Autobiography Critique

Learning to Be Deaf Without Losing Your Hearing, Haben, Sounds Like Home, and *From Rejection to Love* were amazing stories of Deaf and Deafblind women. These books tell the stories of four Deaf or Deafblind women who have had to overcome a lot to find their place in the world. Their stories show what it's like facing audism and ableism, having to stand up for themselves, and having to fight for not just their own rights but the rights of the Deaf community. Their fights facing intersectionality, abuse, and oppression prove just how wrong hearing culture is about the Deaf community. These are their stories, their views, and their beliefs. Nobody can say that they are wrong because they are theirs.

Learning to Be Deaf Without Losing Your Hearing. This book tells the story of Kim Harrell and what it was like for her having been born Deaf but raised in the hearing world. How she was raised using the oral method and didn't learn about ASL or Deaf Culture until later in life. She wrote this intending it for beginner ASL students who most likely would not go on to study Deaf Culture. She wanted to inform them of what life can be like for a Deaf person as well as what the Deaf community looks like. She wrote it "for ASL students who should, at the very least, understand more about the individuals and the community which they are attempting to communicate with" (Harrell and Lea, vi). Harrell wasn't writing to create a knowledge-filled textbook, her intentions were simply to tell stories from her own life to help educate people about some of the trials Deaf people face.

For Kim Harrell growing up deaf wasn't much of a problem. Her family didn't treat her differently than they did anyone else, and she was still expected to do chores around the farm. She learned to lip read and had some residual hearing from the hearing aids she had been wearing since she was little. While in school she took speech therapy so she could communicate better. There were only a few deaf kids around and they all had similar experiences to her. When she was old enough, she learned how to drive, and she got a car just like her siblings had done. This was her life, she knew nothing of the Deaf world until she was leaving for college, as she had decided to go to Gallaudet. This is, unfortunately, the case for a lot of Deaf individuals. The majority of Deaf people are born to hearing parents who know nothing about the Deaf community. Sometimes, like for Harrell, there just wasn't a Deaf community in the area, other times it is because their parents wanted them to be part of their hearing culture. Either way, many Deaf individuals do not learn about the Deaf community until adulthood.

When Harrell went to Gallaudet she was introduced to Deaf culture, but she likes to say it was the "dark side" of Deaf culture. She was bullied and struggled a lot because of her hearing culture. She struggled with learning ASL and hated how she was looked down on for being able to use her voice. She was admonished for talking but made fun of for signing – she signed in English. Students wanted to use her for skills she learned being raised in the hearing world – driving a car or ordering pizza over the phone – but they would still treat her horribly throughout the week. Harrell was frustrated at her treatment and used sports to sort out her anger. When the field hockey coach noticed her abilities, she was asked to join the team, to which she responded enthusiastically, but with her voice. The coach wasn't like the other staff though and was willing to have a discussion with the frustrated woman despite it being against the rules. Harrell leaped at the chance to talk to someone and asked why the students treated her the way they did.

> "The coach helped her understand that even though she was truly Deaf, she had been raised in an oral, hearing culture and never used her deafness as a barrier or an excuse to not achieve something. The coach explained their fears

> might have been perpetuated by the thought of what would become of them, when all their life they were raised largely in a Deaf environment and constantly reminded of the many things they could 'not' achieve solely on the basis that they were Deaf" (Harrell and Lea, 83).

This shows the dysconcious audism that surrounded/enveloped the Deaf community – though it wasn't just at Gallaudet – during that time. The students that Harrell had been interacting with, the ones that had been treating her so poorly, had grown up surrounded by Deaf culture, but also by audism, both dysconcious and otherwise. They had grown up hearing the horror stories of audism from older generations. They had been told that there were things they just wouldn't be able to do because they lacked the ability to hear, and they believed them. This is unfortunately true for a lot of Deaf people, whether they were raised within Deaf culture or not. Some Deaf people believe that the dominant culture, the "superior" culture – hearing culture – was right and that there were limits on the things that a Deaf person would be able to do or accomplish. Deaf people can't read or write, they can't drive cars, they can't travel, or be independent. Instead, they need help because they are "disabled." These are the things these students were led to believe, and people who defy that logic scared them. These are the things that audism promotes.

