

# Deaf Culture Values Through Children's Fiction

By Jean F. Andrews

Stories powerfully project the values and belief systems of the author. When writing about deaf characters, it is common for hearing authors to pity and pathologize them. Or at the opposite extreme, the fictional deaf characters become individuals with superhuman skills either in lip-reading abilities or visual ability; these extraordinary qualities are meant to compensate for hearing loss (Andrews, Leigh, & Weiner, 2004). Deaf characters are seldom cast within the Deaf culture, in part because many hearing authors do not know about it. In this paper, I critically analyze children's literature with deaf characters from a Deaf culture perspective and provide a bibliography of books both recommended and not recommended. [Author's note: We use the convention of big "D" Deaf to mean members of the Deaf culture or community. The little "d" deaf signifies a person with hearing loss who does not necessarily embrace the values of the Deaf culture.]

Authors typically juxtapose a weak deaf character with a hearing character who acts in a hero's role. In contrast to this hearing character, deaf characters are created caricature-like in the abstract (Batson & Bergman, 1976). Authors overlook or barely touch on the everyday lives of Deaf individuals, which include positive features of Deaf culture such as the

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use of American Sign Language (ASL). Furthermore, authors rarely mention the supportive networks available to deaf people that prevent the social isolation that our hearing culture imposes. Such cohesive group memberships include Deaf sports, clubs, residential schools, churches, and the various social, literacy, and cultural organizations that deaf people typically join and that become important parts of their social and emotional lives. In hearing authors' quest to normalize and assimilate deaf people into a hearing world, they often provide a major disservice to deaf children and their families by promulgating myths and negative stereotypes about hearing loss. These attitudinal, physical, and social barriers erected by hearing society are the real villains in a deaf person's life—not the physical aspect of deafness. When society removes these physical barriers by providing sign language interpreting, television captioning, and other visual assistive devices, deaf people enjoy equal access to information. Deaf people want hearing society to

recognize and respect their culture. Such values and beliefs as these are rarely described in children's literature.

The lack of children's literature that included Deaf culture for deaf children propelled me to write *The Flying Fingers Club*, a series for young readers from ages nine to twelve. Doing this I faced the challenge of trying to appeal to a variety of audiences—hearing and deaf.

When I was a reading teacher in middle school at the Maryland School for the Deaf, in Frederick, Maryland, I discovered that the deaf children loved to tell me stories about their experiences. Most of children's books written with deaf characters dealt with the loss of hearing as a tragic event. Deaf students in my junior high class and in the university where I now teach did not perceive their hearing loss as a loss, especially those students who were born deaf. Most celebrate their deafness as a cultural diversity. I wanted to write children's books that reflected these Deaf cultural values. I wanted to focus on deaf children's real lives and potential as individuals, not as persons who just "couldn't hear." I knew that for many of my readers, the notion of Deaf people having their own culture may have been a new idea (Batson & Bergman, 1976; Andrews, Leigh, & Weiner, 2004).

Deaf people live in a larger multicultural society, but they consider themselves a unique cultural group. While hearing loss affects more than 28 million Americans, there is a group of Deaf people, approximately 2 million in number, who consider themselves part of a Deaf culture. Deaf people can be of any race or ethnicity, age, occupation, or educational level and use a variety of communication methodologies, including signing or speech or a combination of these (Andrews, Leigh, & Weiner, 2004). Unfamiliar to many multicultural communities, the Deaf community has its own beliefs, values, heritage, and traditions. It is a culture based on the use of vision, the recognition and use of American Sign Language (ASL), and shared experiences of being deaf within a hearing society (Andrews, Leigh, & Weiner, 2004). While they may wear a hearing aid and use their speech skills as secondary supports for communication, Deaf people prefer to use a sign language. Deaf people are satisfied with being deaf, enjoy their deaf friends and organizations, and typically do not want to be hearing.

Few books are written about prelingually deaf children. Most are written with deaf characters who lose their hearing in early childhood or as teens. Authors, then, typically approach deafness from a medical or pathological view. This view focuses on what the deaf child cannot do and aims to "fix" or "cure" the deafness through medicine, surgery, or rehabilitation. Authors aim to normalize deaf children into

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the hearing world. Such characters are shallow and one-dimensional.

The notion to normalize the deaf found in children’s literature is also deeply ingrained in society’s institutions. But today there is a trend in Deaf education to provide deaf children with a bilingual and bicultural background so they grow up to be proficient in two languages, American Sign Language (ASL) and English, and comfortable in both cultures—Deaf and hearing (Andrews, 2002).

Unbeknownst to many, the Deaf culture is transmitted through different avenues from hearing cultures. It is not passed down from parent to child, but spread from Deaf adults or Deaf peers to the Deaf child. Deaf cultural values include the use of American Sign Language (ASL), attending a state residential school for the deaf, developing a Deaf identity and Deaf pride, having Deaf teachers as role models, understanding and appreciating Deaf art and Deaf history. Deaf people have their own literature, stories, jokes, poetry, and folklore. Most importantly, Deaf people are bound together by shared experiences of coping within a hearing world (Andrews, 2002; Andrews, Leigh, & Weiner, 2004).

I discuss children’s literature with deaf characters around seven themes important to Deaf culture: American Sign Language (ASL), Deaf-hearing relationships, state residential schools for the deaf, attitudes toward speech and lipreading, intelligence, the Deaf identity, and technology.

### **American Sign Language**

ASL, the cherished language of the Deaf community, is a defining feature. ASL is a language of power and beauty. It can be whimsical, as in the drawing of the deaf artist Chuck Baird. In his brilliant painting “Cetacean Blue,” a fish and whales play in the ocean. Two hands on the water surface form the signs for “fish” and “whale” (Baird, 1993). Or ASL can be a nightmare, as in the powerful drawing of “Ameslan Prohibited.” Ameslan is a shortened form of “American Sign Language.” Betty Miller’s horrific drawing shows shackled hands in iron chains. The fingers on the hands have broken-off fingertips (Miller, 1972).

But as all living language, ASL evokes a variety of feelings. It is a unique language with its own grammar and vocabulary, unlike English or any other spoken language. Contrary to popular myth, sign language is not universal. Every country has its own indigenous sign language, bound to the culture of its people (Valli & Lucas, 2000).

