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**Esmail, J. (2013). *Reading Victorian Deafness: Signs and Sounds in Victorian Literature and Culture*. Athens: Ohio University Press. ISBN 978-0-8214-2034-8.**

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In *Reading Victorian Deafness: Signs and Sounds in Victorian Literature and Culture*, Jennifer Esmail explores the cultural role of deafness in Victorian England and North America. Looking to cultural products as a reflection of wider societal beliefs, Esmail provides an in-depth history of the contrasting proponents of signed languages and oralism during this historical period. The author explores the devaluation of signed languages as a cultural creation through the belief systems of the time and the authority of what she calls “the hegemonic language of the dominant hearing culture” (193).

The book opens with a painting entitled “Royal Condescension,” which features an image of Queen Victoria signing to one of her deaf subjects. In the style of the book, art is interwoven with discussion of the existing politics. Queen Victoria, in this example, is contrasted with a sick girl who, the author notes, contrary to the trends of the day, has condescended to use signed language rather than to be spoken to or written to in English. This political statement by the deaf and signing painter Agnew juxtaposes the typical degradation of signed languages with sophistication, through its use by royalty. This painting sets the tone for the rest of the book.

The introduction describes the ways in which Victorian history has influenced constructions of disability through the use of language. The author investigates the roots of contemporary understandings of deafness and marginality through historically accepted images of deafness including depictions of dehumanization, pity, and suffering. Divided into three sections—Victorian Cultural Constructions of Deafness; Deaf Victorians: Their Lived Experiences and Self-Representations; and Victorian Approaches to Signed Languages—the

book demonstrates insightful, well researched and in-depth understandings of both Victorian culture and the role of deafness and marginalization within it.

The exciting initial chapters provide a discerning and provocative look at literary art forms and their convergence with deaf literary artists. Chapter 1 explores the relationship of sound, rhythm, and rhyme in deaf poetry. The author highlights the uncertainty of deaf poets at this time in the creation of this art form, noting its cultural link with sound and speech. Looking to poetry, an artistic style with significant cultural capital, Esmail cites the work of Kitto, Nack, and Burnett, early deaf poets, to exemplify the fight to validate deaf poetry and these individuals as forerunners forging the way for later deaf poets. The author demonstrates this cultural development as a challenge to the oralist belief that signing impeded English language skills, and instead as demonstrative of intellectual capabilities and linguistic capacity of non-verbal individuals. This thought-provoking interrogation of signed poetry challenges assumptions of linguistic superiority and the successful resistance to this dominant force of spoken language.

In Chapter 2 the works of Charles Dickens and Wilkie Collins are explored in both the writing of deafness in Victorian times and the reading of these characterizations. Observing the frequently stereotypical and uninteresting presentations of deaf characters, the author recognizes a lack of signing in deaf characters, in spite of the common presence of deafness in the fiction of this era. Looking specifically at Dickens's 1865 *Doctor Marigold* and Collins's 1854 *Hide and Seek* as "the only Victorian fictional texts to feature a deaf character who uses signed language" (70), Esmail argues that it is the deaf characters relationship to language, the "visio-spatial complexity" (70), and their "speechlessness" (100) which is responsible for the small representation of signing characters within this literary context. Identifying the written text as dependent on orality, the author problematizes the silence of these characterizations. In the style

of disability writers such as Garland Thomson (1997), and Mitchell and Snyder (2001), the cultural presentation of disability is viewed as an important influence, and an important reflection of conceptions of disability in history.