Kim Harrell also tells a story of being at a disadvantage in an airport because of being Deaf. She had missed information that was provided over the speakers but was not listed on any of the information boards. She tried to get the help of two different attendants only for them to provide minimal assistance at best. She was finally able to get back home but, in the process, had missed two earlier flights that she was supposed to have been on. As such she texted friends and posted on social media about how that airline was not Deaf-friendly. As a member of the Deaf community, she felt it was her job to inform others within the community of her troubles so that they did not run into the same complications as she did. This is part of being a member of the Deaf community. Letting others know which places are Deaf-friendly and which are not is a way of supporting each other and helping each other. Some people will be stuck in their hearing world audism ways, so it is better for Deaf individuals to just avoid those places and instead go to places that will be understanding and accommodating.

Haben. This book tells the story of a Deafblind girl named Haben Girma. She was born Deafblind to parents who loved her and wanted the best for her but had ableist views and tried to keep her in a protective bubble. At every turn Haben had to fight for herself and be her own advocate, no one else was going to do it for her. Haben fought for her rights, she didn't let her lack of vision or hearing slow her down either. In high school, she went with a humanitarian group to Mali. She went to a college in Oregon, far from her parent's home in California. She moved to Alaska to get a job for the summer before going to Harvard Law School. She climbed glaciers, went horseback riding, and traveled the world, never letting her "disability" stop her. Haben wrote her book to create awareness and to advocate not just for herself but for her community. She wanted to show the world that she could do anything, and she would be able to reach more audiences by writing her story.

Haben's family loved her and supported her, but they had very ableist views. Even her extended family. For example, her little cousin Yafet believed that a blind person could not make a peanut butter and jelly sandwich even after he had watched her make one.

> "'Can a blind person make a peanut butter and jelly sandwich?' He thinks for a second. 'No.' I continue in a calm, neutral voice. 'Am I blind?' 'Yes.' 'Well,

> then, if a blind person can’t make you a PB&J, then I can’t make you one, right?’ Yafet just stands there. He watches me make the sandwich. […] ‘Haben,’ he commands, ‘Auntie Saba says you have to make me a PB&J.’ I raise an eyebrow. ‘You said a blind person can’t make a PB&J. So how can I make you a PB&J?’ ‘But I saw you!’ […] ‘So you saw me make a PB&J? That’s interesting. Now let’s consider that for a second – does that mean that a blind person can make a PB&J?’ He thinks for a bit. ‘No.’” (Girma, 149-150).

Even when people see that what they believe to be the “truth” is wrong they are still reluctant to believe that “disabled” individuals are actually capable of doing things. It is easier for them to believe that the sighted hearing world is better and that the people who don’t fit into that world are disabled and therefore can’t do everything they can. Unfortunately, that is just the ableist way of thinking. Sometimes that way of thinking can be for the right reasons, but it’s still detrimental to the “disabled” person.

From a young age, her parents tried to keep her in a bubble. They just wanted to keep her safe and they didn’t understand how she would be able to protect herself when she could neither see nor hear. Haben worked hard to prove to herself and to others that she was more than capable of doing anything anyone else could do. Before leaving for college, she decided to attend The Louisiana Center for the Blind so she could find the confidence within herself to move away from her family and navigate the world on her own. Before going to Harvard, she went to The Seeing Eye to get a guide dog. She even helped come up with the idea to use Bluetooth to connect a keyboard to her BrailleNote so people could communicate with her more easily. She was determined to show the world that being Deafblind didn’t mean she was disabled. That the only thing she couldn’t do was see or hear.

That didn't mean she didn't struggle though. While she was in Oregon at Lewis and Clark College, she had to advocate for everything. Her roommate wanted to shelter her even going so far to say that she would feel responsible if Haben went out with her and her friends and something happened to her. It didn't matter that Haben had told her roommate that she could take care of herself and that she was responsible for herself. On top of that, she had a hard time navigating the dining hall. The menus were posted but she couldn't see them, and it was too loud for her to hear if someone tried to read her the menus. For a while, she would just pick a random line and hope for the best – particularly because she is vegetarian – but that became tiring. Eventually, she went to the manager of the dining hall and asked if they could potentially emboss the menu. When that idea was shot down, she asked to get the menu emailed to her. Emailing it to her would mean she could read it through Braille on her computer and it would only take a second for someone from the dining hall to do, especially since all that had to do was copy the excel sheet they would be printing anyway. The manager agreed to this but did not hold up his end very well. The menus came sporadically if at all, sometimes even coming after the meal had been served. She again had to go to the manager and try to advocate for herself but was shot down again being told that the restaurant could not take the time to cater to the needs of a single person when they served over 1000 students.

