What began as a simple request for a book by one of my former students, at times, has not been so simple. The student, whom I refer to as Carla (name changed), hoped to read about characters similar to herself and her friends. As a teacher, I have often tried to hook my students on reading by presenting books with characters to which they can relate. These books can help increase their overall knowledge of the world, open their minds to multiple realities and variations of the human experience and provide scenarios in which they can live vicariously.

Carla’s request was a bit more complicated than I had imagined. As a “Deaf” student who attended a state school for the Deaf and who viewed herself as a member of a linguistic cultural minority, she expected to read a book with characters who used American Sign Language and who participated as members within the Deaf Community. She did not want to read didactic books about deafness but wanted books with unpredictable plots and believable characters. Having graduated from a teacher-preparation program in Deaf Education, I had read numerous books about deafness. While memoirs and biographical selections had been relatively easy to acquire and were on my bookshelf, I had not once read any fictional books for adolescents that included a deaf character. (I refer to ‘Deaf’ as representing individuals who identify in a linguistic, cultural minority group. The term ‘deaf’ is used as a more generic term given to individuals with some degree of hearing loss. In other articles, ‘deaf’ has been used pejoratively or in connection to a view by those who believe one without the sense of hearing is inferior or lacking. I do not believe or wish to imply that.)
As a High School teacher with so many additional work responsibilities outside of classroom teaching, finding fictional books with deaf characters was somewhat of a challenge. Nevertheless, after some research I was able to recommend a book that I thought would be a good summer read. Nancy Butts’ *Cheshire Moon* (1992) is charming book about thirteen-year-old Miranda who is saddened by her cousin’s death and furious at her parents’ insistence that she speak rather than sign. The plot turns slightly mystical when the teens begin having similar dreams under the “Cheshire moon”. Yet, the story is about Miranda, a deaf girl, who struggles with communication. Without her cousin, the only member of her family who was fluent in sign language, communication is difficult and embarrassing. Miranda feels isolated, alienated, and unsure of herself.

Because of the main character’s age, the book was not the best recommendation for a high school student; however, when Carla finished *Cheshire Moon*, she asked for another book with Deaf characters.

**Problem & Purpose**

Historically, authors have used deafness as a literary device to relay various messages about the struggles of humankind and elicit sympathy from readers (Batson & Bergman; Bergman; Burns; Krentz; Panara; Taylor, “Deaf Characters” I, II, III; Schwartz; Wilding-Diaz). In recent decades, however, the general public’s awareness of and perhaps interest in deaf people has risen along with that of our increasingly multicultural world. Educational legislation has increased awareness of the deaf as has news coverage of Gallaudet University protests. In addition, Deaf people have benefited from advances in communicative technology, such as Video Relay (VRS) and instant messaging pagers, more coordinated interpreting services and an increase in awareness of American Sign Language. Authors are incorporating more deaf characters than they did in the past. However, this increase does not necessarily translate to an increase in understanding of the deaf, nor does it translate to the most accurate, respectfully, well-rounded characterization of the deaf (Pajka-West, “Perceptions”).

Acquiring fictional books that include deaf characters can be time-consuming and challenging for teachers and librarians. The research examining deaf characters in fiction is extremely limited (Burns; Guella; Krentz; Wilding-Diaz). The most recent articles predominately focus on children’s literature — specifically picture books (Bailes; Brittain). Despite decades of research affirming culturally authentic children’s literature and the merits of multicultural literature, a coexisting body of research reveals the lack of culturally authentic texts (Applebee; Campbell & Wirtenberg; Ernest; Larrick; Sherriff; Taxel). Moreover, children’s books with deaf characters are used as informational depictions of deaf individuals (Bockmiller, 1980). Readers of such resource books, typically parents, teachers and their students, gain information about deafness and individuals with “disabilities” (Bockmiller, 1980; Civiletto & Schirmer, 2000). If an important purpose for deaf characters in fiction is educational and informational, then there is a need for the characters to be presented as realistic models of deaf people. If not, the readers of such fiction gain inaccurate information about deafness including reinforced negative stereotypes, as can occur in any other literature portraying cultural minorities (Pajka-West, “Perceptions”).

