The reluctant memoirist
Breaking the silence on deaf identity
Donna McDonald

She leaned across the picnic hamper, reaching out for my hearing aid in my open-palmed hand. I leaned back, batting her hand away from mine. The glare of the summer sun blinded me and I struck empty air. She was quick. Her tendrils-fingers seized the beige seashell curve of my hearing aid and she lifted the cargo of sound towards her eyes. She peered at the empty battery-cage, flicking it open and shut as if it was a cigarette lighter, as if she could spark hearing-life into this trick of plastic and metal that held no meaning outside of my ear. I shouted, ‘Don’t do that!’ Clenching my fist around the new battery I had been about to insert into my hearing aid, I imagined it speeding like a bullet towards her heart.

MY heart raced as if I’d been running for my life. I swung my legs around to the side of my bed and pulled myself upright into wakefulness. The back of my neck was damp with perspiration and I went to the bathroom to splash cold water onto my face. I saw in the mirror that the whites of my eyes were stained red; I had been crying in the dream. I rested my forehead on the cold enamel of the bathroom sink.

My hearing aids are personal. Intimate even. I hate people asking me questions about them and only answer such questions out of the long ingrained sense of duty drummed into me as a child by my mother. ‘Answer their questions. They are not being unkind. They are just interested, that’s all.’ But questions about my hearing aids by hearing people feel intrusive. I am fiercely protective of them and rarely entrust them into the care of others, not even my closest friends. I certainly don’t like other people touching my hearing aids. It is a shocking breach of intimacy, as if they are exploring my ears, using the tips of their fingers to trace the outline of the vacuum where sound should echo. I don’t even like people looking at them for any longer than passing curiosity warrants. The crude handling by the woman in the dream was nightmarish.

Still, the ferocity of my reaction shook me; it made me stop and wonder. The epiphany was swift to strike: this dream was the first time that I could recall being
deaf in my dreams. I was born deaf and have lived in apparent harmony with my deafness all my life and yet my dream-self has no consciousness of being deaf. In my dreams, I hear sounds and conduct conversations with ease.

Two nights later, my deaf-self asserted itself again. This time, I woke with a sense of marvel. My dream had taken me to a commemorative event at the Gladstone Road Oral Deaf School at Dutton Park which I attended in my early childhood. I was surrounded by my deaf friends, some of us speaking and some of us signing, but all of us chatting and laughing. My attention was distracted by the arrival of a newcomer. As he approached the group, I saw that it was a friend who is not deaf. I called out to him with joy, ‘Hello! What are you doing here?’ He smiled at me, ‘I wanted to see what your early life was like’ and, turning to greet my deaf friends, he signed his name, spelling it out letter by letter on his fingers with easy grace. His enthusiasm was infectious, and prompted my friends to cluster around him, keen to teach him new signs.

These two dreams arrived as I researched and wrote my memoir of deafness, *The Art of Being Deaf*. I had already been reflecting and writing for several years about my relationship with my deaf-self and the impact of my deafness on my life, but I remained uneasy about writing about my deaf-life. I had lived all my adult life apart from the deaf community; belatedly casting myself as a deaf woman with something pressing to say about deaf people’s lives felt absurd. The urgency to tell my story and my keenness to contest certain assumptions about deafness were real, but I was hampered by anxiety. I doubted my right to speak out. The dreams felt potent, as if my deaf-self was not only asserting itself but also awakening me to the subtlety of the dance between my private deaf-self and my public deaf-hearing persona.

LIKE MOST DEAF children, I was born into a hearing family and had little contact with deaf adults. My hearing parents wanted me to fit in with the broader hearing world, and to enjoy the same advantages of education, work and social opportunities they feared were not then available to deaf people. I was immersed as a little girl in five years of oral-deaf education in Brisbane from 1957 to 1962. On being transplanted as an eight year old child from a small special education school which only had deaf boys and girls to a large private school with a population of 1000 hearing girls – plus me as the exotic sprinkle of deafness in their brown uniformed midst – I was not thereafter exposed to the intimacies of deaf culture or the lessons of deaf history.

