

Giving disability its due

Three new books grant South Africans living with disabilities the attention they deserve, writes **DARRYL ACCONE**



Zip My Brain Harts (HSRC Press) is a unique synthesis of images and words that illuminates the experience of disabled South Africans.

A collaboration between the photographer, Angela Buckland — herself the mother of a child with cerebral palsy — and anthropologists and psychologists, the book portrays and reflects on the everyday experiences of people living with disabilities.

Buckland's photographs offer an affecting, deeply personal view of disability. Counterpointing or affirming the images are essays by Kathleen McDougall, Leslie Swartz and Amelia van der Merwe, which bring anthropological, clinical and medical interpretations to bear.

Zip My Brain Harts is one of two important Human Sciences Research Council contributions to the field of disability studies. The other, **Disability and Social Change: A South African Agenda** (HSRC Press), is the most comprehensive book on the subject yet published. Edited by Brian Watermeyer, Leslie Swartz, Theresa Lorenzo, Marguerite Schneider and Mark Priestley, it provides a theoretical and wide-ranging practical framework for addressing disability issues in contemporary South Africa.

Another illuminating book is **Eyes Wide Open** (Trafford Publishing) by Mark Bannister. Diagnosed when young with a rare form of spinal muscular atrophy, Bannister was obliged to use a wheelchair. But far from limiting the scope of his activities, his condition motivated him to pursue a series of firsts by disabled people, such as bungy jumping in New Zealand. Ban-

nister, who lives in KwaZulu-Natal, writes: "I kept my 'eyes wide open', turned every challenge into an opportunity and enjoyed so many things in life that, had I been able-bodied, I may never have experienced."

The publication of these and other books is further confirmation that disability is finally being given the attention it deserves from government, civil society, the media and academia.

The following is an edited extract from the introduction and overview of *Disability and Social Change: A South African Agenda*.

It is in the wake of the sweeping imperative towards recognition

of our racist past that we, as South Africans, begin to explore and interrogate further markers of difference, which carry their own weight of discrimination. The idea of "oppression" is firmly attached within South African colloquial culture to the idea of race; however, the marker of disability has yet to achieve this status.

When confronted with the notion of "disability", our minds do not turn instinctually to an exploration of possible modes of systematic discrimination and disadvantage. Rather, we remain strongly attached to modes of attribution which prize the explanatory system of the body, in accounting for the inequalities we see. In short, the story of disability — in our country as well as any other — is a story of social oppression.

This book aims to firmly establish this attributive link within a uniquely South African context. Disabled South Africans are, collectively, among the nation's poorest, even within a country characterised broadly by atrocious levels of economic inequality. By exploring the predicaments of a range of disabled citizens, this book attempts

to make an initial step in the forging of attributive links between modes of discrimination and unnecessary, systematic exclusion, and the economically and socially marginal destinies of the majority of disabled South Africans.

As will be familiar to readers acquainted with the politics of disability, it is striking how, when one first begins to comprehend the reality that (for the most part) our society has been designed and constructed with only the interests of a portion of South Africans — the so-called non-disabled — in mind, overwhelming evidence of discrimination seems to burst forth from one's surroundings.

This is because this evidence of discrimination — the stairs, the printed word, the buses and trains, the inaccessible toilets and the hostile or patronising attitudes, to name a very small few — remains invisible to those socialised within a disablist environment, until an awareness begins to be actively created. Similarly, our internal assumptions regarding what disability means, with their attendant ideas regarding what disabled people "need", or "should strive for", typically remain invisible and unquestioned within us until we are required to acknowledge and examine them.

With *Disability and Social Change: A South African Agenda*, the editors have aimed to begin — in the printed form — a dialogue, and a growing exploration, regarding what it means to be a disabled South African. This investigation necessarily involves not only an examination of the experience of disabled citizens, but, more importantly, an investigation of the ways in which physical environments, policies, practices, conventions, laws, beliefs and all other cultural artefacts serve to reproduce the disadvantage of those



individuals designated as disabled.

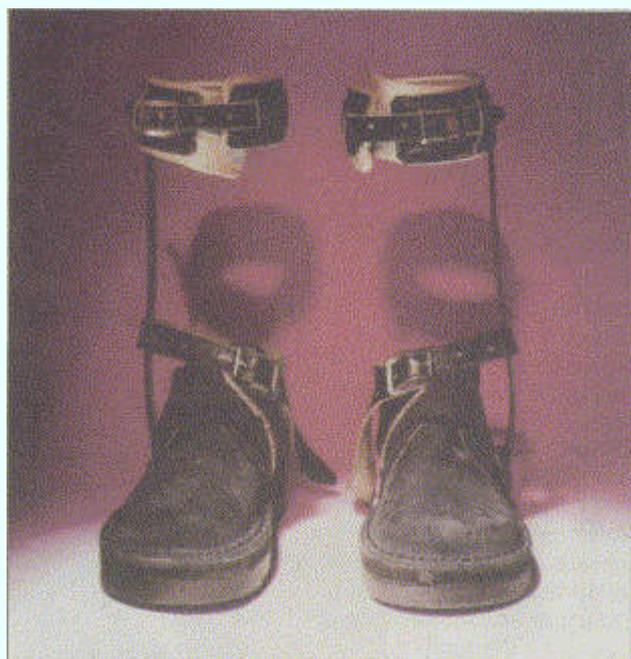
While this book may be viewed as a pioneering one, in the sense that it brings the South African disability arena into the realm of academic debate and critical examination, the disability movement in our country is a well-established one.

Rooted in a close alliance with the ANC during the struggle, Disabled People South Africa is a broad-based and vibrant political organisation of disabled citizens, which continues its efforts in mobilising change. While South Africa is fortunate to have

among its disabled population leaders, activists and campaigners who carry immense experience and knowledge of the nature of disability politics, a distinctly South African disability studies literature is yet to emerge and develop.

This publication, thus, aims to provide a forum for local researchers to be identified with, and contribute to, this literature, whilst also aiming to provide an opportunity for perhaps hitherto unpublished writers — disabled and non-disabled — to develop into contributors to the voice of disabled South Africa. The development of a

vibrant culture of research discourse within the disability arena in our country will, in our opinion, form the essential basis for the driving of change within civil society. It is imperative, if change is to be fostered, that the predicaments of disabled people in our country be explored and documented, such that the very substantial human rights provisions of our Constitution be elaborated and implemented via the securing of state accountability for the provision of citizenship rights.



Angela Buckland's images in Zip My Brain Harts focus on the everyday experiences of those with disabilities