Similar to authors’ informational depictions, writers also reveal societal understanding of groups of people through their fiction (Banfield & Wilson; Panara; Rudman). Literature has often stigmatized minority culture individuals based upon race, ethnicity, disability, gender and/or sexual orientation. While readers might recognize the negative depictions and dismiss them as harmless stereotypes, these portrayals could become a part of the unconscious of members of our society. If books continually reinforce stereotypical depictions of deaf people, individuals belonging to the group might be typecast and discouraged into a limited way of being. As an educator, I want all of my students to have unlimited opportunities for the future, not disadvantaged by stereotypes.

**The Study**

For my doctoral dissertation, I examined six contemporary adolescent literature books with deaf characters. The research methodology for this study required book selection, reader sample selection, instrument creation, book analysis, questionnaire creation, and data analysis. My research questions included: 1) Are deaf characters being presented as culturally Deaf characters or as pathologically deaf and disabled; 2) Do these readers favor deaf authors over hearing ones? If so, why; and, 3) How do deaf and hearing adult readers perceive deaf characters in adolescent literature?

**The Sample**

The book sample included 102 possible books for the study ranging from adolescent to adult selections. I selected books that were recognized as suitable for middle school or high school readers based upon the reading and interest levels established by publishers. The books also had to include main characters who are deaf and deaf characters who are human. The books selected were all realistic fiction, available to the public, and published or reissued for publication within the last fifteen years. The six books that were selected included: *Nick’s Secret* by C. Blatchford; *A Maiden’s Grave* by J. Deaver; *Of Sound Mind* by J. Ferris; *Deaf Child Crossing* by M. Matlin; *Apple Is My Sign* by M. Riskind; and *Finding Abby* by V. Scott. For the first part of my study, I analyzed these texts using the Adolescent Literature Content Analysis Check-off Form (ALCAC) which includes both pathological and cultural perspective statements derived from Deaf Studies, Disability Studies and Queer Theory.

The participant sample included adult readers who fit within three categories: those who identified as deaf, those who were familiar with or had been acquaintances with deaf individuals, and those who were unfamiliar having never associated with deaf individuals. Each participant completed a Reader-Response Survey which included ten main questions derived from Deaf Studies and Schwartz’ ‘Criteria for Analyzing Books about Deafness’. The survey included both dichotomous and open-ended questions.

**Research Questions & Methodology**

Are deaf characters being presented as culturally Deaf or as pathologically deaf and disabled?
In previous articles, scholars have stated that most books with deaf characters include a pathological perspective; yet, few studies actually exist to conclude this assertion. In my study, I analyzed six books to determine whether they supported the cultural or the pathological perspective of deafness. The goal was not to exclusively label a text either/or but to highlight the distinct perspectives to illuminate a discussion regarding a deaf character. As before mentioned, the ALCAC instrument incorporates relevant theories and prior research findings in reference to the portrayals of deaf characters and was developed to specifically analyze adolescent literature with deaf characters.

Despite the historical research regarding deaf characters and due to the increased awareness of deaf people and American Sign Language, my initial assumption was that the authors of the six adolescent books would present their deaf characters as more culturally 'Deaf'. This was confirmed for the majority of the books. I believed that an outsider, such as a hearing writer, could carry out an adequate portrayal of a culture other than his own. In the past, scholars did not believe this was the case; however, the results from my study demonstrated that the majority of the hearing authors presented the cultural perspective model.

Initially shocking, the majority of deaf authors incorporated the pathological perspective model. I offer three possible reasons why these deaf authors included more pathological perspective statements while the hearing authors include more cultural perspective statements: First, the deaf authors have grown up deaf and perhaps experienced more scenarios similar to those presented from the pathological perspective model. Even if the deaf authors live more culturally Deaf lifestyles today, authors include their experiences growing up in their writing. Second, there are less deaf characters in the books written by deaf authors and more characters and more character variety in the books written by the hearing authors. When there are fewer deaf characters interacting with other deaf characters, these characters tend to interact with more hearing characters who are less likely to be aware of the cultural perspective. And third, with decreased populations of culturally Deaf born to culturally Deaf individuals, it seems consistent that it may be more difficult to obtain a book from a Deaf of Deaf author. Similarly, if we consider the Deaf person's first language is American Sign Language, Deaf authors may be spending more time creating stories and poetry in American Sign Language and less time focusing upon English. This possible lack of interest may make the number of Deaf of Deaf authors, or culturally Deaf individuals raised by culturally Deaf parents, who pursue and are successful publishing a book in adolescent literature low.

At least in adolescent literature, deaf characters, as many other minority group characters, are being included in texts to show young people our increasingly multicultural world. Adolescent literature readers can now become aware of a range of deaf characters, including characters who use American Sign Language, who attend residential schools for the Deaf, and even who have Deaf families.

