In 1995, in the opening pages of *Enforcing Normalcy*, Lennard Davis noted that identity politics seemed to have left one form of identity unaccounted for: “there is a strange and really unaccountable silence when the issue of disability is raised (or, more to the point, never raised); the silence is stranger, too, since so much of left criticism has devoted itself to the issue of the body, of the social construction of sexuality and gender.”¹ In the book’s conclusion Davis returned to this theme, at a slightly higher rhetorical pitch: “the concept of disability,” he claimed, “has been relegated to a sideshow, a freak show at that, far away from the academic midway of progressive ideas and concerns.”²
Two years earlier, the late James Tuttleton, writing in *The New Criterion*, had said something similar—not about disability, but about left criticism in toto: “As lit-profs are a national laughingstock,” he cried in a somewhat hysterical review of Gerald Graff’s *Beyond the Culture Wars*, “the only proper response is to ignore the freaks.” Freaked out as Tuttleton was by the amiable proposal to “teach the conflicts,” one can only imagine how freaky he would have considered Davis’s exhortation to consider disability as a critical term for the humanities. But what strikes me now about Davis’s claim isn’t the phrase “freak show” but the more innocuous phrase “sideshow.” For as we’ve heard many times in the 1990s, left criticism of the academic variety is itself a sideshow, even to many writers and organizers on the left: the main event is economic inequality, or the main event is the illegitimacy of the impeachment proceedings against Bill Clinton, or the main event is the contested election results in Florida, or the main event is September 11 and its aftermath. Theories of the social construction of sexuality and gender may have relegated disability to the margins, but to the margins of what? Of already socially marginal discourses?

It was not long ago, in other words, that one of the most prominent and prolific writers in the newly emergent field of disability studies could plausibly construe his field as the sideshow of a sideshow, featuring the freakiest of the freaks. The field has grown tremendously since Davis wrote those words, certainly; and yet just as certainly, disability studies has not so transformed the humanities—or the terrain of left criticism—that it is too late to gloss its still-marginal status. In *Time Passages*, George Lipsitz underwrote his forays into the sideshow of cultural politics by quoting jazz saxophonist Rahsaan Roland Kirk’s straight-up denial: “this ain’t no sideshow.” I could emphatically say the same of *Bending over Backwards*. But I’d like to show another side of the politics of the sideshow, and cite a text that poses the question of its subject’s marginality at the very outset. At the opening of David Lean’s epic *Lawrence of Arabia*, General Sir Edmund Allenby and diplomat Brian Dryden of the Arab Bureau are discussing the recent Arab attack on the city of Medina,
and T. E. Lawrence’s consequent request to be reassigned as a military adviser to Prince Feisal:

Allenby: I may as well tell you, it’s my considered opinion, and that of my staff, that any time spent on the Bedouin will be time wasted. They’re a nation of sheep stealers!

Dryden: They did attack Medina . . .

Allenby: . . . and the Turks made mincemeat of them!

Dryden: We don’t know that, sir.

Allenby: We know they didn’t take it. A storm in a teacup, Brian! A sideshow! If you want my own opinion, this whole theater of operations is a sideshow. The real war is being fought against the Germans, not the Turks, and not here, but on the Western front, in the trenches! Your “Bedouin army,” or whatever it calls itself, would be a sideshow of a sideshow!

Dryden: Big things have small beginnings, sir.5

General Allenby’s words are true enough if you’re thinking, as Allenby is, of a European war being fought in Flanders Fields or the Ypres salient. But as it turned out, the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the signing of the Sykes-Picot agreement, the end of the caliphate, and the emergence of Arabian nation-states in Southwest Asia wound up being world-historical events after all, in the sense that we could reasonably consider the politics of the Arabian peninsula central to world affairs in the past half-century or thereabouts.