Shifting in focus, Chapter 3 contains a discussion of signed language in relation to evolutionary theory and the tendency of Victorians to associate a lack of speech with animal species. This chapter is introduced with a reference to a children's book, which highlights the distinction between humans and apes, and mentions the treatment of talking animals in stories of this period such as Sewell's 1877 *Black Beauty* and Power Cobbe's 1867 *The Confessions of a Lost Dog*. She also highlights the more threatening presentations of talking apes in Wells's 1896 *The Island of Dr. Moreau* and Kipling's 1894 *The Jungle Book*. Through these works Esmail points to the accepted necessity to clearly divide man from animal and the questionable role of those who do not speak orally. The chapter, however, speaks more thoroughly to the further general fears of Victorians around the hierarchical relationship between animals and humans. Noting this fear, the author points to the development of the belief that signed languages were inferior and more "primitive" (104) than spoken language. Esmail links this form of communication with a challenge to the uniqueness and superiority of humans, bringing questions about evolution and the increasing understanding of those who used signed language as lower on an evolutionary scale. The conclusion of this chapter, citing Lennard J. Davis's (1995) recognition of the "foundational abelist myths of our culture: that the norm for humans is to speak and hear" (cited 132), powerfully expresses societal assumptions about language and presumed sophistication.

Chapter 4 looks at deafness as an assumed threat to evolutionary progress through the propagation of deaf people, the creation of deaf communities, and the cultural construction of

signed language. Leading to discussions of eugenics, Esmail links oralism with cure narratives and understandings of the deaf body as defective, and ultimately tragic. The author effectively describes the widespread social campaigns, especially by Alexander Graham Bell, around the development of a deaf variety of human race. In addition to this historical perspective, the movement is described in terms of Dickens's presentation of Dr. Marigold, a sympathetic character who adopts a deaf child, and rejoices when her own child, his granddaughter, is discovered to be hearing.

Chapter 5, "Finding the Shapes of Sounds," provides a historical presentation of technology and its place alongside Victorian deafness and speech. Observing what she sees as an under-examined linkage between ideological and cultural assumptions and technological progress, Esmail identifies the development of speech and hearing technology as equivalent to the recognition of deafness as deficiency. The chapter examines a variety of cultural products surrounding the *problem of deafness*, including medical interventions, fictitious and biographic accounts of the use of technology, along with advertising for prosthetic devices. Looking specifically at the telephone, and Alexander Graham Bell's dual role as the inventor of a tool that was inaccessible to deaf people and as a teacher of deaf children, the author sees this kind of development as one of assimilation. Esmail provides an informative and persuasive chapter around the alienating features of technology, however the literary references included as part of the chapter seem misplaced. A brief mention of Dickens's Mrs. Wardle, Hood's Dame Eleanor Spearing, and McLandburgh's *The Automaton Ear*, feel forced into a chapter where they don't belong. In efforts to keep the book consistently multi-focused this theme is especially weakly developed in the final chapter.

The author concludes that written texts and conceptions of language that emerged from Victorian England have been representative of the cultural reception of deafness and signed language. She acknowledges the problematic connection between reading and the discussion of a language that has no written form, and the changing nature of communication in deaf communities by way of more contemporary visual communication and images.

Several areas stood out as strong arguments in Esmail's work demonstrating important contributions to the historical understanding of deafness and the devaluation of signed language during this period. The author spends a significant amount of time enforcing the recognition of English and signed languages as distinct entities. Differentiating English as a second language for deaf people, she sheds light on the devaluation of signed language as an accepted linguistic form, but also speaks to the social implications of language during this time, especially in her discussion of animal and human communication in Chapter 3. This history of communication and deafness is able to present multiple viewpoints of the role of print, in a language that can't be printed, the support and disavowal of writing by deaf writers, and the relationship of signers to written text and communication.

*Reading Victorian Deafness* provides both an interesting and informative history. My criticism of this book, while acknowledging all of the vital information provided and insightful commentary of the cultural and political role of language, is that the book does not deliver what the title promises. The book itself is about many things, but it is not, for the most part, about reading or literature as the title suggests. The discussion of readings and literature, though present in each chapter, holds a less pervasive role almost as an afterthought, increasingly absent as the book progresses. In spite of my criticisms though, overall this book presents an important perspective and a contribution to disability scholarship in the social creation of disability and

devaluation, especially in the area of language and technology and the forced assimilation of groups who do not fit into normative roles in historic contexts.

#### References

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