But ASL has a sad history of suppression. In the nineteenth century, when hearing professionals attempted to eradicate and forbid the use of ASL, the National Association of the Deaf (the world’s largest advocacy organization by and for Deaf people) initiated a campaign to preserve ASL through home movies (Lane, Hoffmeister, & Bahan, 1996).

In today’s multicultural and multilingual society, we have more enlightened views of ASL. Major academic university

now offer degrees in ASL linguistics. ASL has even become part of popular culture with movies and plays such as *Children of a Lesser God*, and the appearance of Linda Bove on *Sesame Street*. It is taught in many public schools as a foreign language option and has been advocated for young hearing children to enhance overall reading and language arts skills (Acredolo & Goodwyn, 1994).

Despite these changes, parents often have a difficult time accepting sign language for their deaf child. Such rejection represents a form of denial of the child’s deafness. Take, for example, Susan Shreve’s preteen novel, *The Gift of the Girl Who Couldn’t Hear*. Lucy, 11 years old and deaf, is the best friend of Eliza, the same age. Eliza talks about her deaf friend:

Her parents insist that she learn to talk and to understand people by reading their lips. They refused to let her learn sign language. They wanted her to be a perfectly ordinary girl in a regular school. Sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn’t. It isn’t easy. (Shreve, 1991)

In Claire Blatchford’s novel, *All Alone (Except for My Dog Friday)*, Margaret, age 12, becomes deaf after contracting meningitis. (The author lost her hearing at age six when she had the mumps and later worked as a teacher of deaf children.) While in the hospital, Margaret is watching television with her mother.

One day a nurse turned the station to a show that had a lady signing, but Mummy switched it off when she came in and made a face at me that said, “This isn’t for you.” (Blatchford, 1983)

What Margaret’s mother really meant was that she could not accept her daughter’s deafness.

Another negative view held by adults is found in Nancy

Butts's *Cheshire Moon*. Butts is a journalist who also worked with deaf children and was a student of sign language. Her main character, Miranda, age 12, lost her hearing in childhood. Miranda tells her hearing friend Boone about her parents' feelings of shame toward her deafness. At another point, Miranda's aunt says, "I know it's not easy. But can you really expect the rest of the world to learn to sign, just for you?" According to Miranda's aunt, the burden of adjustment must come from her deaf niece, not from the hearing world (Butts, 1996).

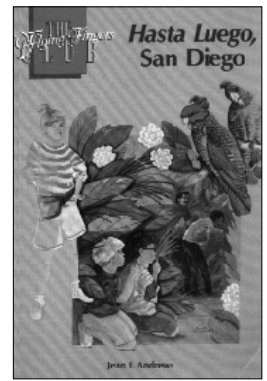
In reality, signing is close to the heart of deaf children. Most deaf people prefer to use ASL, but with hearing people, they will use more of an English-like signing to accommodate them. This system is called Signed English or Manual Codes of English; it borrows ASL signs and puts them in English word order with invented signs for grammar endings and articles (Andrews, Leigh, & Weiner, 2004). Many Deaf community members have hostile feelings toward Signed English and consider it a form of language oppression (Woodward, 1989).

In my novel *Secret in the Dorm Attic*, 10-year-old Matt, who is deaf, explains the difference to Donald, who is hearing, when Donald visits Matt at the Kentucky School for the Deaf:



"It'll take you a while to understand the sign we use here. It's different from the sign I use at Lincoln Elementary."  
 "Why?" asked Donald.  
 "Because it's deaf sign, not hearing sign."  
 "What do you mean? You use a different sign with me than with your deaf friends?"  
 "Yes, hearing sign is more like English. It's slower. I don't like it much," Matt explained. (Andrews, 1990)

do. One cannot simply learn ASL from a book. One must be immersed in a Deaf community that uses it. In Ruth Hallman's book, *Breakaway*, Rob, a young teen who was recently deafened, runs away from his overprotective mother. Rob's girlfriend, Kate, who accompanies him, checks out books on ASL from the public library so she and Rob can teach themselves sign language. This misleads readers into thinking they can learn sign language through pictures in a book. Hallman's view of ASL oversimplifies and degrades the language's full richness and complexity.



There is another myth about sign language promulgated in children's literature: that deaf children can simply teach their hearing peers sign language and then they will have access to all the social language they need. Examples include Jan Wahl's *Jamie's Tiger*, Patrick Quinn's *Matthew Pinkowski's Special Summer*, Lucille Kraiman's *Thanks a Lot!*, and James Heelan's *Can You Hear a Rainbow? The Story of a Deaf Boy Named Chris*.

*Cheshire Moon* shows what really happens most often. Miranda, the deaf character says,

Sometimes hearing kids were interested in signing for a while, but it never lasted long. They learned a few signs like "toilet" and "vomit" that made them giggle, then used them to goof around in class behind the teacher's back. They never learned enough to talk to her. (Butts, 1996)

Just like those of us who travel to a foreign country will pick up a phrase book of Spanish or Arabic so we can appear polite, hearing children may learn only a superficial amount

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Signs can be used to exclude hearing persons. In *Secret in the Dorm Attic*, when Matt and Donald wait in line in the cafeteria, Donald becomes frustrated when Matt and his Deaf friends begin to sign rapidly. Now Donald, the hearing person, is the outsider within the circle of deaf boys and girls.

Signs can arouse suspicion among nonusers. In my novel *Mystery of the Disappearing Newspapers*, Donald and Matt trick hearing bullies into believing they work for the FBI when they sign (Andrews, 1988). ASL is used throughout the North American continent. In *Hasta Luego*, Matt, Donald, and Susan find themselves in Acapulco after being kidnapped by thieves who steal rare cockatoos from the San Diego Zoo. Matt meets a young Mexican girl who knows some sign language (Andrews, 1999).

ASL has structural complexity just as spoken languages

of ASL to communicate with their deaf peers. Again, the burden is placed on the deaf child to "break in" hearing people to the Deaf world.

