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NOT SILENT, INVISIBLE

Not Silent, Invisible: Literature's Chance Encounters With Deaf Heroes And
Heroines

Donna M McDonald

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Literature is both a rich resource and a blunt instrument in conveying the complexities of identity, in particular, the elusive *deaf identity*. The rarity of the fully realised deaf person in memoir and fiction shapes the way readers regard deaf people and throws up fresh challenges in redesigning stories of deafness free of the taint of triumphalism or complaint. Competing but authentic representations of deafness and deaf people's experiences allow the reader to variously witness, immerse themselves in, and navigate their way through those experiences. Consequently, establishing universal truths about deaf lives is a risky business and an improbable goal.

Introduction: Self Disclosure

How do we learn what we know about deafness? I once asked a group of twenty parents about their experiences of deafness prior to discovering their children were deaf. Only three people offered up anecdotes. One person recalled seeing a movie with a deaf boy in it but she could not remember what the movie was about. After some debate, the group speculated that it was *Mr Holland's Opus*, the story of a music teacher whose son is deaf; no-one in the group had seen *Children of a Lesser God*, the 1986 film based on Mark Medoff's play and starring Marlee Matlin, the deaf actor of television's *West Wing* fame. Another parent said that she had worked in an office with a deaf colleague and a third parent said that she had had an unrequited teenage crush on a deaf boy at her school. No-one could recall reading any books which told positive stories of deafness. All the parents in the group agreed that their experiences of deaf people had been slight and, in fact, they continued to be exceptional rather than regular. In nodding their assent, they seemed to consider that this near-absence, almost-invisibility, of deaf people in their world was a significant reason for their lack of knowledge of deafness and deaf people's lives.

Despite their own children being deaf, they did not routinely witness the lives of other deaf people and nor did they seek out, either for themselves or for their children, documented stories, fiction or biographical, of deaf people's lives. They continued to rely on the accidental brush with a deaf adult, their children's school environment, and conversations with other parents as their main sources of guidance, knowledge and hopes about their deaf child's prospects. They were startled when I said, "Me neither. I don't routinely encounter deaf people. I don't know much about deafness either." Just because I

was born deaf and was immersed as a little girl in five years of oral deaf education, this does not give me a passport into understanding deafness in general or my deaf self in particular. On being transplanted from the deaf school to a regular school as an eight-year old girl in grade three, I was not thereafter exposed to the intimacies of deaf culture or the lessons of deaf history. I am only now exploring the implications of this absence of other deaf people's stories from my life.

In undertaking my task, I use the word *deaf* by the lights of how I have understood that word ever since I first became aware of my own deafness as a child; that is, it is a state of hearingness which is substantially less than what is understood to be normal hearing. Because I was born deaf ("moderate-severe, sloping to profound, unknown aetiology" according to a recent audiology assessment), I define my deafness not as a loss but as an experience. Old as the angels, it is an essential part of my sense of I-am-who-I-am. At the same time, I do not identify myself as a member of the deaf community, upper or lower case. If all this sounds oblique or unnecessarily cagey, this is as I intend it to be, because nor do I subscribe to the notion of the fixed deaf identity. Rather, my sense of deaf self expands and contracts in tune with the erratic rhythms of my life's trajectory.

Re-Imagining Stories: What if Estella or Jane Eyre Had Been Deaf?

Most people are more likely to form their ideas about disability from books and films than from policies and personal interactions (Mitchell & Snyder, 2000, p. 166). Certainly, I am a reader and draw much inspiration from books; when I was a child reading English adventure stories and Greek fables, I imagined that I would be a librarian when I grew up

so that I could read all day and into the night. My teenage day-dreams were full of Catherine and Heathcliffe, Pip and Estella, Jane Eyre and Mr Rochester. My reading choices in my adult years have taken in English crime fiction, Russian family sagas, American court-room dramas, Australian novels invoking colonial landscapes and urban angst, and yet for all this diversity, I cannot recall a single chance encounter with a deaf hero or heroine. That absence cannot be explained away by the optimistic hope that perhaps in all those novels deafness is seamlessly integrated into the story. No; deaf people were either simply not present, or they held fleetingly minor roles, usually as narrative symbols.

