A review of
“The Four Walls of My Freedom: Lessons I’ve Learned from a Lifetime of Caregiving by Donna Thomson”
By Melissa Bender

In an early passage in The Four Walls of My Freedom: Lessons I’ve Learned from a Life of Caregiving (Anansi, 2010), Donna Thomson recounts the biting fear and judgement she experienced as a new mother whose infant, Nicholas Wright, has just been diagnosed with severe cerebral palsy:

“What happened to him? Why is he like that? Did you smoke? Did you drink? How about the hair dye you used? Maybe you were too old to have babies. It must have been something you did. He’s underweight. What are you feeding him? Can’t you stop him arching backwards like that? Don’t let him roll in that position....I knew for a fact that every professional was judging me, every relative, every neighbor. Maybe even God was judging me’ (17).

Such questions, whether articulated by neighbours and relatives, or imagined by the young mother, are indicative of the misguided belief—common in many western, democratic nations—that we can control every facet of our lives by virtue of the choices that we make. If it was “something you did,” then I can choose to avoid doing the same and ensure a different outcome. Assigning blame for a diagnosis like Nicholas’s—even when such blame is beyond all reason—allows us to feed the fictional control we wish to have over all aspects of our health and the health of those whom we love and nurture. Four Walls dispenses with this myth as the reader witnesses Thomson rising above the rhetoric of blame and control to become not only her son’s primary caregiver and advocate, but a caregiving activist as well.

Thomson’s personal evolution is apparent in a series of events that occur after she has enrolled Nicholas in a school that specialises in working with children with cerebral palsy. Initially, Thomson had great hope that the conductive education method offered by the school would help her son increase his motor skills and enable him to complete some daily tasks independently. Unfortunately, it quickly becomes clear that the teachers are unaccustomed to working with children who are as limited in their mobility as Nicholas is. Consequently, the results-driven teachers imply that Nicholas’s slow progress indicates a lack of effort on his part and his mother’s. “Nicholas is NOT doing well today,” one teacher states when Nicholas is unable to feed himself a sandwich (127). Likewise, after a screening of an educational film that aimed to show parents how to incorporate the conductive method into home life, the school director announces, “Your children’s progress is up to you” (127). Despite the fact that Nicholas is far more severely disabled than the children presented in the film, Thomson at first feels judged and defensive. However, instead of letting
this blame set in, she comes to recognise two things: firstly, the conductive education method is not a panacea, and, secondly, her own assumptions about the correlation between leading an independent life and leading a valuable life had been colouring the goals she had set for her son. Overall, this episode leads Thomson to find a more appropriate educational placement for Nicholas, and it also leads her to a productive degree of anger, which feeds her later activism.

Through the accumulation of many episodes such as those noted above, *The Four Walls of My Freedom* offers what many readers have come to expect of the contemporary memoir—a narrative of personal development that highlights the heartbreaking and challenging situations Thomson faced while raising her son. These episodes are often rendered in such detail as to give the reader a sense of exhaustion at the level of emotional attention and physical care that Thompson provides for her growing son. However, unlike many recent memoirs, *The Four Walls of My Freedom* does not devolve into false triumphs, nor does the writer isolate her personal story from the web of social relations that extend well beyond her nuclear family.

In this sense, *The Four Walls of My Freedom* is a hybrid text—part memoir, part social criticism. By virtue of this hybridity, the reader's attention is drawn to the manner in which Thomson's ability to care for Nicholas and to provide for his education and healthcare is inseparable from the social, political, and economic landscapes in which their lives unfold. For example, many of Thomson’s struggles revolve around the isolation she feels—emotionally and physically. Indeed, the “four walls” of the title refers to the physical restrictions set on Thomson's own life as a consequence of caring for a child with limited mobility. However, this isolation is not presented as mere happenstance, but, rather, as a consequence of our failure as a society to account for how best to care for and value the disabled. Such philosophical failures, Thomson’s book demonstrates, lead to failures at the institutional level. As Thomson and her husband navigate these landscapes they find that Nicholas’s case (as bureaucrats may put it) often falls between institutionally defined responsibilities—between social care and health care, between one type of educational facility and another, between public and private care, and, as Nicholas reaches adulthood, between child care and adult care. When the family relocates from Canada to the United Kingdom, for Thomson’s husband’s career, they must learn to navigate another maze of bureaucracy.

As a social critic, Thomson presents the reader with questions that are, by turns, practical and philosophical. How can we better facilitate the lives of people with severe disabilities? How can we reduce the physical and financial burden of family caregivers while maintaining the integrity of the family as a legal unit? Questions such as these are scattered throughout the book and, in a later chapter entitled “Good Ideas and Practical Solutions,” Thomson helpfully offers some answers to such questions. Philosophical questions are always more
difficult to answer, though Thomson does not shy away from attempting to do so. How should we as a society value the lives of the disabled? In what ways do the physically dependent contribute to society? To answer these questions, Thomson draws upon the work of renowned scholars such as the economist, Amartya Sen, and philosopher Eva Feder Kittay. Through her attention to both the practical and the philosophical questions, Donna Thomson makes an excellent argument for why all of us, regardless of our abilities or our roles—caregiver or not—should take an interest in these issues.

If there is a flaw in this book, it has more to do with the editing, than with the content. At times, the chapters read as if they were originally published as separate articles, with some unnecessary repetitions of ideas and exact phrases across chapters. There are also instances in which the location or Nicholas’s age at the time of particular incidents is unclear or a compelling idea is introduced without development. However, these are minor annoyances in a book that has much to offer.