**Do the readers favor deaf authors over hearing ones?**

A significant part of my research was based upon the perceptions of adult readers of adolescent literature with deaf characters. I selected participants from a criterion sampling and divided them into three groups: 1. Adults who had attended either a special program for the deaf or a residential school for the deaf, used American Sign Language, and identified themselves as deaf were considered for the deaf category of the study; 2. Adults who were friends, family members, co-workers or professionals in fields connected with individuals who identify themselves as deaf were considered for the familiar category of the study; and, 3. hearing adults who were not aware of the everyday experiences of deaf people and who had not taken a sign language class, worked with or lived with a deaf person were considered for the unfamiliar category of the study. Nine participants were selected for each group totaling 27 participants (one participant from each of the groups withdrew before completion, leaving eight participants from each of the groups to complete the study). To elicit the perspectives of the participants, I developed a Reader Response survey which was modeled after Schwartz's 'Criteria for Analyzing Books about Deafness'.

I assumed that the participants from Deaf and Familiar groups would prefer the books written by the deaf authors while the unfamiliar participants would act more as a control group. This was not confirmed through the data. In fact, the Deaf participants along with the participants as a whole preferred the books written by the hearing authors as better describing their perceptions of realistic deaf people, for presenting deaf characters adequately and realistically, and for the hearing authors' portrayals of deaf characters matching with their perceptions of deaf people. In general, the Deaf participants were more critical of the deaf authors while the familiar participants, although as a group preferred the books by the hearing authors, were more critical of the hearing authors.

Participants throughout all three groups mentioned their preference for a spectrum of deaf characters. The books used in this study that were written by hearing authors included a variety of characters. For example, Riskind’s *Apple Is My Sign* includes numerous deaf students at a school for the deaf and the main character living within a deaf family; Deaver’s *A Maiden’s Grave* includes deaf characters from a variety of backgrounds attending a residential school for the deaf and only a few hearing characters; and Ferris’ *Of Sound Mind* includes two deaf families with two CODA or hearing teens.

The books written by the deaf authors in this study include only a few deaf characters. For example, Matlin’s *Deaf Child Crossing* includes two deaf girls surrounded by hearing characters; Scott’s *Finding Abby* includes more minor deaf characters but readers learn about these characters from the hearing character’s perspective. For instance, the character Jared uses sign language and attends a residential school for the deaf but readers learn this information from his hearing mother talking about him, not from the deaf character’s words. Readers know that he communicates through sign language because we are told that he does; however, the only communication readers are shown is a wave from the child; and, Blatchford’s *Nick’s Secret* includes only one deaf character.

With the fewer deaf characters it is nearly impossible for the various ways of being deaf to be included in the book. Thus, the preference for the books by the hearing authors is more likely connected to the preference for a variety of deaf people represented.

**How do readers perceive deaf characters?**

Participants commented on fourteen main and secondary characters. Their perceptions of these characters fall into six categories: the "normal" curious
kid such as the characters Harry (Apple Is My Sign), Jeremy (Of Sound Mind) and Jared (Finding Abby); the egocentric spoiled brat such as Palma (Of Sound Mind) and Megan (Deaf Child Crossing); the advocate such as Harry’s mother (Apple Is My Sign) and Susan (A Maiden’s Grave); those dependent upon the majority culture such as Palma (Of Sound Mind) and Lizzie (Deaf Child Crossing); those isolated such as Melissa (Finding Abby), Ben (Of Sound Mind), Nick (Nick’s Secret) and Thomas (Of Sound Mind); and, those searching for their identities such as Melanie (A Maiden’s Grave) and Abby (Finding Abby).

Overall, participants commented more frequently about the deaf characters in the books by the hearing authors (A Maiden’s Grave; Of Sound Mind; Apple Is My Sign) and made more positive comments about the culturally Deaf male characters, particularly Ben Roper, Jeremy and Thomas of Of Sound Mind, and Harry of Apple Is My Sign.