While I did not notice this absence until recently, presumably because I was not looking for it, I am now intrigued by it. Even if we read only for entertainment and escape, we occasionally pause during our encounters with narrative characters to wonder how we would react, feel, or cope in this or that situation. If authentic stories of deaf people are routinely missing from the literature—memoir, biography and fiction—does that absence have a constraining effect on the imagined possibilities for deaf people by readers, both deaf and hearing? Couser puzzles over this too when he writes “life writing can play a significant role in changing public attitudes about deafness” (Couser, 1997, p. 221) but then later asks “to what degree and how do the extant narratives of deafness rewrite the discourse of disability? Indeed, to what degree and how do they manage to represent the experience of deafness at all?” (Couser, 1997, p. 225)

I have taken up Couser’s puzzle by examining how stories of deafness and deaf people are told in fiction and memoir. However, unlike Couser, my aim in this essay is not to either validate, dispute or interrogate the narrator’s accomplishment in establishing

an authentic sense of deaf self, a deaf identity. (In fact as I discuss later, I take issue with Couser's approach; he oversteps the mark). Instead, I want to demonstrate how competing perspectives of deafness and deaf people's lives are shaped not only by the narrator's temporal place in social and cultural history, but also by the narrator's position in the story as either a hearing witness to a deaf person's life (providing a subjective or objective appraisal), or as an immersed participant in the deaf experience (i.e., the insider's view), or as an objective, omnipotent (and apparently auditory-neutral) navigator guiding the reader through certain personal, social, cultural and educational features of a deaf life. I share my own sense of discovery with all its chaotic elements of discomfort, joy, anticipation, fear, delight, confusion, and nostalgia amidst the consolations of camaraderie in seeing glimpses of my deaf self—both as I perceive myself to be and as I would like to be—in other people's stories.

My aim is to show how literature is both a rich resource and a blunt instrument in conveying the complexities of identity, in particular, the elusive deaf identity. Just as knowledge is not absolute, so is identity mutable, fluctuating over time and in response to context and circumstance. The corollary for educators is simple: it is a risky business to extrapolate from the faceless expert knowledge of deafness to the individual child standing before you in the classroom.

Gestures: Deafness in Fiction

So we arrive, at last at the pulse and purpose of literature: to reject the blur of the “universal”; to distinguish one life from another; to illumine diversity; to light up the least grain of being, to show who it is concretely individual, particularised

from any other . . . Literature is the recognition of the particular. (Ozick, 1983, p. 248).

But not, apparently, if the characters are deaf. Deaf characters in fiction have historically been used as generic symbols for something else rather than as fully realised expressions of their individual selves. They were rarely allowed to take their place in the story without having to perform a symbolic task such as alienation or source of special knowledge, laden with stereotyping constructs of pity and crude assumptions about deafness (e.g. *deaf and dumb*), in addition to their usually minor narrative role. (Miller, 1992 & Krentz, 2007). Literature is also saddled with narratively flawed attempts by hearing writers to imagine the deaf experience, for example, deaf detectives who do not need sign language interpreters (Mitchell and Snyder, 2000).

Two anthologies, Trent Batson and Eugene Bergman's *Angels and Outcasts* (1985) and Brian Grant's *The Quiet Ear: Deafness in Literature* (1987), contribute substantially to our understanding of how deafness has historically been portrayed in fiction and memoir. However, this is not to be confused with improving our understanding of the breadth of personal experiences of deafness as the anthologies are the products of the editors' world views of hearing loss and deaf identity politics respectively. Brian Grant was partially deafened as a result of injury during his service in World War Two, and so his anthology is shaped by his own sense of loss, leading him to introduce many of his excerpts with emotive words about the *suffering* of deaf people. In contrast, Batson and Bergman, former Gallaudet University academics, are aggressive in their editorial approach, stripping their motivation of all sentiment and claiming that the anthology makes it "possible to know much about the attitudes in the western world toward deaf people, and how these attitudes have changed." (Batson &

Bergman, 1985, p.ix) They also take the opportunity throughout their commentary to advance the cause of American Sign Language.

