



DiGeSt

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What are you reading?

Hedva. J. (2025). *How To Tell When We Will Die: On Pain, Disability, and Doom*. New York: Hellman Grad Books.

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Hedva, J. (2025). *How To Tell When We Will Die: On Pain, Disability, and Doom*, New York City. New York: Hellman Grad Books.

Korean-American writer, artist, and musician Johanna Hedva is maybe most well known for their essay *Sick Woman Theory* (2016), a text written during a flare-up in bed as critical and political analysis through the concept of 'the sick woman'. Sick Woman Theory has been translated from English into dozens of languages. As Hedva mentions themselves, the essay has made its way into 'covens, hackerspaces, queer hair salons, and crip collectives around the world' (Hedva, 2025, p. 9). This essay is also part of their new book *How To Tell When We Will Die: On Pain, Disability, and Doom*, which is a collection of essays, notes, letters, and other literary extracts. In general, Hedva's work intertwines witchcraft, political activism, performance, poetry, and music, while exploring different modes of knowledge. Written through a hyper-American lens, the book exemplifies artistic research and critical analysis, delving into what it means for them to be disabled.

The pink-covered book, printed on recycled paper, with a title that reads like a heavy metal album, centralises doom as a liberating condition. It balances academic and creative writing, using practices of autotheory and varied literary forms. In this collection, they experiment with diverse styles and forms, creating a collection of eclectic writings that reflect their personal position at the intersection of race, gender, queerness, disability, class, and religion. *How To Tell When We Will Die* detonates like a bomb, portraying disability as a nightly event steeped in spirituality, dreams, mystery, sex, joy, and resilience. The self-identified 'goth kink queen' (Hedva, 2025, p. 27) writes about the nastiest of body horrors. They write about disability in terms of malice, disobedience, malfunction, and deterioration, without necessarily framing these as negative: 'A fate worse than death, one has to familiarize with' (Hedva, 2025, p. 21). Hedva speaks about death with a peculiar comfort, viewing it as a wild and risky concept that is ever-present. Death is fast. Doom is slow. This book is as much about pain, fear, anger, hatred, dread, and doom as it is about resilience, activism, joy, compassion, courage, and perseverance. Above all, it is about creativity and the creative potential that disability holds. For Hedva, disability is not something to endure while searching for a silver lining. It is the silver lining.

How To Tell When We Will Die is written with vivid and obscure imagery, offering an intimate glimpse into Hedva's mind. To them, the body is a page to write upon, and this book feels like an account of writing their own body into experience, observing how it transforms through the pages. They explore what writing means, not merely as a tool to explain, but as a medium to express and experience. Writing, for Hedva, is a way to test the boundaries of what is possible to think and to marvel at its capacity to expand. As they write: 'As a disabled person I wanted to know what thinking can do when it coexists with the incoherence of a day soaked in pain, the grind of life negotiating poverty, bargaining for time, the desolations of being broken down by the medical-industrial complex, if thinking can happen at all, after going up flights of stairs because an elevator is broken and all energy is lost for the day' (Hedva, 2025, p. 25). Hedva examines where writing begins when the body fails, grappling with power dynamics rooted in ableism, capitalism, class oppression, racism, and sex negativity. Furthermore, their texts seems to be written as associative and broadening as Hedva's bodymind experiences with all its particularities: its pain, flare-ups, and shifting symptoms. As they note in the introduction: 'My story does a thaumaturgic shape-shift during the decade of writing this book. I realized I was researching not for one story of illness or disability, but for how this can be more than one story' (Hedva, 2025, p. 11). They explore disability as political and relational, amplifying their voice through their identity as a Korean-American, queer, witch, poor, kinky, mad, sick, and disabled individual. Hedva spins a web and casts a spell, navigating queerness, mad narratives, disability activism, crip empowerment, kink, and witchcraft. This book is written for the disabled, the mad, the chronically ill, the neuro-spicy, queer freaks, and goth punks. It is written for anyone who wants to see doom as liberation.

I have always cherished a love for artists and academics who hopscotch through methodologies of autotheory, creative writing, and artistic research, and Hedva exemplifies this effortlessly. Their meticulous engagement with the academic fields of critical disability studies and crip theory is matched by a wild and unapologetic writing style. Themes like death, doom, and trauma resonate deeply with me. As a queer, disabled, neurodivergent artist who is also an empowered widow, this book feels like a nod of recognition.

Josefien Cornette

Josefien Cornette (they/them) is an artist, researcher, and writer currently working in the Department of Art, Music, and Theatre Sciences at UGent. Their work explores themes of disability, grief, and emancipation through multidisciplinary practices and artistic research. Their master's thesis, *A House Called Pain*, won the DiverGent Thesis Prize in 2021 and was later published as *Een Huis Dat Pijn Heet* (Mammoet) in 2023.