

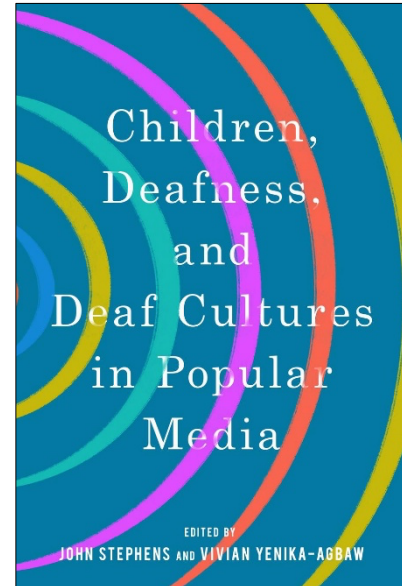
John Stephens and Vivian Yenika-Agbaw (Eds.), **Children, Deafness, and Deaf Cultures in Popular Media**, Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2022, 286 pp., \$110.00 (hardcover), \$35.00 (paperback), \$27.07 (ebook).

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In ***Children, Deafness, and Deaf Cultures in Popular Media***, editors John Stephens and Vivian Yenika-Agbaw address important gaps in scholarship surrounding representations of deafness and Deaf Culture in children’s literature and film. Many prior academic discussions have centered adult literature instead, and even though creatives have demonstrated interest and engagement in d/Deaf representations in children’s and young adult media, there has yet to be ample academic scholarship and critical analysis on the topic, especially from a global perspective.

The 15 essays included in this edited collection cohesively explore several core questions about d/Deaf representations in media: Whose perspectives currently shape these representations? What are authors’, filmmakers’, and other creatives’ relationships to d/Deaf and hearing communities? And what characteristics do they highlight in d/Deaf characters, especially in relation to the larger narrative? Is deafness caricatured, reinforcing stereotypes through assimilatory sketches? Or are audiences challenged to reflect critically on their own biases and assumptions about deafness? Grappling with these questions across creative mediums and historical, cultural, and geographical contexts, the editors succeed in curating a diverse selection of global perspectives, which they emphasize as a strength of the collection. Engaging with theories from deaf studies, cultural studies, disability studies, media studies, childhood studies, and cognitive sciences, *Children, Deafness, and Deaf Cultures in Popular Media* offers a timely interdisciplinary reflection on the practices, implications, and histories of d/Deaf representation in children’s media. Though many d/Deaf people do not identify as disabled, many of the discussions around norm subversion and media representation, particularly when critiquing instances of stereotype reinforcement and curative narratives, are in dialogue with essays featured in Elizabeth Ellcessor and Bill Kirkpatrick’s (2017) *Disability Media Studies*.

The editors’ Introduction is a vital orientation for readers unfamiliar with definitions of deafness and Deaf Culture, citing Baynton (2015) and Padden and Humphries (1988) to foreground historical distinctions between the “audiological condition,” denoted by “deafness” with a lowercase “d,” and Deaf Culture’s shared signed language and culture, denoted by an uppercase “D.” Yenika-Agbaw’s interwoven reflections on her mother’s deafness and her own research with d/Deaf communities in the West and in Africa is a compelling addition, especially when discussing the increasing uptake in cochlear implants in the Global North, a once highly stigmatized and now more normalized procedure perceived to “shrink” Deaf Cultures (Baynton, 2015). Debates around social and medical models are frequently described in conversations around disability, and in their framing argument, the editors note that narratives around deafness tend to “range from texts that



continue to construct deaf children through a medical and thus a pathological perspective to those that leverage a balanced perspective that takes into consideration the complete child as a complex human being" (xiii).

The collection engages with d/Deaf representation through three sections. The first focuses on "Narratives of d/Deafness." The second highlights "Deaf Cultures in Visual Texts." The third centers "Deafness and Cultural Difference." Throughout its sections, the collection accomplishes its goals of emphasizing medium affordances for representation and situating representations in historical, cultural, and geographical contexts.