Themes such as the characters being dependent and isolated from others did arise. For example, Palma in Of Sound Mind insists that her hearing son act as her personal interpreter so that she can avoid other hearing people. Examples to demonstrate the isolation some of the deaf characters experience include Nick of Nick’s Secret being the only deaf character in his story and Ben Roper of Of Sound Mind being the only deaf employee in his workplace. While these can certainly be read as negative situations the characters experience, isolation is a reality that resonates in some deaf people’s experiences. With communicative technology and more individuals fluent in American Sign Language, some deaf individuals may decide to associate more with individuals in the larger culture. One must interpret purposeful isolation such as Ben Roper’s (Of Sound Mind) case, working in a location that provides him with the best employment opportunities, differently than Melissa Black’s (Finding Abby) isolating feelings of being left out of family dinner discussions.

Similarly, variations in characterization including the egocentric, spoiled brat and those searching for their identities are common themes in adolescent literature with or without deaf characters being included. Positive examples of deaf characters including the roles of the advocate such as Susan (A Maiden’s Grave) and Harry’s mother (Apple Is My Sign), along with descriptions of regular everyday deaf kids increases the varieties of deaf characters.

As previously stated, my study included an analysis based on literary theory and prior research. At that time, unless the author explicitly told readers in a foreword or a letter to readers, I had no way of truly knowing why the deaf character was included and why the author made such decisions. This uncertainty of the author’s decisions changed for me in 2007 with the establishment of my educational blog.

Beginning to Blog

When I started my educational blog Deaf Characters in Adolescent Literature in February 2007, I did not plan to become a blogger nor did I have any plans for my blog. I simply opened a Blogger account and added a list of 106 books with deaf characters that was connected to my research. Once I started blogging on a regular basis, I discovered an active audience who not only read what I wrote but who truly cared about my research. Blogging had become a way for me to keep my research current; since my blog was about deaf characters in adolescent literature, it became an advocacy tool that called attention to authors and books that were not widely publicized; and, it enabled me to become part of a cyber community made up of other bloggers and readers. After a few months of blogging on a weekly basis, I began to feel a sense of obligation to research and post my findings.

While continuing to post to my blog, I have acquired more information about my research topic and even received advance reader copies prior to the books’ publication dates. This enables me to discuss the most current books. It also enables my readers to learn about such books. My blog acts as free advertisement for the publishing companies and authors.

I currently have 195 contemporary books with deaf characters and over 36 author and professional interviews. While the most rewarding aspect of blogging is connecting with readers, there have been some major highlights in the process. As I stated, I had no way of knowing why the deaf character was included in the books until I began interviewing the authors. I had hoped that the hearing authors of books with deaf characters would portray their characters realistically but I had not realized the authors’ personal connections to actual deaf people. For instance, Delia Ray, Singing Hands, wrote about a Deaf preacher and his family. Her book was based on her grandfather who was a Deaf preacher and leading pioneer in the Deaf Community.

Ray is not the only hearing author who has a personal connection to deaf people. Other examples include: Jean Ferris, Of Sound Mind, who earned a degree in Speech Pathology and Audiology. Ferris’ book includes only two hearing characters, the majority are Deaf. All of her characters are also fluent in American Sign Language; Jodi Cutler Del Dottore, Rally Caps, who includes a deaf character named Luca who uses a cochlear implant. Luca is based on Cutler Del Dottore’s son, Jordan, who also has a cochlear implant; finally, Jacqueline Woodson, Feathers, grew up in a community that included deaf people who did not use sign language. As an adult, she met members of the Deaf Community and began learning American Sign Language herself. Woodson introduces readers to Sean who is attractive, funny, and intelligent. In my study, I noted that all of the deaf characters where not diverse based upon race, ethnicity, and socio-economic status (Pajka-West, “Perceptions”). Sean is the first Deaf American-African character in adolescent literature who uses sign language to communicate.

Another main highlight is finding Deaf authors who do not receive the mainstream press that other authors might receive. For example, Ann Clare LeZotte, T4, introduces readers to main character Paula Becker, a thirteen year old deaf girl who uses sign language and lipreading to communicate. Through verse, we learn of Paula’s life in Germany during Hitler’s time as she goes into hiding since individuals with physical and mental disabilities were being executed under the orders of Hitler’s Tiergartenstrasse 4 (T4).