> "'We hope you understand that this is something that we are trying to help you with, but you also need to understand that this is a service that we are not contracted to provide, and unlike the college, we do not have people on staff to assist students with special needs. We will continue to do our best to help you, but it is not reasonable to have an expectation of us that we are not required to do (we never expressed that we could, or would, commit to this),

> and it is also unreasonable to expect that this assistance will come seamlessly. There will be meals that are missed, and there will be times that emails will arrive late. We are just not set up with the support staff to assist you personally in this matter – we work hard to meet the needs of over 1,000 students for every meal, so we hope you understand that we have a variety of concerns to address every service, and whenever possible we are giving you all the help we can.'" (Girma, 158-159).

Knowing that they did in fact have to provide her with a menu according to the Americans with Disabilities Act, she emailed the manager again only this time including senior management, the Dean of Student Life, and Student Support Services. Finally, she got the help she needed, and the emails were sent to her before every meal. Experiences like this are unfortunately not uncommon among the Deaf and Blind. Some people just don't want to be bothered to take an extra minute or two to help someone who does not have access to some needed information. It is because of experiences like this that the Americans with Disabilities Act was passed in the first place. Haben later learned that a new student at the College who was blind was also receiving the emails thanks to her efforts.

Haben also faced discrimination because of being Deafblind. When she moved to Alaska, she was supposed to have already had a job but once she got there, she was denied the position because she was not Alaskan. She however believes that it was because of her cane, as they knew that she was not Alaskan during the interviews. She was also denied many other positions because of being Deafblind since the employers felt that she would be unable to adequately do her job. This is also a form of ableism. Many able-bodied people believe that in order to be able to do a job properly and to do it well you have to be "normal" and like them. They don't understand how someone who is Deaf, Blind, or Deafblind would be able to work without lots of assistance.

Sounds Like Home. This tells the story of Mary Herring Wright. She was not born Deaf as the other women had been. She was maybe 8 or 9 when she started to lose her hearing. It was hard for her to transition. She loved hearing everything; music, birds, talking, the dogs barking, everything. It was hard to transition, and she fought it at first. She tried to just read lips so she could pretend that she was still hearing everything and could follow conversations, but it was hard. Her family wanted what was best for her and never looked down on her for her deafness though.

Mary was sent to North Carolina School for the Deaf and Blind in Raleigh. The schools during her time there were segregated. Mary grew up in the early twentieth century - roughly in the ‘30s and ‘40s - before desegregation, so there were many things she was forced to endure being Black in the South. However, the schools weren’t just segregated by race. But also, by gender and disability. The school for the white students was in town while the school for the black students was well out of the way. The girls were not allowed to go near the boys, or they’d be whipped. The only times they were even around the boys were at mealtimes when everyone was in the dining room and at special holiday parties. However, the girls were still not allowed to interact with the boys. The tables, dorms, and classrooms were even divided into spaces for the deaf girls, the blind girls, the deaf boys, and the blind boys.

Deaf schools were also residential schools. As there weren’t many schools for the Deaf most students had t travel to get to them. Their families would have to send them away for the majority of the year, only getting to see them for short periods of time. When Mary first started going to Raleigh for school they had to stay through Christmas, only going home once the schools year was over and summer was starting. Mary's last year there they started allowing some students to go home for Christmas but only if their parents sent for them. This was an unfortunate side effect of being Deaf and gaining an education from a Deaf school. This is also why many parents didn't want to send their Deaf children to the Deaf schools. Most parents have a hard time being separated from their children, especially when their child is "disabled." They worry about their safety and how they will take care of themselves, and sometimes even just the idea of their child gaining some independence.

Times changed and so did the school. Old buildings were refurbished, new buildings were added, and policies were updated. No longer were the Blind and Deaf students completely separated from each other, and the boys and girls were allowed to start socializing as long as there was adult supervision. Students were sent home over the holidays and even allowed to go home over the weekends. All in all, the school improved much like the rest of the world.

From Rejection to Love. In this book, Avril Hertneky tells her story of how she struggled with abuse – emotional, mental, and physical – as well as neglect because she was Deaf. She tells how she had no one to turn to for help, how everybody she tried to tell turned their backs, and how no one believed her. She was born Deaf - most likely caused by all the drugs her mom took trying to abort her - and was treated poorly because of it. Her parents made no effort to help her and instead would beat her for her inability to hear (though this was done mainly by her father). Even her siblings would neglect her. She had to fight for everything she got.