### Deaf-Hearing Relationships

About 90 percent of Deaf people have hearing parents and close relatives (Andrews, Leigh, & Weiner, 2004). Oppression happens when hearing people take over the decision-making processes that should involve deaf people. Many Deaf people believe that if they are denied the opportunity to use sign or to have sign language interpreters, they lose access to information and opportunities for successful, independent lives.

Hearing tends to afford hearing people who interact with deaf people higher status and privileges. In her children's

book *Deaf Child Crossing*, television and movie actress Marlee Matlin addresses this relationship. Her deaf character, Megan, meets Cindy, a hearing girl in her neighborhood. Megan teaches Cindy sign language, and the girls become best friends—until they go to summer camp. When Megan meets Lizzie, another deaf girl, Cindy feels like the “odd girl out.” Megan begins to resent all the help that Cindy wants to give her—even when she does not need it. Megan’s friendship with Lizzie is special because they both share a Deaf identity and experience of coping in the hearing world (Matlin, 2000).

Sometimes hearing people get excluded in Deaf-hearing relationships. In my novel *The Mystery of the Totems*, Matt and Donald meet Joe Berns, who is a student at the Alaska School for the Deaf. Matt expresses his feelings on meeting Joe.

The moment Joe and I met, we became instant friends. We started signing rapidly to each other, comparing notes on the Kentucky School for the Deaf and the Alaska School, our teachers, what sports we liked, and so on. Joe told me he liked to snowboard, to ski, and race Alaskan huskies!

Their bond excludes Donald.

“Slow down,” signed Donald. “I can’t understand your sign.”

“That’s because deaf people sign differently than hearing people. Our sign is more smooth.”

“Whatever,” signed Donald. “I want to understand

what you are saying.”

“Sorry,” smiled Joe. “Train gone sorry.”

(Andrews, 2002)

The expression “train gone sorry” is a Deaf idiom that means “sorry you missed what I said (you missed the train) and I will not repeat it.”

Matt and Joe’s bond begins to interfere with Matt’s friendship with his Flying Fingers Club friends, Susan and Donald.

I did something I rarely do, that is, to divulge Flying Fingers Club business to an outsider. Even though Joe was deaf and I trusted him 100 percent, I had made a pact with Susan and Donald that business in the club was confidential. I turned to the wall and used sign whispering as I signed with one hand against the inside of Joe’s opened jacket. (Andrews, 2002)



## Residential Schools

Deaf residential schools are major transmitters of Deaf culture and are rich language environments for children to learn from Deaf adults and peers (Andrews, Leigh, & Weiner,

2004). There are more than 40 residential schools for the deaf in the United States. Most states have at least one residential school. These schools have rich histories. The first deaf school established in the United States was the American School for the Deaf, set up in Hartford, Connecticut, in 1861 by Thomas Gallaudet and Laurent Clerc, a deaf teacher from Paris. Residential schools provide comprehensive programming from infancy to age 22 in academics and vocational education, along with sports and extracurricular activities. Due to current trends of inclusion, only 10 percent of the 80,000 deaf children in the United States attend residential schools (Andrews, Leigh, & Weiner, 2004).

In *Secret in the Dorm Attic*, Matt invites his hearing friends, the siblings Donald and Susan, to spend a weekend with him at the Kentucky School for the Deaf. The year before, Matt went to a public school, but he was unhappy there. He missed his Deaf teachers and Deaf friends. Deaf adults and peers are critical for deaf youths’ establishment of a healthy Deaf identity. Parents often think it is in the deaf child’s best interest to go to a public school, but oftentimes public schools do not provide the same kinds of support systems that residential schools for the deaf provide.

In *Nick’s Mission*, sending a deaf child to the residential school is used as a threat. Nick’s mother complains that his classmates have trouble understanding him because of his speech. She is concerned because he doesn’t have friends. But the real problem is her decision to keep her son away from Deaf peers.

In Virginia Scott’s book *Belonging*, Gustie Blane, like Nick, loses her hearing from meningitis. (Scott became deaf later in life.) Gustie’s high school friends desert her. Later, she meets Jack, a boy who has a deaf brother. Gustie and Jack discuss residential schools. Gustie says:

“Did you say residential? Do you mean he had to live there?” The idea made me think of some awful kind of building I’d seen in old movies on TV all dark and spidery and where there was no laughter. “Poor Larry,” I thought.

But Jack has a different view of residential schools.

“Boy, you’ve got some picture, haven’t you? It wasn’t terrible at all. It was a place where he had friends who also had hearing losses and where the teachers and staff knew sign language and were trained to use special teaching methods. It looked like a college dorm . . . not the Frankenstein setting you thought.” (Scott, 1986)

Instead of places to be banished to if parent expectations are not met or creepy places where Frankenstein lives, boarding schools are positive alternatives to the frustrations and limited social lives many deaf children and teens face in public schools. Here they can have a wide choice in deaf friends, join clubs, run for school offices, compete on sports and debating teams, and assume leadership roles.

In *Mystery of the Disappearing Newspapers*, Donald is upset with Matt’s wanting to transfer from the public school to the residential school. Donald argues against residential schools, and Matt responds.

“But you have it good around here! Many of the boys and girls know sign, Terry [the interpreter] is

always around, the teachers like you . . . .”

“It’s just that I’m tired of being different. I want to be with kids more like me, that’s all! And I’m tired of always getting stuck.”

“What do you mean, stuck?” asked Donald.

“Remember when I was left behind during the fire drill last week? Then I walked outside, and everyone laughed at me. Has that ever happened to you, Donald, where a whole school laughed at you?”  
(Andrews, 1988)

In *The Ghost of Tomahawk Creek*, I capture deaf children’s love of their residential school, the Kansas School for the Deaf (KSD) (Andrews, 1990). Several years earlier, I received a TTY call from several boys and girls from the KSD. They invited me to come to their school in Olathe. They enjoyed reading my novels and wanted me to write a Flying Fingers Club novel about their school. After reading *The Ghost of Tomahawk Creek*, the children of Donna Heincker’s fifth grade class at KSD sent this poem to me. Their view, as insiders, differs greatly from that of outsiders looking into the residential school.