This had implications for how I came to regard myself – a ‘hearing deaf person.’ Issues of identity are at stake. How do little deaf children grow up into healthy adults? Comfortable in their deaf selves and competent in the hearing world? (I use the word *deaf* here by the lights of how I have understood that word ever since I first became aware of my own deafness as a child, drawing on both its audiological sense
and its social role, to include people whose hearingness is substantially less than what is understood to be normal or ideal; whose ability to participate in hearing-centred conversations is profoundly affected; who communicate either by Sign, or by speech, or by a combination of both; and whose sense of identity is likely to be shaped by the experiences arising from their inability to hear a range of sounds. My own deafness is rated as ‘moderate-severe, sloping to profound; unknown etiology’.

I came late to the task of exploring the implications of this severance from other deaf people in my life. On the cusp of my fiftieth birthday, I found myself reflecting on the impact of that long-ago decision made on my behalf by my parents. I was stirred by the Gemini-like duality within me – the deaf girl who is twin to the hearing persona I show to the world – to tell my story of deafness as precisely as I could. Before I could do this, I had to find that story because it was not as apparent to me as might be expected.

In an early published essay about my deaf childhood, ‘I Hear With My Eyes’ (Griffith REVIEW 11: Getting Smart) which was prompted by a psychologist asking me whether my deafness had had a big impact on my life, I wrote about my mother’s persistence in making sure that I learned to communicate by speaking rather than signing, the assumed communication strategy for most deaf people back in the 1950s. I crafted a selection of anecdotes, ranging in tone, I hoped, from sad to tender to laugh-out-loud funny. I speculated on the meaning of certain incidents in defining who I am and the successes I have enjoyed as a deaf woman in a hearing world. When I wrote this essay, I searched for what I wanted to say. I thought, by the end of it, that I was done with it. I was ready to move on, to write about other things. However, I was delayed by readers’ responses.

Some people who read my essay told me that they liked my candour. Others said that they were moved by it. Friends were curious and fascinated to get the inside story of my life as a deaf person as it had not been a topic of conversation or inquiry among us. They said they had learned something about what it means to be deaf. Many people expressed their relief and surprise, and parents of little deaf children cried on hearing me talk about the fullness of my life. Educators invited me to speak at parent education evenings because ‘to have an adult who has a hearing impairment and who has developed great spoken language and is able to communicate in the community at large – that would be a great encouragement and inspiration for our families’.

I was uncomfortable with these responses because I was not sure that I had been as honest or direct as I could have been. What lessons on being deaf had people absorbed by reading my essay and listening to my presentations? I did not set out to be duplicitous, but I may have embraced the writer’s aim for the neatly curved narrative arc at the cost of the flinty self-regarding eye and the uncertain conclusion.
LET ME START again. I was born deaf at a time, in the mid 1950s, when people still spoke of the ‘deaf-mute’ or the ‘deaf and dumb.’ I belonged to a category of children who attracted the gaze of the curious, the kind, and the cruel with mixed results. We were bombarded with questions we could either not hear and so could not answer, or that made us feel we were objects for exploration. We were the patronised beneficiaries of charitable picnics organised for ‘the disadvantaged and the handicapped.’ Occasionally, we were the subject of taunts, with the word ‘spastic’ being the insult du jour. I glossed over this muddled social response to deafness in my published essay. I cannot claim innocence as my defence. I knew I was glossing over it but I thought this was right and proper: after all, why stir up jagged memories?

The nature of readers’ responses provoked me into a deeper exploration of deafness. I was shocked by the intensity of so many parents’ grief and anxiety about their children’s deafness, and frustrated by the notion that I am an inspiration because I am deaf but oral. I wondered what this implied about my childhood deaf friends who may not speak orally as well as I do, but who enjoy fulfilling lives. I was stunned by the admission of a mother of a five year old deaf son who, despite not being able to speak, had not been taught how to Sign. She said, ‘Now that I’ve met you, I’m not so frightened of deaf people anymore.’ I was unnerved that so many parents of children newly diagnosed with deafness were grasping my words with the relief of people who had been given a liferaft of hope.

