“[Lehrer] narrates her difficult childhood with an eloquence and freedom from self-pity that are every bit as powerful as those of Lucy Grealy in her Autobiography of a Face (1994). Remarkably, Lehrer, now 62, found a way to survive endless surgeries (many of them completely bungled) and irremediable pain to create a successful life—one that readers will relish learning about. Her evolving self-awareness as an artist, a disabled person, and a woman with a complicated sexuality are well-explored, and her prose ranges from light and entertaining to intellectually and emotionally serious—and always memorable… An extraordinary memoir suffused with generosity, consistent insight, and striking artwork.” —Kirkus, Starred Review

“As a girl, artist, writer, and disability activist Riva Lehrer, born with spina bifida, imagined herself as following in a long line of golem like figures, from the Bride of Frankenstein to Gollum of Tolkien fame…. [Golem Girl is a] sometimes disturbing but often darkly humorous memoir illustrated with Lehrer’s artwork, a chronicle of a free spirit who finds solace and purpose in creating art that represents the socially challenged body… [readers] will respond to Lehrer’s remarkable resilience and robust sense of humor.” —Booklist, Starred Review

“Painter Lehrer applies the same unflinching gaze for which her portraits are known to a lifetime with spina bifida in this trenchant debut memoir of disability and queer culture . . . Readers will be sucked into Lehrer’s powerful memoir.” —Publishers Weekly

“This searing personal history expands Lehrer’s project of looking at our bodies inside and out, in all their queerness, fragility, and strength, into a stunning new dimension.” —Alison Bechdel, author of Fun Home

“Golem Girl is luminous… a profound portrait of the artist as a young – and mature – woman; an unflinching social history of disability over the last six decades; and a hymn to life, love, family and spirit. Occasionally nightmarish, often very funny, always compelling, Riva Lehrer’s book is as vivid and assumption-busting as her beautiful paintings. The author is not merely a dreamer: she is also a maker. I am, as you can tell, floored by this book.” —David Mitchell, author of Cloud Atlas

“Like Patti Smith and Sally Mann, Riva opens a vein and spills wisdom and humor, lyricism, and conviction on the page. She teaches us with images and words that all bodies are exquisite, just as they are. Riva’s life and art is an example of the deepest creativity and resistance.” —Ayelet Waldman, author of A Really Good Day

“Riva Lehrer is a great artist and a great storyteller. This is a brilliant book, full of strangeness, beauty, and wonder.” —Audrey Niffenegger, author of The Time Traveler’s Wife

GOLEM GIRL
A Memoir
by Riva Lehrer
A ONE WORLD HARDCOVER, ON SALE OCTOBER 6, 2020

A vivid, gloriously illustrated memoir of an artist born with disabilities who searches for freedom and connection in a society afraid of strange bodies.
What do we sacrifice in the pursuit of normalcy? And what becomes possible when we embrace monstrosity? Can we envision a world that sees impossible creatures?

In 1958, amongst the children born with spina bifida is Riva Lehrer. At the time, most such children are not expected to survive. Her parents and doctors are determined to "fix" her, sending the message over and over again that she is broken. That she will never have a job, a romantic relationship, or an independent life. Enduring countless medical interventions, Riva tries her best to be a good girl and a good patient in the quest to be cured.

Everything changes when, as an adult, Riva is invited to join a group of artists, writers, and performers who are building Disability Culture. Their work is daring, edgy, funny, and dark—it rejects tropes that define disabled people as pathetic, frightening, or worthless. They insist that disability is an opportunity for creativity and resistance. Emboldened, Riva asks if she can paint their portraits—inventing an intimate and collaborative process that will transform the way she sees herself, others, and the world. Each portrait story begins to transform the myths she’s been told her whole life about her body, her sexuality, and other measures of normal.

Written with the vivid, cinematic prose of a visual artist, and the love and playfulness that defines all of Riva's work, GOLEM GIRL is an extraordinary story of tenacity and creativity. With the author's magnificent portraits featured throughout, this memoir invites us to stretch ourselves toward a world where bodies flow between all possible forms of what it is to be human.

Riva Lehrer is an artist, writer, and curator whose work focuses on issues of physical identity and the socially challenged body. She is best known for representations of people with impairments, and those whose sexuality or gender identity have long been stigmatized. A longtime faculty member of the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Riva Lehrer is currently an instructor in medical humanities at Northwestern University.

MORE PRAISE FOR GOLEM GIRL

"Vivid… unforgettable … It is the story of how someone who is fundamentally different made not a life that transcends that difference, but a life that lionizes it. This book expands our notion of what constitutes the human experience, and it does so with generosity and open-heartedness."
—Andrew Solomon, author of Far From the Tree

"Lehrer’s story is a revelation of an inner subjective life—full of tragedy, love, and creativity—pushing against the external social stigmas, cultural narratives, and prejudices surrounding disability. She admits a felt kinship with other ‘monsters’ because their bodies were also ‘built by human hands,’ but unlike them, she is her own purpose, her own meaning, her own unstoppable golem."
—Stephen Asma, author of On Monsters: An Unnatural History of Our Worst Fears

"With deft, painter's prose she helps us discover what it is to be human when others see us as broken. In GOLEM GIRL, Riva Lehrer gives us the gift, at long last, of our own crip beauty."
—Nicola Griffith, author of Hild

"Oy, what a story: Job, eat your heart out! In Riva Lehrer’s life chronicle, an appalling fate (and I don't just mean the circumstances of her birth) gets visited upon an invincible character, and the result is a wincing-wise tale, by turns harrowing and hilarious, cut clean through with flecks of grace and beauty. Lehrer is one wry mensch, and an extraordinary kinstler to boot."
—Lawrence Weschler, author of Seeing is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees