and Cultural Inquiry*, and edited books published by Orient BlackSwan, and Upanayan. He can be reached at sskumar.krishna@gmail.com

ORCID Id: <https://orcid.org/0009-0008-2141-0734>

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