One additional highlight is that I learn about insider tips and am then able to share this information with my blog readers. In one instance I began corresponding with Marvel Comic’s David Mack, the creator of Echo, a multilingual, biracial, Deaf comic book character who debuted in Daredevil and later The New Avengers. In comics, it is Marvel who owns the character; while Echo was created for Daredevil by Mack, she later appears in The New Avengers. In March 2008, discussion boards were buzzing since issue #39 would include original creator, Mack, among other artists. To make it less complicated for those who do not follow comics, the issue was about whether or not Echo had become a skrull, an alien who takes over the body of the character. This was frightening news since potentially Echo could become a hearing skrull. I just did not believe that Mack would let that happen. My
students and I held numerous discussions about the implications of Marvel’s decisions and finally I sent Mack an email. While he could not reveal the details of the issue, he did assure me that my students and I would be pleased. I’m sure there was a collective sigh from readers once his email was published on the blog.

Final Thoughts

While there have been pejorative depictions of the deaf in literature, the portrayals of deaf characters in adolescent literature have become much more realistic in the last decade. Authors have personal connections with actual deaf individuals which lend to the descriptions of their deaf characters; they are conducting more detailed research to develop their deaf characters; and, they appear to be much more aware of the Deaf Community than they were in the past. A unique benefit of the genre is that authors of adolescent literature often give the impression of being more available to the readers of their books. Authors often participate in open dialogues with their fans through social networking sites or discussion boards on their own websites. After posting interviews with the authors on my blog, I refer readers to the author’s on site whether it through personal blogs, websites, Facebook or Twitter pages.

While hearing authors’ portrayals now include a spectrum of deaf characters, we must encourage Deaf and Hard of Hearing writers to include more deaf characters in their works. Consider again my student Carla and her longing to find books with deaf characters. A positive portrayal of deaf characters benefits deaf adolescents whether or not they see themselves as biologically deaf or culturally deaf. Only through on-going publishing, more realistic and positive representations of the deaf will occur.

References


**Adolescent Fiction Books**


**Author Biography**

Sharon Pajka-West, Gallaudet University

Sharon Pajka-West is a Lecturer at Gallaudet University. Sharon has a PhD in English Education from the University of Virginia and an MA in Deaf Education: Secondary from Gallaudet University. For her doctoral dissertation, she conducted research on the portrayals and perceptions of deaf characters in adolescent literature. In 2007, she began publishing a Blog and a quarterly newsletter on deaf characters in contemporary Young Adult literature.

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Fictional children's and YA novels about the deaf community or being deaf. Score. A book's total score is based on multiple factors, including the number of people who have voted for it and how highly those voters ranked the book. All Votes Add Books To This List. 1. Hurt Go Happy by. Ginny Rorby (Goodreads Author). 4.26 avg rating — 2,325 ratings. score: 2,188, and 21 people voted. Within this framework, deaf people are regarded as being completely capable of self representation, decision making concerning their health and participating in health care work. The notion of giving power to deaf people seems clear and easy to put into effect. However, the issue is not so simple and merits further analysis. Attempts made to increase the power of people have usually resulted in a highly objectionable situation of dominance/subordination; power is therefore seen as being in the hands of just a few people who wield it over other people. If applied to deafness, it leads to a pai Disabilities in Children's LiteratureINTRODUCTIONREPRESENTATIVE WORKSOVERVIEWS AND GENERALSTUDIESPRESENTATION OF MENTAL DISABILITIES IN CHILDREN'S LITERATUREPRESENTATION OF PHYSICAL DISABILITIES IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE Source for information on Disabilities in Children's Literature: Children's Literature Review dictionary. young adult fiction, representations of deafness. Downloads. Untitled. How to Cite. Pajka-West, S. (2010). Representations of Deafness and Deaf People in Young Adult Fiction. M/C Journal, 13(3). https://doi.org/10.5204/mcj.261. More Citation Formats. As a "Deaf" student who attended a state school for the Deaf and who viewed herself as a member of a linguistic cultural minority, she expected to read a book with characters who used American Sign Language and who participated as members within the Deaf Community. She did not want to read didactic books about deafness but wanted books with unpredictable plots and believable characters. Having graduated from a teacher-preparation program in Deaf Education, I had read numerous books about deafness. For Deaf films that meet Deaf cinema criteria, see List of Deaf films. There is a body of films that feature the deaf and hard of hearing. The Encyclopedia of Film Themes, Settings and Series wrote, "The world of the deaf has received little attention in film. She identified various classifications behind the representation of deafness in film: deafness as a plot device, as a metaphor, as a symbolic commentary on society, or as a psychosomatic response to trauma; deaf characters as protagonist informants or as parallels to the protagonist, et cetera.[2]. The American comedy-drama film about people in the country and gospel music businesses features an ensemble cast including a hearing gospel singer who is the mother to two deaf children.[2][63][3].