“KSD”

Brick buildings,  
Ancient trees,  
Large playground  
Compact campus  
Small classrooms  
Separate dorms  
Deaf kids,  
Pleasing staff,  
Bright students,  
Clever teachers,  
Deaf community,  
Signed ASL,  
Written English,  
Hands moving  
Flying fingers,  
Expression experts,  
Mascot jackrabbits,  
Enthusiastic players,  
Great cheerleaders,  
Terrific teams  
Extraordinary Games,  
Go KSD,  
Best school,  
Close friends,  
Brothers, sisters,  
Deaf Pride,  
My home,  
Sweet home!

### Attitudes Toward Lipreading and Speech Instruction

Lipreading and speech instruction, two modes of communication, have aroused deep, sometimes hostile

responses from the Deaf community.

Chuck Baird’s painting titled “Why Me?” shows four egg-shaped heads that have mouths controlled by wires—an angry statement about speech instruction (Baird, 1993).

Lipreading and speech are the least preferred communication methods and are generally used only to supplement sign language. Deaf persons understand only about five percent of English through lipreading. It’s extremely difficult and tiring, and most don’t lip-read very well. About 30 percent of English sounds appear the same on the lips. Mustaches, lighting, and distance are other factors that increase the guessing involved in lipreading (Vernon & Andrews, 1990).

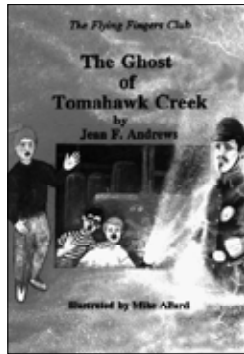
Stories in children’s literature have traditionally exaggerated deaf children’s abilities in lipreading to hyperbolic proportions. Take Amy and Robert Cloud’s “Thorger Sturm: Voices in the Storm.” Published in the children’s magazine *Highlights for Children*, it is about Marie, a fourth grade deaf girl who attends a public school on an island. One day a storm hits the island. In the schoolroom, Marie is handed binoculars. While looking out the window through rain, wind, and turbulent surf, she miraculously reads the boatman’s lips.

Such episodes are delusional. Parents of deaf children desperately want to believe these speechreading talents are abilities their child can acquire. This places an impossible burden on the young child developing language.

Another exaggerated example of lipreading abilities occurs in *Nick’s Mission*. Nick meets Carlos, a Hispanic gardener who has been tied up by bandits. Locked in a room with him, Nick lip-reads Carlos, even though he does not understand a word of Spanish. Nick must also lipread through Carlos’s bushy mustache. Nick reads body language and understands that the bandits are near, the birds are stolen, and that both of them are in danger. The emphasis in the story on lipreading is unbelievable and ludicrous. What Nick can do is to use his eyes to read the body language, the facial expressions, and the eye gazes of Carlos and fit this into the overall context of this most dangerous situation in which he finds himself. With this information, he can infer what Carlos is thinking and saying. It is not reading the sounds on Carlos’s lips through the hairy, brown mustache but using his intelligence that helps Nick figure out the information.

In Nancy Levinson’s book *Annie’s World*, the main deaf character, Annie, is upset because her parents have moved to a new city, forcing her to leave her deaf school and her best friend, Katie, who is also deaf. Annie must struggle to adjust to a hearing school without support services. She is unable to lipread her teachers and falls behind in her classwork. But in the story, she is miraculously able to lipread two school bullies who plan to burglarize and vandalize the school science laboratory. After getting the data on the lips of the school delinquents, she alerts the police and becomes the town’s heroine. How is it possible for Annie to lipread the school bullies, when she can’t lipread her hearing classmates and teachers? This unrealistic plot perpetuates the myths and misconceptions about lipreading.

Such stories give parents false hopes and unrealistic expectations. Parents place unreasonable burdens of lipreading performance on their children. While some deaf persons develop lipreading skills, to be successful they must already know English. Young children rarely have this English competence. Thus, they get very little language from lipreading alone.



What is true about lipreading is that it is largely guesswork. Willa, a young woman at age 24, reflects back on when she became deaf at age 14 in *Sound Friendships*. In Willa's words,

Speech reading it's called, but it's really speech speculation. Only about thirty per cent of all words are visible on the lips. There's a lot of guess work, and it's helped by expression and gestures (Yates, 1992)

Miranda in *Cheshire Moon* expresses the difficulties of lipreading: "Was she saying 'moon' or 'Boone'. . . M and B look a lot alike when you are trying to read lips."

Another realistic portrayal of the difficulties of lipreading comes from Austrian author Eleanor Spence's rather depressing book, *A Nothing Place*. Glen is 12 years old and was recently deafened from meningitis. He is ashamed of his deafness, and his mother does not alert the school to her son's hearing loss when they move to a new town. Glen sinks in school because he cannot follow the teacher.

Teachers had a habit of talking while at the blackboard, half turned away from the class, or worse still, of not opening their mouths and speaking clearly, so that it became impossible for Glen to distinguish a number of similar consonants. He had to guess quite often at what they were saying, and he felt sure that his guesses were frequently wrong. (Spence, 1973)

Lipreading is also physically tiring for the eyes. Many of my students complain of headaches at the end of the day having to watch both moving lips and signing hands all day. Such eyestrain is captured in Virginia Scott's novel, *Finding Abby*; Scott herself lost her hearing when she was older.

This story is written from the viewpoint of Paige, the older sister of Abby, who at age 14 purportedly committed suicide. The novel is about Paige's quest to find the truth about Abby's death. Abby was born with a progressive hearing loss and became totally deaf at 14. Abby came home with raging headaches from having to lipread her hearing teachers and classmates. When Paige interviews another deaf woman in order to find out more about deafness, she reflects back on her deaf sister and says something to the other deaf woman: "I remembered something Abby had said and paraphrased it. 'Are your eyes ready to fall out?'" The woman responds, "You understand!" (Scott, 2000).

Speech therapy, like speechreading, is a tiring exercise for deaf children. Margaret, the twelve-year-old deaf character in *All Alone (Except for My Dog Friday)* says about her speech therapy sessions, "I went to bed early that night, as I usually did on days I had therapy. My eyelids felt like lead, I was so exhausted" (Blatchford, 1983).

