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Forbidden Signs: American Culture And The Campaign Against Sign Language



Synopsis

Forbidden Signs explores American culture from the mid-nineteenth century to 1920 through the lens of one striking episode: the campaign led by Alexander Graham Bell and other prominent Americans to suppress the use of sign language among deaf people. The ensuing debate over sign language invoked such fundamental questions as what distinguished Americans from non-Americans, civilized people from "savages," humans from animals, men from women, the natural from the unnatural, and the normal from the abnormal. An advocate of the return to sign language, Baynton found that although the grounds of the debate have shifted, educators still base decisions on many of the same metaphors and images that led to the misguided efforts to eradicate sign language. "Baynton's brilliant and detailed history, *Forbidden Signs*, reminds us that debates over the use of dialects or languages are really the linguistic tip of a mostly submerged argument about power, social control, nationalism, who has the right to speak and who has the right to control modes of speech." —Lennard J. Davis, *The Nation* "Forbidden Signs is replete with good things." —Hugh Kenner, *New York Times Book Review*

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Customer Reviews

Douglas Baynton has written a learned history of the varied and sundry attempts that have been made to prevent deaf people from communicating with their hands. *Forbidden Signs* intelligently explores the cultural aspects of deafness, laying out the naturalness of a gesture-based means of communicating by deaf people, exploring the unique aspects by which meaning can be conveyed

without the spoken word. In this context, the pseudo-scientific arguments for preventing the use of sign language which predominated for nearly a century are laid bare as the arbitrary and capricious biases of the hearing world. The rise of a quasi-biological notion of eugenics and genetic determinism as well as the construction of a standard of "normalcy" against which deaf people were measured explains both the means and the rationale for the suppression of sign language. The incredible story of the extensive attempts to isolate deaf people and to break up communities of signers that Douglas Baynton has recorded will likely be difficult to imagine by those who know little of the history of deafness in America. Unfortunately, it is likely a story too familiar to deaf people, even today. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

As the subtitle of this important book suggests, it is a study of American culture rather than a history of Deafness. Baynton uses the history of sign language and Deafness in America from the mid-nineteenth century to the early twentieth century to explore the shifts in practices, assumptions, dogma, and national mission during this volatile period of American cultural formation. . . Baynton is able to clarify significant, yet complex changes during America's most intense period of reform. . . Such a strategy of employing the particular to reveal the general makes this book of interest to scholars of Deaf culture as well as the general historian. Moreover, because Baynton thoroughly lays out in accessible language the argument that deafness is a cultural construction, this be used as a text with which to integrate disability studies into an American studies or history course. -- Disability Studies Quarterly, Summer 1997 Baynton places this struggle between the 'manualists' and the 'oralists' into its very broadest cultural context, seeking to offer fresh perspectives on the shifting ways in which Americans have conceptualized human history and American identity, nature and human nature. . . Baynton's narrative is most powerful, not where the treatment of the deaf reflected a broader cultural consensus, but, instead, where the existence of the deaf shaped that consensus. Such is particularly the case in Baynton's illuminating discussion of the emerging scientific definition of the normal. -- Journal of American History, September 1997 Baynton's brilliant and detailed history reminds us that debates over the use of dialects or languages are really the linguistic tip of a mostly submerged argument about power, social control, nationalism, who has the right to speak and who has the right to control modes of speech. -- Nation, March 10, 1997 Excellent. . . Historians and specialists in sign language or education will gain valuable and unexpected insights into their own disciplines from this book. -- Times Higher Education Supplement Forbidden Signs is an excellent cultural history that offers timely insight into our present. -- Journal of Communication, Summer 1997 Forbidden Signs is replete with good things. -- New

York Times Book Review, January 26, 1997In his wonderful book . . . Baynton suggests that there is a legitimate and important place for the study of . . . disabled people. Forbidden Signs is a fine piece of American cultural history, and it is clearly the finest example yet published of disability history turned on its head to illuminate the world all of us, whatever our disability, share. -- H-Net Reviews, August 1997Superbly written . . . balanced and convincing. His excellent historical analysis will interest not only specialists interested in deafness, but all cultural and intellectual historians. -- Journal of Social History, Spring 1998Unassuming originality [and] fresh details from the history of American deaf education. -- Times Literary Supplement, January 30, 1998

Really well-written history of cultural attitudes towards deafness and the hearing impaired, and how they have changed over time.

Very interesting read made me more knowledgeable in regards to the Deaf Culture.

Phenomenal book!

Juxtaposed against 'democracy' the oralism movement was fundamentally authoritarian to the core. Like the schools which missionaries set up to 'tame' the Indian tribes which they encountered, these institutions wanted to make the 'deaf and dumb' as they were once called, assimilate by any means necessary. Signing was considered backwards and primitive, speaking was thought to be the only 'civilized' marker of civilization. However, Douglas C. Baynton clarifies that at these institutions, the students practiced their own models of resistance. He also stresses that being deaf is not a limitation, but a distinctive culture, like Spanish or Polish is commonly thought of. Therefore it is impossible to obtain a complete translation between English and ASL in all cases. Academic works can be pretentious, but this was a definite page turner. I felt a little let down that his chronicled history did not examine the 20th century. It would be interesting to see what forms this campaign is taking in an era when people with disabilities are supposed to be included in greater public participation. I doubt that it completely disappeared. Plus the transformation of Gallaudet University from a site of oralism to the DPN now protests and open embrace of ASL could have provided interesting research certainly within this book's reach. It remains an important work in the too under-known field of disability studies.

Quite honestly, I expected to be bored out of my wits by this book. The subject matter was

interesting, but it started out as Baynton's doctoral dissertation, for goodness' sake! It was going to be a dryly written academic bog. Wrong. Baynton's style is witty and positively lyrical, a pleasure to read. Indeed, I was surprised at the short time it took me to finish. This is not to say that the book suffered from a lack of hard content- far from it. If "When the Mind Hears" intrigued you, "Forbidden Signs" will leave you riveted. Baynton reaches startling conclusions which are so logical that, in hindsight, they seem self-evident. Of particular interest was his chapter on gender in the oralist movement- you definitely won't see that one coming! I hate to seem excessively gushy, but Baynton has produced a marvel. I only hope there's an equally good sequel in the works. :c)

The book was sensitive and beautifully written. There are many things still forbidden to the deaf in the year 2,000 (disgraceful)! Here are a few more sundry attempts to prevent the deaf from exploring their right to fully communicate or make their language fully credible, valuable and valid. I call it DDD or Dumbing the Deaf Down. 1. The linguists, educators and interpreters all say sign language is a visual language, therefore it cannot have a written form. Even the deaf have bought this myth hook, line and sinker. To prove my point, English is a vocal language. Does that mean English should not have books filled with words? No one should be able to write letters, type, keep documents etc.? How loonie that would be. 2. The experts all say, "Home signs are invalid", there's "no use for them", they are "wrong" and they "aren't accepted" (by the Ph.D. community I guess), etc. Who's language is it anyway? Why shouldn't all signs be documented? Why should some signs die when the old deaf ones pass on? Why shouldn't there be a 2 way sign language dictionary that anyone at any age could access? Have no fear! A team of concerned parents are doing just that. As of this writing there are 9,000 signs in written form, and 3,000 left to finish. 1,800 signs are now in alphanumerical order with 10,200 left to be placed in a 2 way dictionary. If anyone has a problem with this and wishes to debate the issue, I'll be more than happy to oblige. wercozy@wvi.com

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