I could not understand why – some five decades after my mother experienced her own grief, bewilderment, anxiety and quest to forge a good life for her little deaf daughter – contemporary parents are still experiencing those very same fears and asking the same questions. Nor could I understand why parents still receive the news of their child’s deafness as a death sentence of sorts, the death of hope and prospects for their child, when the facts show – based on my own life experiences and observations of my deaf school friends’ lives – that far from being a death sentence, the diagnosis of deafness simply propels a child into a different life, not a lesser life. Evidently, a different sort of silence has been created over the years; not the silence of hearing loss but the silence of lost, unspoken stories.

I contributed to that silence. More than that, I authored it. For as long as I could remember, and certainly for all of my adult life, I had been deliberate in avoiding being tagged as ‘a deaf person.’ My silence about my deafness was my ‘story.’ Some of my silence was consistent with my desire not to shine the torch on myself in this way. I did not want to draw attention to myself by what I did not have, that is, less hearing than other people. I thought that if I lived my life as fully as possible in the world that includes both hearing and deaf people, and with as little fuss as possible, then my success in blending in would be eloquence enough. If I was going to attract attention, I wanted it to be on the basis of merit, on what I achieved. Others would
draw the conclusions that needed to be drawn, that is, that deaf people can take their place fully in the hearing world. My silence became a habit, and like so many enduring habits, it did not always sit comfortably with me; I felt that I was compromising myself in a way that I could not quite grasp.

I wondered whether written stories of deafness, memoirs and fiction, shape public perceptions or whether they simply respond to existing public perceptions of deafness. While writing The Art of Being Deaf, I read other people’s stories of deafness. I found, to my surprise, a substantial body of literature featuring deaf lives. The heritage of diverse and extensive deaf fiction (much of which is hallmarked by the role of a feisty or beautiful deaf heroine; fictional deaf men tend to be cast in unflattering lights), together with deaf memoirs, biographies, and life narratives acted as a prompt for my reflections upon my own deaf life and deaf self. In doing so, I answered my early musings about whether stories of deafness shape, or respond to, public perceptions. I found that they have the potential to do both: careless writing can reinforce stereotypes but thoughtful writing in any genre has the power to change attitudes. Certainly, my own attitudes about deafness changed. By reading other people’s stories of deafness and deaf people’s lives, I found that I became less judgemental of my own ‘deaf self’ and more open to the possibilities of relaxing my guard, of allowing other people into my private ‘deaf self.’

HAVING READ SEVERAL novels with deaf characters and memoirs by deaf writers, I wanted my own memoir of deafness to be crafted in a fresh way to shake stale perceptions of deafness and what it means to be deaf. This presented me with a narrative dilemma because my deafness is just one of several life-events by which I understand myself. I was also daunted by the prospects of breaching my own privacy as well as intruding upon the privacy of others. This was a troubling hurdle as I did not want my memoir to be an exercise in disability tourism for the curious but merely idle reader. I was mindful, too, of the ‘Catch-22’ involved in writing my memoir: my parents’ benchmark for my ‘success’ as a deaf woman was the extent to which I blended in with, and integrated into, the hearing world and yet, to answer questions about my deafness, I was required to elevate myself above the tidewater of anonymous integration. Given that personal privacy was being sacrificed, I wanted my memoir to matter, to grab the reader’s attention and give them pause to reflect, and perhaps even to provoke them into asking more questions that might bring about an improved understanding of the lives and needs of deaf people.

How was I to do this? I had observed that most memoirists seemed to write with the narrator’s voice of certainty. Their writing portrayed confidence in their knowledge of how certain events and circumstances affected their lives, giving their narratives the propulsive trajectory of the archer’s arrow – straight ahead with only a slight arc before landing in the bullseye of the summative conclusion. Whether
their confidence was deserved or flawed depended on the reader’s willingness to accept the memoirist’s version of events, but their trump card would always be, ‘It happened to me. I remember.’

