

Gender News Review
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Susan Krieger, *Traveling Blind*
by Katherine Marino

Talking with Susan Krieger is reminiscent of reading her prose – her manner is effortlessly open, generous, and wise. Thus, it comes as something of a surprise when she admits that one of the greatest challenges she faced while writing her book, *Traveling Blind: Adventures in Vision with a Guide Dog by My Side* (Purdue University Press, 2010), was sharing her feelings so honestly. Even though using her personal experience to illuminate the larger topic of vision was the book's goal, she was challenged by delving into some of her feelings, particularly those regarding her sense of "illegitimacy about partly seeing and partly being blind."

As she explains, "One of the hardest things for me to accept was the duality... that I do see and I don't see...If you're blind, you don't see...Harder for me to accept than the blindness was having to accept still having some sight while at the same time experiencing myself as significantly blind...I felt guilty for seeing, and I felt guilty for not seeing."

Diagnosed in 1996 with a rare autoimmune eye disease, "birdshot retinochoroidopathy," Krieger, a sociologist who has taught in the Feminist Studies Program at Stanford since 1987, has long confronted the ambiguities of a condition that leaves her legally blind yet still retaining some vision. In some ways, as she's explained, her blindness was "invisible" to her until 2001 when she was struck by a car she had not seen in a blind spot of her peripheral vision. Thrown up on the car's windshield and then onto the sidewalk, Krieger was not seriously injured, but was newly concerned for her personal safety. She decided she needed more aids in her mobility.

Enter Teela, a spirited Golden Retriever-Yellow Labrador mix. After a

month-long training residency at Guide Dogs for the Blind in San Rafael, California, Krieger came home with Teela and a thirst for new adventure.

Several months later, Krieger began writing *Traveling Blind*, to record her new experiences of mobility and vision. She set off with Teela and with her partner, Stanford historian Estelle Freedman (whom she calls Hannah in the book), to a part of southwestern New Mexico that has long been her haven. *Traveling Blind* spans three years and two trips to New Mexico, and includes other ambulatory journeys Krieger takes with Teela through airports and the streets of San Francisco. It records, with honesty and humor, the hazards of being partly-blind and partly-sighted, as well as the frustration she often feels when hounded with the question "are you training that dog?" from passing strangers who don't think she is blind.

The book also preserves the striking visual imagery of the New Mexican desert landscape that has so long been meaningful to her. For Krieger, "vision" means much more than its literal translation, "eyesight." As she explains, even before her diagnosis, "vision as a subject was always really...about knowledge." Vision as it relates to personal identity has long served as the touchstone of Krieger's sociological work. In an early study, *Social Science and the Self* (1991) she championed an innovative type of sociology and feminist ethnography in which, rather than a contaminant, the self serves as a rich source of knowledge. Using the first-person voice, deeply probing her own experience, and talking about what others might be too embarrassed to talk about sheds incisive light on broader questions of "how we see and how we know."

Traveling Blind is a travelogue, memoir, and adventure story that also contributes to bodies of knowledge about personal identity, disability, sight, and blindness. Similarly, her earlier books *Things No Longer There: A Memoir of Losing Sight and Finding Vision* (2005) and *The Family Silver: Essays on Relationships among Women* (1996) draw in an accessible way on Krieger's personal experiences, while significantly contributing to the field of sociology. She plans to further explore this methodology in her next book, titled *The Art of the Intimate Narrative: Unconventional Academic Writing*.

Krieger transfers this personal method into the classroom: "I teach in a way

that has students be in touch with their own feelings, experiences, and reactions to readings and research as a route to expanding their knowledge." She utilizes the approach in a Feminist Studies class she has taught for the past eight years at Stanford, and which she will offer again this spring. In "Seminar on Women's Health: Women and Disabilities," students read personal accounts of and interview women with many forms of disability. When conducting their interviews, Krieger asks the students to access their personal experiences: "...how do you feel as you're interviewing the person...what are the questions this person is answering for you, what questions may not be answered?" In the end, she says, "you learn about a lot more than disabilities and women; you learn about yourself."

Krieger's eyes light up when she talks about her students. Not everyone is willing to take a class that has the word "disability" in the title, she says: "The class is not titled 'Women and Success.' It's 'Women and Disabilities.' You get students who are actually a little bit brave." Certainly the same can be said of their teacher.

Note: More information on Susan Krieger's book can be found at her website:

<http://susankrieger.stanford.edu/travelingblind/>. The book is available in several alternative versions accessible for the blind (such as the audiobook), which are listed here:

<http://susankrieger.stanford.edu/travelingblind/accessible-versions.html>.

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Tags: Guide Dog, Susan Krieger, Traveling Blind

Online at:

<http://www.stanford.edu/group/gender/cgi-bin/wordpressblog/2011/02/susan-krieger-traveling-blind/>