The theme of loss is the shadow in most of the fictional representations of deafness and deaf people by the hearing writers in Grant's anthology. Many of the stories are bleak, tragic, dour or comedic in a slap-stick sort of a way, playing to culturally perceived stereotypes of deafness, for example, the excerpt from CP Snow's *Last Things* includes this observation, "Often she wore the expression, at the same time puzzled, obstinate, and protesting that one saw in the chronically deaf." (Grant, 1987, p. 143). Some of the images of the isolated deaf outcast are confronting, for example, Alfred de Musset's story, *Pierre and Camille*, a "classic of the fictional treatment of deafness" (Grant, 1987, p. 98), is set in France in 1760 "when so many prejudices were destroyed and replaced, there existed a most pitiless one against the poor creatures known as deaf-mutes . . . They inspired more horror than pity." (Grant, 1987, p. 96). Similarly, the excerpt from Carson McCullers's novel, *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, tells a dark and morbid tale of Singer who is deaf and his friend, Antonapoulos, also deaf and "mentally deranged," (Grant, 1987, p. 146) who is committed to an asylum in a distant town. Few of the fictional excerpts in the anthology ring with jubilation or exuberance. Charles Dickens' approach to writing about deafness provides the exceptions which prove the rule, for example, in *Great Expectations*, Pip meets the elderly and deaf, but cheerful father of Wemmick, Mr Jaggers's clerk. Wemmick is also jocular and practical in his interactions with his deaf father.

These fictional representations of deafness also seem to lack mindfulness that their reading audience potentially includes deaf people. The dismissive asides, jarring humour, and gossipy tone assume a posture of authorised finger-pointing and staring at the deaf person.

While everyone knows it is rude to stare at deaf people when they are signing to each other, and it is uncharitable to speak unkindly about deafness, these conventions are not observed when writing about deafness. If anything, the conventions are over-turned, presumably in the writer's pursuit of a compelling story.

Three contemporary novels, *An Equal Music* by Vikram Seth (1999), *Deafening* by Frances Itani (2003), and *Talk Talk* by TC Boyle (2006) provide fresh approaches in their representations of deaf people. Their competing perspectives of deafness are shaped by their thematic concerns—music, deaf history and identity—and they position the reader to respectively witness, be immersed in, and navigate experiences of deafness.

Vikram Seth's novel, *An Equal Music*, is a love story about two concert musicians, Michael and Julia, set in present-day England. Unbeknown to Michael, Julia has recently lost her hearing and is still adapting to her loss. In most fictional stories featuring deafness and deaf people, the reader sees the life of the deaf character through the perceptions and experiences of the hearing narrator. And so it is in Seth's novel; the reader discovers the implications of Julia's deafness by witnessing Michael's grief laden reactions and other people's responses to her different hearingness. Seth uses music—and its nemesis, deafness—to explore sound and silence, including their roles in the rise and fall of relationships and their capacities to transmit emotion. He describes the rhythms and cadences of the music being played throughout the novel's story-line, thus forcing the reader to hear the music in their mind's ear while simultaneously imagining what it would be like *not* to hear that music in real life. In this way, Seth provides an empathetic insight into contemporary responses to hearing loss while exploring people's relationships and the world of music. In his evocation of Julia's hearing loss, Seth's focus is not so much on the grief of loss, the usual narrative associated with

deafness, but more on Julia's pragmatic response to her loss. The tragic narrative element in this novel is not Julia's deafness: instead, it is the ill-fated love between Julia and Michael. However, when Michael wonders about his place in Julia's life, he also raises the spectre of the role of sound in all its communicative power—and by implication, the desolation of silence—in forging and sustaining the bonds of love between two people.