Further, even allowing for the memoirist’s usual concession that memory deceives, most deaf memoirists seemed to derive their narrative certainty from their recollection of a time before their hearing loss. They remembered that time as their lost paradise of perfect hearing. Their memoirs came with the archetypal back story of happy times disrupted by the devastation of illness or other trauma bringing with it the carnage of hearing loss. Their narrative task was to convey their capacity to endure, conquer, achieve, and quell: to do whatever it took to overcome this terrible thing that had befallen them. I, on the other hand, have no such memory of hearing loss. My memory is not of hearing loss but of the work to be hearing-like. Unlike most deaf memoirists, I have no sense of being a prisoner of silence or any other such thing. So, when people tell me how well I have done in my life despite my deafness, I want to rail against the persistently held belief of others that my deafness has been my life’s burden. It has not.

Writing any memoir is like building a relief map of one’s life with hills, valleys and plateaus, with the rivers, creeks and lakes flowing through the eruptions in the earth. In my memoir of deafness, I bring to the foreground incidents associated with my being deaf as if they have been the consistently solid hills and valleys in my life. However, in my memoir of my grief following the death of my son, Jack – Jack’s Story (Allen & Unwin, 1991) – I did not mention the fact of my deafness at all. Not once. In the immediate aftermath of my son’s death, my grief consumed all my attention, and even now, over two decades later, it remains an attendant hum to my days. Evidently, there is a shakiness of perspective in memoir writing.

My memoir of grief also differs from my memoir of deafness in its impetus. This may seem self-evident given the respective topics but it has implications for the reader’s access to my emotions and ideas in both narratives. Jack’s Story is essentially a tidied up version of my daily journal entries over a period of almost two years. During this time, my emotions in all their turbulence were highly accessible to me and thus also to the reader. However, in The Art of Being Deaf, I had to work hard at remembering not just incidents but the emotions I attached to them at that time, while bringing forward those remembered emotions into the present day for the purpose of reflecting on, and interpreting, those incidents and emotions all over again. I discovered some of my memories were, in fact, rehearsed beliefs: I had embodied stories handed down to me from my mother or my siblings, and had come to regard them as the way I remembered a particular incident. Occasionally, this crack in the eggshell of memory distressed or angered me, but mostly, I experienced a relief of sorts. An ‘oh!’ moment. Remembering was a softening process for me; not a hardening or embittering one.
Right from the very start, I knew I would not frame my memoir as a ‘triumph over adversity’ narrative. I understand that my mother may regard me as her triumph because she established the foundations for my deaf-hearing life with all its opportunities according to her vision and hopes for me, but it does not follow that I therefore regard myself, or my life, as a triumph simply by dint of succeeding as a deaf woman in the hearing world. My life, like the lives of possibly most people, has been an accidental series of incidents, events, and efforts linked by long periods of tedium in which little or nothing seems to happen. Other than being deaf, my life has not been especially unusual. It has been pitted here with deep sadness, wrenched by serious illness, and lifted there with joy, but it has been mostly a plateau held stable by the grist of daily life.

Consequently, I did not want my memoir to carry any tones of being a trauma account (or ‘a pity-party!’ as a colleague so crisply warned). My opposition to this perspective arose for several reasons but the two main ones were as follows. Firstly, I understood my external experiences of deafness to have been largely a series of adaptations to specific incidents ranging from the hurtful and irritating to the difficult and outrageous, rather than an uninterrupted struggle against hardship. At the same time, my inner sense of myself as being deaf has been mostly sanguine. Secondly, the ‘triumph over adversity’ memoir usually starts with the premise that life was good until some terrible thing happened. The memoir then unfolds as a series of dire consequences and apparently insurmountable obstacles against which the heroic writer successfully battles. The memoirist’s character emerges as a survivor. In contrast, the narrative arc of my life has been (and, of course, continues to be) less apparent. My struggles have had less to do with the specific auditory detail of my deafness and more to do with the general questions of life that confront all of us.