Like lipreading, speech instruction is glorified in many children's books. In fact, speech gains for most prelingually, profoundly deaf children are small. To have intelligible

speech, a major factor is the amount of hearing the child has. Even after years of instruction, few profoundly deaf persons have developed understandable speech (Vernon & Andrews, 1990).

Deaf children form negative views about using their speech because of the phony and unpleasant responses they often get from hearing adults. Teachers often overly praise deaf children for their progress, even though laypeople cannot understand their speech. Deaf speech for those who

have never heard before is characterized as a monotone, slowed, unclear, and hard to understand (Vernon & Andrews, 1990). Laypeople often make strange facial expressions when hearing a deaf voice for the first time. After seeing hearing people's responses to their speech attempts, many deaf children feel humiliated and refuse to use their voice.

In the *Secret in the Dorm Attic*, Matt tries to order a strawberry shake. When he speaks to the waitress, she grimaces. Matt furiously writes down his order. He turns to Donald and Saleem, a deaf friend.

"They're so dumb," Matt signed, slurping his milkshake.

"Why do they always have to make a face when I talk? I hate that."

"Maybe they don't understand your speech," Donald signed, trying to be helpful.

"My speech is fine!" retorted Matt. "My speech teacher at school says so. And she always gives me an A on my report card," he added with emphasis. (Andrews, 1990)

As Miranda in *Cheshire Moon* says, sign language works much better as a communication mode than speech and lipreading. But children suffer through years of instruction with minimum gains. In Deaf education from the 1900s to the 1970s, there was a heated controversy about the use of speech versus the use of signs. This highly charged debate has confused many parents. Today, though, most parents support sign language or combined use of signs and speech. This balanced view has resulted in happier and healthier children (Vernon & Andrews, 1990).

### Deaf Identity & Deaf Pride

Many Deaf people resent being labeled "disabled." They believe deafness makes up a cultural identity rather than a physical or pathological condition. They feel deep pride in their deafness and have developed a rich history, folklore, traditions, and values.

A major civil rights victory for the Deaf community took place in 1988 when students and faculty shut down Gallaudet University for one week to protest the hiring of a hearing president. After the week of protests, which included a march to the Capitol, Dr. I. K. Jordan was elected the first Deaf president of Gallaudet University in its 125-year history

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(Christiansen & Barnartt, 1995).

The children's book *Victory Week*, by the Deaf author Walter Kelley and illustrated by the Deaf artist Tony MacGregor, captures the excitement of that week from the perspective of Butch, a Deaf student in elementary school. Encouraged by his teacher's aide, Butch joins right in with the college students. There is no mention of hearing loss or speechreading skills or feelings of loss at being deaf or being misunderstood because one is deaf in this story. *Victory Week* is unique in that it is one of the first children's books that allows a Deaf child to be just fine the way he or she is. It also is inspiring to young Deaf children who may aspire to be a Deaf teacher or Deaf president of a university when they grow up (Kelley, 2001).

Another stereotype in deafness relates to the role of Deaf parents. This is captured in the *Mystery of the Disappearing Newspapers*. Donald's mother is shocked to learn that her son's best friend, Matt, who is Deaf, also has a Deaf mother and father. Donald asks his mother if he can spend the evening with Matt and his family. His mother says, "How can they take care of Matt? . . . And what about you? . . . I don't like the sound of this at all." Later she visits. She sees that Matt's parents are capable people and allows her son to spend the night with the Deaf family (Andrews, 1988).

Deaf identity and pride are also expressed in the many political and sports organizations, clubs, and networks that Deaf people have set up in communities worldwide. It is expressed in Deaf art, storytelling festivals, and humor. In *The Mystery of the Totems*, Matt tells a joke, well known in the Deaf community, that hearing people do not understand. Donald feels left out because he does not understand the joke, even after Matt explains it to him. The joke, called "Please-But," is a play on the structure of sign language and English words (Andrews, 2002).

Deaf pride and identity are also expressed in Deaf art and ASL literature. ASL literature is not English literature translated into ASL. It consists of original compositions that have arisen from the thoughts, emotions, and experiences of culturally Deaf people. But most Deaf children are not exposed to these materials until adulthood. They must seek out their own Deaf identity, as Miranda does in *Cheshire Moon*:

*I am deaf. Miranda swept one finger from her ear to her closed lips. Everyone thinks that means I'm broken. They think those—she pointed to the hearing aids in Boone's fist—will fix me. I can hear with my eyes and speak with my hands. I'm fine just the way I am.* (Butts, 1996)

### Intelligence and Other Psychological Processes

Intelligence in the Deaf community is normally distributed (Vernon, 1968). Deafness does not in itself imply mental slowness or retardation. The archaic phrase deaf and dumb is rarely used anymore to describe Deaf people. Even so, hearing people often confuse intelligence with the ability to speak, and this theme is seen in children's literature.

In Patrick Quinn's book *Signs of Spring*, Eddie, a 12-year-old boy born with a severe hearing loss, moves with his family to a new school and neighborhood. His step-grandmother, upon hearing Eddie's deaf voice, says, "The boy talks kind of

different. He ain't slow, is he?" Eddie's mother bristles and replies, "No, he is not slow. In fact, he's very bright. Eddie has a hearing problem. He's nearly deaf but with his hearing aids and watching people's lips he does just fine." (Quinn, 1995).

In *Johnnie Alone*, by the Welsh author Elizabeth Webster, Johnnie, age 12, is made partially deaf by his abusive stepfather, who batters him in the head and ears. Johnnie struggles in school to understand his teachers and classmates but begins to fail. His schoolmates are cruel and taunt him:

*Johnnie Dumbo!*  
*Hasn't got a single Crumbo!*

*Johnnie Dim*  
*Hasn't got a glim!*

*Johnnie Moo*  
*Hasn't got a clue.*

*Johnnie Cass*  
*Bottom of his class.*

*Pea-brain Johnnie*  
*Flea-brain Johnnie*  
*Johnnie Dimbo*  
*Lives in limbo*

By today's standards, these taunts would be treated as verbal harassment equal to the worst racial epithets. But this book was first serialized in *My Weekly* in 1982 under the title of *Johnnie Dumbo*.

Deafness creates other psychological dynamics in families and in schools. For example, parents may become overly protective. Deaf children may withdraw, become depressed, or be suspicious of others when they are placed in environments where they do not know what is going on.