Lean’s film (and Robert Bolt’s and Michael Wilson’s script) knows all this, of course, which is why it says as much. And in the same spirit, I want to suggest, modestly enough, that some sideshows are worth attending to on their own terms, regardless of how far they may seem from the ostensibly main event of the day. For disability studies did not start
to become an important area of study exclusively because of the recent work of Lennard Davis or David Mitchell or Sharon Snyder or Tobin Siebers or Rosemarie Garland Thomson or G. Thomas Couser or Brenda Jo Brueggemann, valuable though all their work has been; rather, disability studies has started to become an important area of study because the long (and largely unheralded) work of disability activists in the past three decades has finally begun to change American law and culture, making disability more visible and thinkable in the midways of American life, and because disability itself is so important to all our lives, so crucial to any account of human embodiment. Disability can be a practical matter of demographics, as Davis reminds us in these pages, or it can be a theoretical matter of deploying the instability of disability as a device for destabilizing all categories of identity, as Davis shows us in these pages. Either way, it doesn’t really matter whether anyone thinks of disability as a sideshow; the subject will be central to human existence for as long as humans have bodies—and embodied minds to theorize them with.

The importance of disability as a category of social thought may depend more on the practices and politics of people with disabilities than on the work of academic disability studies, and for now, disability studies may be in the position of finding adequate theoretical concepts with which to describe those practices and politics; but few people in the humanities have done more in recent years to describe those practices and politics than Lennard Davis. Beginning with Enforcing Normalcy, which seamlessly blends Davis’s earlier work on the history of the novel with his groundbreaking analysis of Adolphe Quetelet’s characterization of l’homme moyen in the early nineteenth century, Davis has brought poststructuralist cultural history (in the mode of his first book, Factual Fictions) to bear on the concept of disability, thereby giving disability studies greater historical and theoretical depth and giving poststructuralism a much-needed specificity with regard to theories of the “normal” body. One measure of Davis’s success in moving disability studies from
sideshow to midway is the new Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism, which excerpts Davis’s Enforcing Normalcy alongside the work of Homi Bhabha, Henry Louis Gates, Dick Hebdige, and Judith Butler; another more immediate measure is the work undertaken and performed by the essays in this volume, essays which demonstrate with eloquence and élan that disability studies is as pertinent to the history of the novel as to the history of the idea of citizenship, as important to the future of genetics as to the history of eugenics, as critical to legal theories of employment as to philosophical theories of embodiment.

For in Bending over Backwards Lenny Davis shows once again that the idea of the “normal” citizen was built on, distinguished from, and sustained by countless forms of “abnormal” bodies throughout the past three centuries, as the world’s industrialized nations created their new social sciences of population management and figured their new normalities in all manner of social institutions and literary texts. In Bending over Backwards, Davis shows that disability simultaneously unsettles the categories of race, gender, class, and sexuality yet cannot be thought of without them, especially (but not exclusively) because disability is so intimately related to poverty, illness, and long-term unemployment. In Bending over Backwards, Davis shows us why professors of literature, freaky as they are, should learn to become good close readers of the Americans with Disabilities Act, Vande Zande v. State of Wisconsin Dept. of Admin., and Sutton v. United Air Lines. In Bending over Backwards, Davis offers us a model of disability studies that points the way to a form of cultural criticism that’s every bit as urgent and important as the cultural practices and politics it addresses.

I’m not going to predict—or even try to imagine—that any of the essays in this volume will have the impact of a Supreme Court decision or a vicious executive order directed against the sufferers of repetitive-stress injuries. But I do imagine that these essays will make it still more difficult for teachers and scholars in the humanities to consign disability studies to the margins of theoretical inquiry. And I might even go so far as to predict that in another decade or three, people will look back on Davis’s
extraordinary body of work, from Enforcing Normalcy to The Disability Studies Reader to My Sense of Silence to Bending over Backwards, and wonder how in the world disability studies could ever have been considered a sideshow in the world of cultural criticism and theory. By that time, no doubt, everyone who works at the intersection of culture and society will know that disability is a pivotal concept for any comprehensive account of culture and society, and they’ll assume that the critics of the late twentieth century and the early years of the twenty-first century were simply bending over backwards to avoid the subject—with the salient exception of people like Lennard Davis, and books like Bending over Backwards.