In contrast, Frances Itani's novel, *Deafening*, draws the reader into the deaf experience through the narrative device of the deaf heroine's interior monologue supported by an omnipotent narrator's observations of other people's responses to her deafness. In this way, the reader is immersed in Grania's preoccupation with her deaf self and social isolation. By setting the love story of Jim and Grania during World War 1 against the imaginative sound-tracks of the gun-fire of the war in Europe and the quiet of small town life in Canada, Itani also provides a fictionalised but authentic social history of the attitudes towards deafness and the education of deaf people at the turn of the twentieth century. Itani's evocation of a deaf life is obsessively melancholy but her observations of the things that make life different for a deaf person are authoritative. She tells the story of Grania's hearing loss through illness, the varied reactions of parental grief and sibling pragmatism to Grania's deafness, the dilemmas of speech, lipreading and signing, the sounds of deaf people's voices, the physicality and sensuality of the hand flourishes of signed communication, the bitter historic debates about oral education versus signed education, the occasionally cruel but mostly awkward social responses to deafness, the closeness of deaf friendships, and the impact of deafness on family relationships. Unlike Seth's *An Equal Music* in which Julia's deafness is portrayed as just one element of her personality and in which her deafness only affects certain areas of her life, such as her music career, Itani portrays Grania's deafness as an all-consuming shaper of her personality, a shadow which falls

across her whole life. This has the effect of cannibalising Grania; without her deafness, she would be an empty vessel.

Changing tack from both these perspectives, T.C. Boyle's adventure novel, *Talk Talk*, uses the crime of identity-theft to navigate the reader through issues of identity-formation, not only for the deaf heroine but for all the major characters in his novel. When the heroine, Dana Halter, who lost her hearing as a child, discovers that she is the victim of credit-card identity theft, she pursues the thief, Peck Wilson, across North America with her boyfriend, Bridger. Dana's deafness is independent of the unfolding drama; thus, Boyle meets the narrative challenge identified by Lennard Davis that "when characters have disabilities, the novel is usually exclusively about those qualities. Yet the disabled character is never of importance to himself or herself." (2002, p. 45). In *Talk Talk*, the reader is drawn into a plot driven by the crime of identity-theft, rather than by the impact of deafness on people's lives. Nevertheless, throughout this adventure, the reader learns about Dana's deaf-life, the impact of her deafness on relationships, deaf politics including the contemporary politics of Sign language versus oral speech, hearing technology such as cochlear implants, and the implications of these for Dana's sense of self. T.C. Boyle's treatment of all this material is more nuanced than this list might suggest. In particular, he captures the paradox of the occasional fragility of Dana's integration of her deaf self into her generally exuberant personality. By navigating the reader through Dana's own navigation of her deaf self in her hearing world, Boyle adds a textural layer to his exploration of identity in general. In the end, Dana's strongly forged sense of self wins out in her pursuit of the thief who has constructed his identity around other people's credit cards.

Different readers will, of course, have different responses to these three novels (and the historical examples of fictional representations of deafness and deaf lives). Indeed, my own responses vary each time I re-read them. My most consistent response to Vikram Seth's novel is to marvel gratefully at his respectful representation of Julia's hearing loss. My emotions towards Frances Itani's novel are more complex; I feel resentful, angry, embarrassed, and sullen because I do not want *this* to be the story of deafness that is told today. At the same time, Itani's novel provides me with a historical perspective that I did not otherwise have, helping me to grasp the distance travelled in deaf education and opportunities since the turn of the 20th century and the distance that has yet to be travelled. Boyle's novel with his feisty, independent-minded deaf heroine inspires me to *be* Dana. But my most telling response to all three novels as a reader who is deaf is the frisson of recognition; I see my deaf experiences reflected to a lesser or greater degree in each of these stories.

What does all this mean for educators? As I am not a teacher and have no experience in curriculum design, I asked a friend, who *is* a teacher for her advice. She responded with the incisive insight that is the privilege of English literature teachers by quoting C.S. Lewis: "Literature adds to reality, it does not simply describe it. It enriches the necessary competencies that daily life requires and provides." (source unknown). So, having staked my claim earlier in this essay that it is risky to draw universal generalisations from individual experiences, I must now defy my own advice. The inclusion on the reading curricula of all students, hearing and deaf, of at least some novels which foreground the experiences of deaf people would be a valuable step towards guiding readers to an empathetic understanding of the complexities of deaf lives. While a disability literary discourse might be too advanced for the school classrooms, it would be

a creative way of engaging student teachers and educators in examinations of disability and culture, outside the usual (and somewhat dry) theoretical and policy frameworks.