*Muddy Four Paws*, written by Jean Ure, is a story about two young girls who find a stray dog. One of the girls, Clara, has an eight-year-old brother, Benji, who is deaf. The girls attempt to train the dog to become a hearing-assistive dog for Benji. Clara talks about her mother's overprotection of Benji.

Mom is always a softie where Benji is concerned. I don't mean she spoils him, because she often tells him off just the same as she does me if he's naughty, but she's like, extra protective toward him. She gets really angry if anyone tries to suggest that he's foolish or anything, just because he can't hear well. (Ure, 1998)

Another deaf character, Willa, reflects on her parents in Elizabeth Yates's *Sound Friendships*:

She realized dimly that during her growing up years they had overprotected her, as in their anguish they had tried to make up for what she had lost. (Yates, 1992)

Willa in turn becomes withdrawn and suspicious. When she can't hear the others, she wonders if they are talking about her.

In *Cheshire Moon*, Miranda's mother won't let her ride her bicycle because "you could turn in front of a car and not even hear it." Miranda eventually leaves her bike to gather dust in the garage (Butts, 1996).

Hearing people often think deaf people are unfriendly if they do not respond to them. In Mary B. Christian's *The Goosehill Gang and the May Basket Mystery*, the neighborhood kids misjudge an elderly deaf couple who move into their neighborhood. They learn the truth only when the couple's hearing daughter comes to visit (Christian, 1978).

### Science and Technology

Science and technology is another cultural feature of the Deaf community. Technology has been a boon and a bane. Computers, modems, telephone relays, visual communication devices like TTYs (telecommunication devices), closed-captioned television, visual alerting devices, vibrating beepers, wireless pagers, videophones, videoconferencing, hearing aids, and amplifiers have allowed more information to be accessible to the Deaf community. Multimedia technology has enhanced classroom instruction and educational opportunities for deaf children.

But technology has been a curse, too. The invention of the telephone by Alexander Graham Bell eliminated many deaf people from jobs at the turn of the century. The transition from the "silent movies" to "talking pictures" made movies inaccessible to deaf people until captioned films were invented (Gannon, 1981). The Deaf community has mixed feelings about the use of hearing aids and cochlear implantation.

Children's stories illustrate these devices and cast different values on them. Jean Okimoto's picture book, *A Place for Grace*, features several of these devices—visual flashing alarm clocks and the TTY. The book presents a very positive view of deafness, as Grace is training to be a hearing dog for a deaf man named Charlie, but Charlie ends up helping Grace when she repeatedly flunks a critical test (Okimoto, 1993).

The hearing aid and the cochlear implant evoke powerful negative feelings among some Deaf persons. Chuck Baird's painting "The Mechanical Ear" shows a giant ear covered with wires, meters, and gadgets. Many Deaf people reject their hearing aids when they become adults.

Children's books abound with stories of the benefits of hearing aids; examples include *Can You Hear a Rainbow? The Story of a Deaf Boy Named Chris*, *Patrick Gets His Hearing Aid*, *Jamie's Tiger*, and *Lisa and Her Soundless World*. These claims often provide false hopes to parents and youngsters. Some people benefit from hearing aids, but they have limited use for other deaf people. Hearing aids are also very expensive, and scandals have rocked the industry. Unlike eyeglasses, which correct vision to normal, hearing aids do not correct hearing to normal. Hearing loss is complex. These devices may only serve to amplify a distorted sound.

Virginia Scott's novel for high schoolers, *Belonging*, presents a realistic picture of a girl's struggle with her hearing aid. Gustie begins with positive expectations for "the little tan

hearing aid nestled on a bed of velvet in its box." She is hoping to regain her hearing for the music and conversations that she has missed since she became deaf. But from the first she is bitterly disappointed: "But everything went wrong. I heard this terrible grating speech . . . the human voice didn't sound right for some reason." Gustie begins to have terrible headaches from wearing her hearing aid. One day, she recalls, "I nearly jumped out of my seat when a horrible, loud sound blasted its way into my ear. To my amazement, it had only been the girl across from me sneezing." After these experiences, Gustie gives up on the device (Scott, 1986).

Many deaf youth are embarrassed about their hearing aids and will hide them behind their hair. Others, like Miranda in *Cheshire Moon*, want to destroy them.

Miranda pinched the snail-like ear molds between her fingers and dangled them overboard. All she had to do was open her fingers and—splash!—they would sink to the bottom of the bay. Maybe some fish could use them. She held the hearing aids over the rail for a moment longer, hesitating. Then slowly she drew back her arms and stuffed the tiny devices into her pockets. Not yet. They cost a fortune. She was not ready to face her parents over this just yet. (Butts, 1996)

Like hearing aids, the cochlear implant, a prosthetic device that is surgically implanted behind the ear, has proven beneficial to some deaf persons, but not all. It is not a cure for deafness but a communication aid. The National

Association of the Deaf (NAD), the largest advocacy organization for deaf people, has taken a neutral position for the use of the implant for young deaf children.

The Deaf graphic artist Elizabeth Morris has made a powerful drawing "Not my choice—cochlear implants." A young girl is depicted with tears running down her face.

She has a coil and electrical wires buried in her skin. In the background, a street sign reads "Wrong Way." In the right-hand corner of the drawing is the phrase "deaf and proud" (Morris, 1995).

This is not to say that these technology devices do not benefit deaf people as secondary avenues of communication. However, children's books that describe hearing aids and implants as cures for deafness misrepresent the experiences of those who are deaf. As Marlee Matlin said in a speech to her fans about her book *Deaf Children Crossing*, "I always wanted to write a book relating my experiences growing up as a deaf child in Chicago. Contrary to what people might think, it wasn't all about hearing aids and speech classes for me or about frustrations about growing up deaf" (Matlin, 2001).

### Conclusions

In producing children's literature about Deaf culture, we are at a primitive stage similar to Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Stowe's 1852 novel has been criticized

**“ In producing children's literature about Deaf culture, we are at a primitive stage similar to Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin. ”**

for its condescending depictions and racist descriptions of the book's African-American characters. The white author, though well meaning, had little experience of her characters' culture and life on a Southern plantation. Despite these

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## “We need more Deaf authors to write children's books.”