This is unfortunately not unheard of within the Deaf community. Some hearing parents just don't care for their Deaf children. They make no effort to learn to communicate with them or help them with their language development, whether that be oral or sign. This is a form of audism as well. Even though it is very extreme, and most people would never go this far, abuse is a form of audism when it pertains to one’s ability or inability to hear. Preventing someone from having access to language is extremely detrimental to them, especially when they are a child and thus still developing. Also denying one’s disability exists so everyone then just thinks they are incompetent or dumb is also disabling.

Hertneky was denied access to an interpreter many times while living in Canada with her family because her parents would deny that she was Deaf. Being as she was a child, police, child protective services, medical workers, and teachers would believe her parents instead of her when she tried telling them that she was being abused. When she would ask for an interpreter, her parents would say that she didn’t actually need one because she wasn’t actually Deaf. Doing this was a way to control her.

Growing up she was ostracized by her family and in mainstream schools because she was Deaf, but when she attended a Deaf school, she was still bullied and left alone. When she started attending the Deaf school she had hoped to fit in and be able to communicate with people and make friends, potentially even find people who would listen when she tried to tell them what went on at home. However, instead, her classmates would bully her because of her nationality. Even though she did not look it, she was Iraqi – both of her parents were from Iraq. No one wanted to be friends with the Deaf Iraqi girl either. With her fellow Deaf students, she was an outcast because her parents were from Iraq, but in the hearing world – especially at home – she was an outcast because she was Deaf.

Racism exists within the Deaf community just as much as it does within the hearing community. It is not limited to only hearing white able-bodied males, but instead, everyone is able to partake in it, as awful as it may be. When they are children, they sometimes don't know any better. They just copy their parents and don't think for themselves. However, even as adults, it exists within both hearing and Deaf cultures as well. Hertneky even experienced it in high school and college when people would make fun of her and say go about saying they'd never date the Iraqi girl.

Even after coming to America though Hertneky continued to face audism and ableism. She and her husband moved to Frisco, Texas while she was a few months pregnant with her second child. She went to multiple obstetricians for her prenatal checkups only to be denied access to interpreters. As she still needed the information, they would use a video relay service with an interpreter and Hertneky would just have to do the best she could. However, this meant that all of her attention was forced to be on the little screen trying to understand the interpreter and she could not pay attention to her 1-year-old daughter. The nurses would then yell at her for being a horrible mother. Then when it came time for her to deliver the baby there were more complications. The office again failed to provide an in-person interpreter despite it being requested multiple times and so she was forced to find one herself last minute. The doctors tried to force her into having a c-section despite the fact that she was perfectly healthy simply because they thought she wouldn't be able to because she was Deaf. Then after she gave birth to her son the nurses constantly belittled her and went against her wishes when caring for her newborn baby because they did not feel she was capable of being a good mother.

These problems are again not uncommon within the Deaf community. Hearing people especially worry about the Deaf's ability to raise children because they se them as disabled. In this story, the nurses and doctors not only went against the wishes of their patient and the new parents but also against the law. Legally they are not allowed to blatantly disregard the wishes of their patient – which they did constantly – and they are also required by law to provide access to information via an interpreter. The Americans with Disabilities Act was meant to protect people with disabilities from being forced into situations like this.

When Hertneky was still living in Canada it was frustrating trying to get an interpreter because there was no law saying that hospitals or police or anyone else was required to provide one. However, for Hertneky it was even more frustrating to not be able to have one available when needed when living in the United States because she knew that there was a law stating that places like hospitals were required to provide her with one.

Hertneky also faced discrimination and hate when she tried to advocate for herself and the Deaf community. When the National Association for the Deaf came out and said that the Deaf preferred to be called Deaf or hard-of-hearing and not hearing-impaired, Hertneky tried to educate her neighbors. She had hoped they would be accepting and respect her wishes for them to refer to her as Deaf and not hearing-impaired however instead she got a lot of hate. “I was shocked that the members of my community would show such hatred towards me. It seems that the problem was that my peers did not want to learn about Deaf culture because it is easier for them to stay in their bubble of hearing society” (Hertneky, 117). This is audism at its finest. People are stubborn and usually set in their ways. They don’t like change, and even though some things are rather minor – like asking to be called Deaf and not hearing-impaired – they are too stubborn to see that they are in the wrong and that the change isn’t a bad thing. In addition to completely disregarding her request, she was attacked for advocating for the Deaf community. People would message her asking her to take down her post or saying they felt attacked by it.