Voices: Deafness in Memoir

I turn now to consider the rise of the deaf memoir. As I have noted, early literary representations of deafness were dominated by hearing writers who inevitably brought their own fears, assumptions, and coping strategies ranging from comedy to sorrow into their interpretations of deaf people's lives. This helps to explain the potency of the early-to-mid twentieth century memoirs by Helen Keller, *The Story of My Life* (1903), Frances Warfield, *Cotton in My Ears* (1948) and *Keep Listening* (1957), and David Wright, *An Account of Deafness* (1969). They were not only among the first personal insider-stories of deafness (and blindness in Keller's case), but they also held out success stories of integration into the hearing world—regarded by most hearing people as the ultimate quest of deaf people—through triumph over adversity and conversion through cure. Keller, an American writer and scholar, became such a world-renowned celebrity that she battled against the image of herself as a human hybrid of freak and angel (Keller, 2003. p. vii); Wright, a South African poet, wrote of his quest to dominate his deafness rather than allow it to dominate him; and Warfield, also an American journalist, regained her hearing through surgery.

And yet in the final decade of the twentieth century, Henry Kisor was still able to observe in his memoir account of his successful life and career as an American journalist, *What's That Pig Outdoors?*, “there isn't a large body of literature about the deaf by the deaf” (1990, p. 3). Seven years later, G. Thomas Couser wrote “this should not be surprising, for a number of factors militate against deaf autobiography . . . making them

unlikely and rare entities.” (1997, p. 226). In 2008, Gallaudet University Press had a catalogue of just seven memoirs in its *Deaf Lives Series*, and listed thirteen autobiographies. A longer bibliography of 42 autobiographies and memoirs of deafness and hearing loss was prepared in 2000 by J. K. Aronson. Both the catalogue and bibliography comprise books which are mostly written by people who have lost their hearing following an illness or trauma but after acquiring language, or by a parent or sibling of a child with a hearing loss, or by the hearing son/daughter of deaf parents. Sightings of the pre-lingually deaf memoirist are as rare as Aspley Cherry-Garrard’s penguin’s egg. Couser (1997, p. 283) warns that “the number of [published deaf] narratives is still so small that each new text is in danger of being taken as more representative than it could be.”

The issue of representation is important because not only is each individual’s experience of deafness unique, but it is also so shaped “by all the other forces operating on a person’s life that, if one were to remove these other forces and components, the experience of deafness alone would be that of a vacuum” (Heuer, 2007, p. 199). With this observation, Heuer provides the necessary corrective to those analyses of disability narratives which attempt to understand people’s lives exclusively through the lens of their particular disability, as if nothing else in their lives had any meaning, influence, significance or touch upon the way their lives panned out. The image of disability in literature is so symbolically powerful that it can over-ride everything else, even to the extent of trapping the autobiographical writers themselves into configuring their life stories within the enclosed box of their disability. *Being deaf* is particularly prone to being fixed to the page by the stiff pin of a one dimensional identity.

In his essay, “Signs of Life”, a discussion of contemporary deafness narratives and their place within the genre of disability discourses, Couser (1997, p. 6) observes that “Some groups of individuals . . . find powerful cultural obstacles to life writing.” He claims that the “Deaf community does not offer much cultural sanction for autobiography, and literacy in English tends to be low”. He notes that people with a disability or illness often have to contend with “pervasive cultural discourses” (p. 31) from which they must reclaim their life story, even while he himself approaches deaf narratives as a question of defining the deaf identity, thus undermining his stated concern about those “pervasive cultural discourses”. Georgina Kleege raises another issue when, after acknowledging that “Autobiographies written by people with disabilities offer readers a glimpse into lives at the margins of mainstream culture, and thus can make disability seem less alien and frightening,” she asks whether “these texts [are] agents for social change or merely another form of freak show?” (Kleege, 2008).