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criticisms, the book was a vital tool that helped turn the tide against slavery in the United States.

Similarly, children's authors have depicted Deaf characters as passive, wanting help, and yielding to whatever hearing people feel is in their best interest. Deaf persons' successes are measured by how well they fit into hearing society, not on finding their Deaf identity. Sign language does not have as much status as spoken language does. In the not-recommended books, deaf children choose hearing schools over residential schools. In one story, a deaf girl follows the advice of her older hearing benefactor to be a research subject in a study at a university rather than attend the state residential school. The deaf characters in many of these stories prefer to have hearing friends over deaf friends. As such, these books reflect the values of the hearing writer, not the values of the Deaf culture.

There is a remedy. We need more Deaf authors to write children's books. We need more books from the Deaf perspective about their experiences growing up and about the beauty and value of ASL and the benefits that membership in the Deaf community can entail. With such books, young deaf children can identify with deaf characters and feel more “akin” rather than “alien.” Deaf children can grow up to celebrate their diversity.

A student at the Kansas School for the Deaf, Kyra Luck, wrote this poem, “The Eyeth,” that sums up the “Deaf perspective.”

“The Eyeth”

I wish I found a new planet and that planet was named Eyeth!

It is beside Earth!

When I went there, there were lots of deaf people!

I compared (Ear)th and (Eye)th!

Know why it is weird?

Because E-a-r and E-y-e!

It was weird, but they were nice to me.

There were some hearing people there, but they had to go to school to learn sign language!

It's fun, I want to live there.

It is my home, no one can enter to harm me!

I love my planet, Eyeth! (Luck, 1994)

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Yates, E. (1992). *Sound friendships*. Greenville, S.C.: Bob Jones Univ. Press.

#### **Appendix A: Books Not Recommended**

Abbott, D., & Kisor, H. (1994). *One TV blasting and a pig outdoors*. Morton Grove, Ill.: Albert Whitman.

This story is from a hearing boy's point of view about living with his deaf father. Conan's father became deaf at age three from meningitis. Conan talks about the different voice quality of his father's deaf voice, and his father's rejection of sign language. Conan talks about all the assistive devices his dad uses: TTY, relay interpreters, vibrating alarm clocks, and television captioning.

Blatchford, C. (1998). *Going with the flow*. Minneapolis: Carolrhoda.

Mark, a sixth grade deaf boy, moves to a new school. He is embarrassed to be the only deaf child and center of attention. He says he feels like a "freak." He tells his father he wants to move back to their old home in New Jersey and live with his deaf friend Jamie and Jamie's deaf parents, but his parents insist he stay at the hearing school.

Blatchford, C. (1995). *Nick's Mission*. Minneapolis: Lerner.

Nick's mother threatens to send him to boarding school because of his unintelligible speech. However, Nick saves the day when he uses lipreading to thwart a gang of bandits who are holding him and the family's gardener hostage.

Caisley, R. (1994). *The quiet world*. New York: Macmillan/McGraw-Hill.

Mark, born deaf, is the younger brother of David, who tells this story from an older sibling's point of view. David tries to simulate deafness by putting cotton in his ears and wearing earphones. He goes to the park, to a neighbor's rose garden, and to a playground. He describes how his senses of sight and smell become more acute. He plays football with his deaf brother and expresses hope that Mark will grow up and play football for the neighborhood school.

Corcoran, B. (1974). *A dance to still music*. New York: Atheneum.

Margaret, age 14, becomes deaf as a young adolescent from meningitis. Frustrated with her relationship with her mother, Margaret runs away from her home in the Florida Keys and is sidetracked when she finds an injured deer on the side of the road. Josie, who lives on a nearby houseboat, assists her in bandaging the animal's leg. When her mother finds her, Margaret refuses to attend the state school for the deaf. Josie finds a researcher at a university who wants to take on Margaret as a "research subject."

Hallman, R. (1981). *Breakaway*. New York: Dell.

Rob is a teen who has recently lost his hearing. Overprotected by his mother, he runs away with his girlfriend. They rent a room from an elderly woman who has a stroke, and the two teens help her. Rob's girlfriend acts as his savior, helping him face his deafness and its implications. She teaches him lipreading, and they both learn sign language from a book, which is very unrealistic.

Hare, L. (1998). *Where the birds don't sing*. Ogden, Utah: PaceSetter Direct.

At age 4, Johnny contracts measles. He is left deaf, and his mother dies. The historical novel takes place when he is nine and working in his father's blacksmith shop. A new teacher come to town and rescues him through education. Kraiman, L. (1995). *Thanks a lot!* Hillsboro, Ore.: Butte Publications.

Jordan, a signing deaf boy in public school, meets Lisa, an orally raised deaf girl, and the two nine-year-olds develop a friendship. Both children remove barriers. Jordan learns to speak a few words, and Lisa learns some sign language. Through a Thanksgiving play, Jordan makes new hearing friends. This saccharine story is full of platitudes.

Levene, N. (1993). *Crocodile Meatloaf*. Elgin, Ill.: David C. Cook.

Rachel's parents enroll her in a new public school to see if she can get along in a regular classroom. The sixth grade boys tease her because of her deafness. Alex, a girl in her class, befriends her and gets her involved in softball. Alex takes on her friendship with Rachel as a "mission" to protect her from bullying classmates.

Levine, E. (1974). *Lisa and her soundless world*. New York: Human Sciences Press.

When Lisa does not develop speech, her parents are worried and take her to the doctor. Lisa is fitted for hearing aids and has speech and lipreading lessons. She also learns sign language and goes to a special school. No mention of Deaf culture.

Levinson, N. (1990) *Annie's World*. Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet University Press.

After her family moves, Annie is isolated in a public school without deaf peers. Despite not being able to lip-read her teachers, she miraculously lip-reads two troublemakers who plan to vandalize the school. She alerts the police and becomes the hero of her new hometown.

Pollock, P. (1982). *Keeping it secret*. New York: Putnam.