Thus, the unfolding of my story is not about conquering battles, but about inviting the reader into my world to see what it feels and sounds like. The narrating ‘I’ character in my memoir unfolds as a searcher, and that search is not limited to understanding my deafness but extends to understanding the nature of my relationships with others, including the search for love. I was deliberate in weaving in this theme of love because as well as providing an additional source of the discord and conflict so necessary for engendering drama in narrative, the depiction of romantic love in the lives of people with a disability still seems to be startling to others. It struck me as a useful device for challenging ‘cultural ideas about the normal and the whole’.

IN WRITING MY memoir of deafness, I stand in line behind several other deaf people who have written about their lives in an effort to build a bridge across the hearing divide: Helen Keller; David Wright; Frances Warfield; Henry Kisor; Bernard Bragg; Bainy Cyrus; Hannah Merker; Christopher Heuer; Joseph Valente. The
variety and richness of our lives give the lie to the historic begging bowl image of the ‘poor deaf and dumb person’ or to the pathology-driven interpretations of deaf lives. While we may share certain experiences, our responses to those experiences are diverse and individual. The impulse to tell our stories – especially if we are seeking to correct the record of false impressions, misunderstandings, secrets and plain bunkum – is universal, but the gift of courage to attend to those stories, to really lean in close and grasp the lesson within, is rarer. Such courage requires patience, a quality not always in abundant supply by people who can hear unassisted when confronted by a deaf person with a broken voice or dancing hands. This might explain, in part, why there are relatively few memoirs written by deaf people. The frustration of not being attended to, free of the fog of stereotyping, and the hurt of being taken for a fool restrain the impulse to tell our stories.

I eventually shook off my own restraint in writing my memoir of deafness because I understood that by telling my story of deafness for public scrutiny, I was adding to the knowledge of deaf lives as told by deaf people, rather than as ‘explained’ by people who can hear. I was also adding to a sort of repository of images of deaf people. My memoir is not intended to be representative of deaf people’s lives: how can it be? I cannot experience the deafness (or hearingness, for that matter) of others, and I have struggled to understand the impact of my own deafness on my life, let alone other people’s deafness. Whatever the reader’s response to my memoir, it is important that this particular image of a deaf life is available, alongside the diversity of other deaf narratives, because otherwise how do we know who we are – or test who we can be – if we never see ourselves reflected in what is written?

Just as importantly, how do others understand us if our stories about deafness and what it means to be deaf are missing from what they read? How do hearing parents of deaf children navigate the course of their young children’s lives if they do not have an array of life stories from deaf adults from which to learn? From which to cherry pick this experience and reflect upon that insight, weaving them into their own instincts about the best thing to do for their children. Because most parents of deaf children (and even deaf children themselves) have little or no contact with deaf adults, they therefore have little understanding about how to navigate the territory before them.

My memoir only makes sense if it is read within the broader historical, social, and cultural contexts of my time. I am as much a product of a particular time – the second half of the twentieth century and the first quarter of the twenty-first century, with all their upheavals and advances in technology and global politics – as I am of my parents’ private hopes and my own personal efforts.

The act of writing my story of deafness has changed not only my relationship with myself, in all my hearing-deaf self certainties and subtleties, but has also
changed my relationships with others. Researching the impact of my deafness on my life, my family, and my friendships has led me down several paths of self-pity, anguish and anger but in the end, the final destination has been clarity. I feel more confident about asserting my connectedness to my deaf self, and I aim to wield this new confidence as a tool for advancing the educational and employment opportunities of deaf people.

Donna McDonald lectures in disability studies at Griffith University. Her publications include Jack’s Story (Allen & Unwin, 2001) and ‘I Hear with My Eyes’ which appeared in Griffith REVIEW 11: Getting Smart. Her most recent project is a memoir, ‘The Art of Being Deaf’.

References