Although Couser points out the difficulty of autobiography in providing deaf people complete control over their self-presentation, he is complicit in this difficulty by imposing his hearing judgments on the deafness narratives in his analysis. A glaring example of this occurs when he writes, “The *desire* [my emphasis] of some deaf individuals to pass as hard of hearing, if not as hearing, suggests the continuing power of the stigma attached to deafness . . .” (Couser, 1997, p. 224). Without disputing the power of stigma, I take exception with Couser’s attribution of *passing as hearing* as the deaf person’s deliberate desire to hide their deafness when what is more likely to be the case (and it is so for me) is that most deaf people just do not go about their daily lives thinking about their deafness 24/7. (Krentz (2007) provides a more thoughtful,

historically-determined analysis of the concept of passing). Couser also misses the irony of his admission that “deaf children are apparently damned if they do and damned if they don’t try to talk”, (Couser, 1997, p. 245) when he himself has a pathological script available to fit whatever choice the deaf and hearing-impaired memoirists make—denial, avoidance, faking, romanticising, minimising but never the possibility of successfully integrating the deaf self and hearing-orientation elements of their personality.

Such a critical streak is not unusual as Corker records in one of her client-narratives, “when I try to explain what my experience is, it is always disputed, it is never good enough for the [hearing] person who is on the receiving end of the explanation” (Corker, 1996, p. 108). Perhaps you have to be deaf to feel this particular sting, but there must be a space in which individual deaf people can write autobiographically and “gain recognition, acceptance and affirmation of deafness, without assumptions about ‘deaf identity’ as the main driving force in their lives” (Corker, 1996, p. 61).

At the same time, deaf people cannot afford to be overly sensitive about this. If assumptions are to be shattered, they must be shattered by deaf people themselves; hearing people cannot take on the task, missionary-like, on their behalf. Deaf people must persist in their efforts to tell, write, show, illustrate, film and construct their stories in whatever medium they can apply for whatever audience they can find. The educators’ task is to raise—and hold—the bar of educational expectations high, equipping their deaf students with the literacy skills across all media to step up to the plate, ready or not.

Disruptions: Telling Fresh Stories

In telling fresh stories of deafness and deaf people, novelists and memoirists must keep up with the times, injecting their stories with respect for contemporary cultural understandings about disability, deafness and identity-wars if they are “to disrupt patterns of perception familiar to the reader” (Fisher Fishkin, 1990, p. 133). This is a daunting challenge as demonstrated by comparing Hannah Merker’s book of essays, *Listening* (2000) and Bainy Cyrus’s extended essay-memoir, “All Eyes,” (2006), with David Lodge’s autobiographical novel, *Deaf Sentence* (2008).

Hannah Merker’s book, *Listening*, is not strictly a memoir as “that is another book” (Merker, 2000, p. 201). Instead, in her quest to understand the mystery of silence, she has crafted her essays as meditative explorations of listening drawn from her memories of sound. Merker’s book is shaped by her theme that “the world becomes larger as the mind reawakens to the soaring symphony of everyday life.” (Merker, 2000, p. 2). She signals her anthropomorphic approach to sound on the first page: “The silence around me is invisible.” (Merker, 2000, p. 1). By describing it as an entity which cannot be seen, she makes silence a character in her story, and uses the artist’s skill of perceiving negative space to describe what she hears now, in the place of what she heard before. It is a poetic and unusual approach; inevitably, Merker does not succeed in disguising her longing for the return of her former world of sound despite her attempts to reconcile with her loss. Still, her book is rewarding because by describing what emerges for her when she listens with *all* her senses, including her senses of memory and imagination, Merker inverts the usual story of hearing loss to make it a story of listening-gain.