One person commented about her hearing-impaired daughter and when Hertneky asked that she use Deaf instead the person proceeded to attack her. Another person attacked her saying that she had disabled sons.

> "People assume that all disabilities are the same. We are not the same group of misfits. We are uniquely made with unique gifts and challenges. I cannot understand why someone with a disabled child would attack me. They know what their child experiences, yet they come after me in the same way. The reality is that these parents, like many others, failed to educate themselves about the nature of the word 'disability' in the first place. I am not an ally of all the disabled. I do not know what life is like through their eyes. It is their job to speak up and represent themselves, and their community. I am Deaf. I understand the Deaf. Therefore it is my job to speak up for the Deaf. To represent the Deaf. To educate my neighbors and peers about the Deaf" (Hertneky, 124).

As it stands many people do view disability this way. They see it as overlapping and all encompassing. Society sometimes fails to recognize that each disability is unique and that each individual with that disability is also unique. No two people will ever have the exact same experiences, which is why Hertneky felt it was so important to tell her story. She is an advocate for the Deaf community, she wants to educate people on Deaf culture. More importantly though she was advocating for herself.

This is the type of discrimination and audism that many Deaf individuals face today. As much as the world has progressed it has not progressed enough. Audism is still a prominent part of society and until people are willing to put their own egos aside to see that they are in the wrong it will continue to be a part of society.

Hertneky wrote this book as a way to share her story. She needed to be able to share it with people to let go of everything she had been holding on to from her childhood. All the pain and frustration and suffering from growing up how she did, all the anger she felt toward her family for treating her the way she did, her first love, her friends, her bullies. Everything that was weighing her down. She needed to tell her story to let go. Her story is sad and hard, but she managed to make it through. She held her ground and fought for everything she could. She didn't let everything that happened to her break her, even if she got really close sometimes.

Deaf Gain was noticeable throughout these books in small things like curved sidewalks, and tv captioning. In *Haben* she shares the story of introducing the President and Vice President of the United States on the anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act. One of the things she comments on about the speech was that everything that was said was being captioned live on the screens. This is part of Deaf Gain because while it was a technology that was meant to improve the lives of the Deaf it ended up being beneficial to everyone. People who were in the back that maybe couldn't hear everything that was said or even other people with a disability that makes it hard for them to understand speech, they were able to simply read the captions instead of straining to hear everything that was said.

Another notable thing was that all four women had to face intersectionality. For Kim Harrell she had to find balance between the hearing world sh egrew up in and the Deaf world she had become a part of. While she was at school in Oregon she was able to be in both worlds as the Deaf community was strong but also not put of by her ability to talk as the Deaf community at

Gallaudet had been. For Haben Girma it was her ethnicity. She tells a story from when she was little about her parents saying they were Etheopean and Eritrean, but when they asked her what she claimed she said she was American. They explained to her that while yes she was American, she was also Etheopoean and Eritrean. For Mary Herring Wright it was being Black but also being Deaf. Similarly, for Avril Hertneky it was being Iraqi and being Deaf.

In conclusion, *Learning to Be Deaf Without Losing Your Hearing, Haben, Sounds Like Home,* and *From Rejection to Love* were all very powerful books. Their stories were empowering and proved to everyone who would listen that the deaf are not disabled. That the only thing they could not do was hear. All four women - Kim, Haben, Mary, and Avril - were strong, powerful, independent women who did not need to rely on others. They proved to themselves, their families, friends, peers, and everyone else who payed attention that they were capable of doing anything. That the inability to hear was not the inability to live.

These women faced hardships and discrimination. They faced audism and racism and sexism. They encountered dyscnscious audism but never faultered. They stayed strong in their culture, developed their own beliefs, and stood up for themselves and the Deaf community. These are only four women's stories though. They do not represent all Deaf females. Everyone has their own story and none will ever be exactly the same. However, through these stories you can see what some members of the Deaf community go through. Some aspects of these stories are common for many members of the Deaf community to experience. By reading these stories you can gain a better understanding of everything the Deaf community has had to work for, what they have proved to the world only to be denied over and over again. These books give hearing people a better understanding of Deaf culture and what it is like to have to be your own advocate because no one else if going to do it for you.

Sources

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