Mary Lou, an eleven-year-old hard-of-hearing girl, experiences growing pains in adapting to a new school environment. The story chronicles her shame and embarrassment with wearing hearing aids, her difficulty in listening in class to students' voices and music, and dropping her hearing aids and hearing aid batteries in class.

Quinn, P. (1991). *Matthew Pinkowski's special summer*. Prior Lake, Minn.: Eagle Creek Publications.

Matthew, age 13, meets Laura, a deaf girl his age, in his neighborhood. Laura teaches Matthew and other kids how to sign and fingerspell. Laura is visiting her overprotective aunt and uncle. The youths solve a mystery using Laura's keen visual skills. Very little information on Deaf culture.

Riski, M., & Klakow, N. (1994). *Patrick gets his hearing aids*. New York: Phonak.

This is a story about a deaf rabbit, Patrick, who has a hearing loss. He can't hear his teachers at school or his friends on the playground. He goes to the doctor, gets a hearing test, and is fitted with hearing aids. Now, miraculously, he can hear his friends and family.

Spence, E. (1973). *A nothing place*. New York: Harper & Row.

Deafened from meningitis, 12-year-old Glen is ashamed of his deafness and keeps it hidden. Glen's mother does not even tell the teachers. A classmate, Lyndall, and her friends organize a benefit to buy Glen a hearing aid. Glen becomes furious when he finds out because he doesn't want pity. The story overemphasizes the negative.

Steel, R. (2001). *Touchdown*. Buena Park, Calif.: Artesian Press.

Two youths, one blind and the other deaf, strike up an unusual friendship in high school. They are instrumental in stopping a gangster who is operating a gambling racket with college football teams. The blind boy acts as the deaf boy's voice (after reading his sign language) and the deaf boy uses his eyes for the blind boy. This story is hard to imagine.

Webster, E. (1982). *Johnnie alone*. Long Preston, North Yorkshire, England: Magna Print Books.

Johnnie Cass, age 12, is made partially deaf by his abusive stepfather, who batters him. Johnnie struggles in school to understand his teachers and classmates. He tries to take care of his mother and younger siblings. He becomes withdrawn and runs away from his dysfunctional family, embarking on a quest to find his biological father, who deserted his mother when he was a child.

Yates, E. (1991). *Hue & cry*. Greenville, S.C.: Bob Jones University Press.

This is a piece of historical fiction set in 1836. Melody Woods is a teenager deaf from birth. She develops a relationship with an Irish boy who is hiding in the woods with a stolen horse. Melody and the boy help each other develop relationships with their family and the community.

Yates, E. (1992). *Sound friendships*. Greenville, S.C.: Bob Jones University Press.

This is a story about Willa, a lonely 24-year-old. At age 14, she lost her hearing from noise trauma—a prankster tied a firecracker to her pigtail. The bleak novel describes her isolation and her love of her hearing dog.

#### **Appendix B: Recommended Books Not Mentioned in the Article**

\*designates written by a deaf author

McElfresh, L. (1999). *Can you feel the thunder?* New York: Atheneum.

This is a story about a deaf-blind girl, Stephanie, who is 16 years old. The story is told by her younger brother, Mic. Mic describes in very realistic terms what it is like to live

with a deaf-blind sister. Mic resents his parents for using resources for Stephanie instead of him. It is somewhat unrealistic for the deaf-blind character to be depicted as socially underdeveloped but a math genius who can help Mic with his homework. Still, the story rings true in its realistic description of a deaf-blind household (Ingraham, 2005).

Neufeld, J. (1996). *Gaps in stone walls*. New York: Atheneum.

This historical mystery is set in 1870 during the time when there was a Deaf community in Chilmark, part of Martha's Vineyard. In this village, both Deaf and hearing people used sign language. The story is about a young deaf girl, Merry Skiffe, who witnesses a murder. The story contains information about Deaf culture on Martha's Vineyard and information about the first school for the deaf in Hartford, Connecticut.

Nicholas, E. (1997). *Selena who speaks in silence*. Bothell, Wash.: Wright Group.

A nine-year-old girl befriends a deaf girl named Selena, who uses sign language. The girls enjoy skating and bowling together. The hearing girl simulates deafness by wearing earplugs. She describes her experiences, then compliments Selena on being a better skater and bowler because she is not distracted by noises in the background.

\*Smith, A. K. (2005). *Deaf Cinderella*. Frederick, Md.: ASL Rose.

Deaf Cinderella is an adaptation of the classic Cinderella story, written from a Deaf perspective and with illustrations accompanying the story. Readers get a glimpse into what it is


like to be a Deaf person facing discrimination from hearing people. As Deaf Cinderella flourishes through her beautiful American Sign Language and ASL poetry, readers learn how important Deaf culture and history are to Deaf people. A companion DVD is included, with a Deaf person narrating the story in American Sign Language.

\*Smith, A. K. (2005). *Waving Hands!!! The ABCs of the American Deaf Role Models*. Frederick, Md.: ASL Rose.

This story utilizes the finger-spelled alphabet to highlight some of America's most accomplished Deaf individuals. Readers of all ages are sure to be inspired by the 35 individuals and animals mentioned in this book. Featuring accomplished individuals such as the baseball player William E. Hoy and artist Chuck Baird, *Waving Hands!!!* serves as a valuable historical account of individuals who have forever influenced Deaf history. A DVD accompanies the book, with Deaf teenagers narrating the contents in American Sign Language.

\*Smith, A. K., & Jacobowitz, E. L. (2005). *Have You Ever Seen . . . ? An American Sign Language (ASL) Handshape DVD/Book*. Frederick, Md.: ASL Rose.

This whimsical children's book provides animated illustrations of 44 commonly used American Sign Language handshapes in a collage-like fashion. The colorful illustrations also incorporate information about the Deaf community and its culture and language. The accompanying DVD includes an ASL version of the book, signed by native ASL users.

**Jean F. Andrews** is professor of communication disorders and deaf education at Lamar University in Beaumont, Texas, and the author of five children's books in the *Flying Fingers* series. 

## Coming in the Next Issue

- **Researching Historically Black Colleges and Universities**
- **Author Nicholasa Mohr Reflects on Spanish Harlem**
- **An Interview with Translator Carrol Coates**
- **Recommended Children's and Young Adult Books in Spanish**
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