Bainy Cyrus's extended essay-memoir, "All Eyes," is one of three essays by deaf women in an anthology with the eponymous title *Deaf Women's Lives. Three Self Portraits* (2006). Her essay is deceptively simple because of its linear, autobiographical approach and informative tone of voice apparently free of doubt. A statement about the potency of influences in the first few years of any child's life, Cyrus's essay also emphasises the role of her predominantly oral-deaf education during the 1960s and 1970s in determining the quality of her life. Her discussion of the oralism versus signing debate is restrained and compassionate, providing guidance to anyone trying to find her own response to it. In telling her life-story, Cyrus is empathetic about the impact of her deafness on her family and on her friendships, placing any hardships that she experienced within the social and historical context of her times. Her description of the changing nature of her friendships with her deaf friends draws particular attention. As they grew away from their shared childhoods of an exclusively deaf world towards adult lives which straddled different worlds, they renegotiated their friendships with each other. Towards the end of her essay, she implies that the apparent absence of doubt in her story may have been hard-won: "The more I learned [about deafness], the more I appreciated my own life as a deaf person. I was finally at ease with my disability." (Cyrus, 2006, p. 90). An essay free of self pity and triumphalism, Bainy Cyrus's clear-as-a-bell honesty increases her authority; she has the reader leaning into the page to learn more.

Despite his authorial reputation, David Lodge's 2008 autobiographical novel, *Deaf Sentence*, fails to "disrupt patterns of perceptions" (Fisher Fishkin, 1990, p. 133) because the novel's narrator, Professor Desmond Bates, adopts an unrelieved stale and grumpy old man approach in his reflections on his age-related deafness. As foreshadowed

by the novel's title, he plays a one-note song of self-pity as he tells his story of his deteriorating hearing, yielding only once or twice to sardonic doubts about the authenticity of his reflections: "I was almost persuaded by my own story, moved by the pathos of my imagined plight" (151). Given that David Lodge himself is losing his hearing and reported in *The Sunday Times* on 20 April 2008 that he wrote this novel as a means of exploring the implications of that loss, the staleness of the deaf narrator's reflections is all the more surprising. It is certainly a missed opportunity for a deeper personal story of deafness, albeit fictionalised, instead of serving up the old plight story of hearing loss under the guise of comic satire. Lodge's tin ear is particularly disappointing because his novel seems so incognisant of his writing predecessors—hearing and deaf, novelists, and memoirists.

Conclusion: The Art of Being Deaf

What does it matter that we've taught this girl to read and write and to spell, and to do all the things that we think are essential, if no one along the line taught her the sacredness of being alive and taught her the dignity and the wonder of her own personal self worth? (Leo Buscaglia)

All of us, educators and scholars, can learn about the diversity of life in general and deaf experiences in particular when we read authentic, well-crafted novels and memoirs by hearing or deaf writers. By reading competing representations of deaf people and deafness, we are alerted to the shifting nuances of deaf identity and are cautioned against the comforts of a standard tool-kit of deaf knowledge.

On a more personal note, reading deaf fiction and memoirs together with a range of disability literary analyses is proving to be an unexpectedly companionable, if late-in-life, joy

for me. Other deaf writers' recollections are stirring into fresh life my buried memories, and together with the literary analysts, they are challenging me to re-imagine them so that I can examine my responses to those experiences more contemplatively and less reactively than I might have done originally. Having belatedly found these deaf writers and their stories, I do not want them to be lost to other readers, and am incorporating references to them in my work-in-progress memoir of a deaf life, *The Art of Being Deaf*.

In the light of my late-arriving experiences, I encourage educators to introduce all students to those life's lessons embedded in the world of memoirs by deaf writers and fiction inhabited by deaf characters. In raising high the bar of educational and literacy attainment for all educators and students—both deaf and hearing—it would be useful to include deaf history as well as novels, memoirs, plays and poetry by and about deaf people in the school literature curriculum (while being mindful that deaf history is not confined to the history of the signing deaf community). And let us not stop at school; expand and promote disability literary courses in tertiary institutions to create new audiences for conversations about deafness, disability, and culture. This would also extend the interdisciplinary framework for understanding the experiences of deaf people beyond the current educational, sociological/health-medical fields.

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