The first three chapters grapple with medium and representation. Part 1 opens with an essay by Jessica Kirkness, who describes the medium affordances of writing about her experience growing up with Deaf grandparents. Kirkness perceives her creative nonfiction and memoir writing as a "between space," a "contact zone" between her dual experiences as an insider and outsider (p. 5). Creative nonfiction is framed as a tool for visibility and embodied sharing of experience, with power to upset norms. She writes about her struggle to reconcile her own positionality and perspective with her collaborative documentation of her grandparents' lives. Meanwhile, Cynthia Neese Bailes underscores the importance of d/Deaf representation in children's literature as "a window for hearing children into the lives of D/deaf children and a mirror for D/deaf children of their own lives" (p. 16). Of critical importance to Bailes is realistic connection to lived experiences of deafness. She asserts that many of the emotions, ideologies, and hierarchies represented in the picture book she analyzes do not align with d/Deaf people's lived experiences. She also critiques the picture book because she does not interpret it to take a critical, perspective-shifting approach. In contrast, Nerida Wayland describes the potential for humor to subvert norms and "close the space between text and readers to encourage empathy and familiarity" (p. 39), though she cautions against leaning too far into generalizability and flattening individual difference when using humor as a communicative tool.

Essays in Parts 2 and 3 also highlight medium affordances for representation, like Sara Kersten-Parrish's chapter on the medium affordances of graphic novels, especially focusing on the collaboration between text and author-embodied illustrations to "demand" engagement from readers. Chapter 14 describes novelist Lynn McElfresh's (2012) stylistic choice to narrate one of her protagonists via American Sign Language (ASL) "gloss," which essay author Angela Schill defines as ASL "represented or translated in writing with English words and accompanying symbols" (p. 204). Other authors describe the translational challenges of writing about a nontextual language on paper, but Schill notes that McElfresh's use of ASL gloss manages to capture some of ASL's flow, and notably, within the context of a multicultural family.

Numerous essays are particularly historically, culturally, and geographically situated in their discussions of d/Deaf representation, with many focusing on possibilities for norm subversion. Several authors position some amount of work toward normalizing deafness as refuting established norms and incorporating d/Deaf representations into the everyday. Chapter 4 features H el ene Charderon's analyses of four 19th-century stories penned for children by French writer Sophie de S egur, which feature a historical use of "metaphorical deafness" as a moral issue and a mechanism for norm deconstruction. Similarly, Sung-Ae Lee notes South Korean films' tendency to use deafness as a metaphorical plot device, highlighting several more recent films that seek to normalize deafness in "everyday culture" (p. 158). Vivian Yenika-Agbaw's chapter on *Wonderstruck* and *A Quiet Place* explores how print text and illustrations, as well as visual media narratives,

can alter conceptions of norms within and beyond fictional worlds set decades and worlds apart. Meanwhile, Helen Kilpatrick acknowledges the common “curative” narrative of deafness and its history in Japanese cinema. She describes the potential for live-action and anime films to generate communicative bridges across difference, emphasizing the possibilities for altering audience’s mental representations of deafness through popular genre conventions. Josh Simpson’s essay also emphasizes the potential for media to provide audiences with representations of deafness that expand their imaginations, noting that young adult novels can generate greater awareness and imaginaries about identity and experience.

Other essays in the collection provide in-depth cultural histories across time, such as Nina Benegas, Stuart Ching, and Jann Pataray-Ching’s summary of the history of Hawai’i Sign Language and the narratives that continue to reinforce its local identity. Lijun Bi and Xiangshu Fang offer a historical and cultural analysis of Chinese literature and disability awareness. Corinne Walsh reflects on her own experiences with deafness as well as her field research with an Indigenous community in Australia. Helene Ehriander’s reading of a novel from the 1990s acknowledges the text as a critique of ableist power structures that asks early questions that continue to be relevant in modern discourse. Finally, John Stephens’ chapter on Theory of Mind, or the cognitive process that guides how we perceive others’ behaviors, describes Roz Rosen’s (2017) *Deaf Culture Fairy Tales* as she guides readers through retellings of familiar fairytales like “The Ugly Duckling” through a Deaf Culture lens that transforms narratives with long histories of cultural transmission.

This collection will be of interest to a broad audience, including scholars across a range of disciplines and media creatives contributing their own popular media representations. The book concludes with a glossary that solidifies its legibility to readers previously unfamiliar with deaf studies and Deaf Culture, offering definitions for terms like “speech reading” (a more precise and expansive replacement for the term “lip reading”) and “home signs” (gestures generated by deaf children in hearing homes, often in collaboration with hearing family and friends but not connected to widely adopted signed language). The Introduction and individual essays are already written quite clearly, so this concluding section serves as a final installment in a practical and theoretical guide for scholars and creatives who aim to use more inclusive language and incorporate more authentic and realistic narratives about deafness into their scholarship and creative projects.

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