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# Deaf Characters And Deafness In Science Fiction

By HARRY G. LANG<sup>1</sup> and ROBERT F. PANARA

## Abstract

Through the years, many individual reports have been published which review the treatment of deafness and deaf characters in various literary works. More recently, comprehensive anthologies have also addressed this topic. The authors add a new dimension to this area of "Deaf Studies" with their review of science fiction literature. Selected nineteenth and twentieth-century works of science fiction are discussed, and several deaf writers in this genre are introduced.

## Introduction

Many writers have reviewed how deafness and deaf characters are represented in literature. This subject has been approached in general articles (e.g., Guire, 1961; 1963; 1965; Panara, 1972), or in specific contexts, such as Panara's (1974) discussion of the concept of "Deaf Studies" in the English curriculum in postsecondary education. Reviews of short stories have been published (e.g., Taylor, 1974a; 1974b) as well as detailed studies of deaf writers (Panara, 1954; 1970a; 1970b). Singular literary works have also been scrutinized, such as Lindholm's (1963) discussion of the deaf character in Charles Dickens' *Master Humphrey's Clock*. More recently, major anthologies have effectively summarized a wide range of fictional and biographical literature dealing with deafness, deaf characters, and deaf writers (Batson & Bergman, 1985; Grant, 1987). Schuchman's (1988) review of the portrayal of deafness and deaf characters in motion picture films since 1902 adds still another fascinating glimpse into history, and, collectively, these studies allow the reader to examine how attitudes toward deafness and deaf people change through time in various literary and dramatic contexts. What does the future hold?

We cannot, of course, answer this question. Science fiction, one of the most popular genres today, is not predictive of future fiction. It is fiction *about* the future written in the past and present. In this sense we may find its portrayal of deafness and deaf people very similar to that found in other genres. On the other hand, science fiction writers have access to an excellent inherent literary device for conveying social and political messages to a wide range of readers. We refer to the "alternate reality," an idea through which a writer can present laws and frameworks that provide the reader with new ways of experiencing or viewing human existence. Implicit in this concept is the postulate that there may be a multiplicity of universes nested together, "Chinese-box fashion," though each universe is often oblivious of the others (Elrick, 1978). We, as deaf writers, however, may go so far as to argue that for many people in the deaf community such a framework of existence is not fiction at all. We are, in one sense or another, nested Chinese-box fashion in subcultures, in the larger society of hearing people, or even when we are divided amongst ourselves by virtue of our communicative preferences.

If this notion is true in fact, then can it be extended to fiction? Elrick also writes that science fiction is rife with time

loops, windows and other boundaries that are traversed only at the risk of "meeting oneself face-to-face, sometimes in a hostile or erotic context" (p. 28). In terms of such encounters, deafness may very well present such an alternate reality. With this in mind, we searched the genre of science fiction for such "windows" and "boundaries" through which the fiction and fact about deafness has been conveyed.

There are many science fiction stories which deal with "silence," and a review of a few of these reveals a variety of interpretations. C. S. Lewis, for example, uses a theological metaphor in his novel *Out of the Silent Planet*. In this story, the "silent planet" is Earth, whose angel is "bent" (the Devil), and the other planets have heard nothing from that world since before the creation of Man (Moskowitz, 1976, p. 6). In Paul Janvier's "Silent Brother," "silence" is psychiatric possession (Moskowitz, 1976, p. 120). The "anacoustic zone," a region of absolute silence which begins far above the surface of the Earth, enables writers to approach "silence" in a purely physical manner. The further one moves into space, the more distant the molecules are from each other and therefore the more difficult it is for sound to travel. Most science fiction writers, however, assume readers are familiar with this concept and the hearing characters in stories occurring in interplanetary space frequently make use of radio, light beam and other technologies to assist them in communicating. Electronics may even provide these characters with the ability to hear beyond the normal audio range of humans, such as the idea of the "soundless siren," a futuristic form of the hearing aid (Elrick, 1978, p. 233).

In "Without Colors," one of an enchanting series of stories about the evolution of the universe, the Italian writer Italo Calvino (1968) draws such a metaphorical interpretation of "deafness" from the physical absence of air molecules which carry acoustic energy. Calvino's character, Old Qfwfq, reflects on the monotonous but restful days when the Earth was just beginning to form its atmosphere: "Then there was the silence: no use shouting! Without any air to vibrate, we were all deaf and dumb" (p. 51). Old Qfwfq falls in love with Ayl in all her colorlessness in the ultraviolet era of our planet and, in such a period when "we didn't have many concepts at our disposal," gestural communication was not easy. Later Old Qfwfq explains: "How could we understand each other? No thing in the world that lay before our eyes was sufficient to express what we felt for each other, but while I was in a fury to wrest unknown vibrations from things, she wanted to reduce everything to the colorless beyond of their ultimate substance" (p. 55). As oxygen and nitrogen began to surround him, Old Qfwfq began to notice his voice could be heard; also as a consequence the primordial gray, and with it his beloved Ayl, faded away.

## Deaf Characters in Science Fiction

Deaf characters appear in a number of short stories and novels published by hearing writers. In "The Distance of the Moon," also by Italo Calvino (1968), Old Qfwfq recollects a time when the Moon swung so close to Earth that one could

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row out in a boat, prop up a ladder and climb onto it. Most characters in Calvino's story have names. There are Captain Vhd Vhd, little Xlthlx and others. Old Qfwfq's cousin, however, is merely referred to as "The Deaf One."

Calvino's story contains erotic overtones and covert allusions to mythology. Although he lacks character development, The Deaf One plays a principal role. His only physical description is that of having "clumsy hands." However, the narrator, Old Qfwfq, marvels at how his deaf cousin easily outdoes the other members of the boat's crew when climbing the ladder and leaping onto the moon. He is just as dexterous when returning to Earth and hurling himself into the boat, an operation still more difficult. Once on the Moon, The Deaf One resembles Peter Pan as he is "inspired to turn somersaults or to fly almost like a bird" (p. 7) while exploring its milky floor. These explorations have no seeming sense or direction, yet he travels to the most isolated places, "jumping from one to the other, as if he were playing tricks on the Moon, surprising her, perhaps tickling her." Obviously, he is moonstruck during these boarding episodes when the Moon is full and its orbit closest to Earth; because at month's end, when the satellite moves on, he returns "to his solitary detachment from the things of the world" (p. 10). Then, too, it seems that the Moon itself looks forward to these monthly reunions. On one occasion, when The Deaf One prepares to board the Moon, Old Qfwfq remarks, "I even thought I saw the Moon come toward him, as he held out his hands" (p. 5).

This lunar attraction resembles a Narcissus-like complex. We learn that the Captain's wife, Mrs. Vhd Vhd, has eyes for The Deaf One only, and not for Old Qfwfq (who is sexually aroused by contact with her). She secretly longs to leap on the Moon and live for a whole month in isolation with The Deaf One in one of his secret hiding places. She also plays the harp, which she later brings aboard the Moon, just as its orbit begins to widen at month's end. The Deaf One, however, is not only deaf to her harpstrings but also blind to her advances. At the last moment, during the final boarding, he jumps off the Moon, back to the haven of the boat—there, perhaps, to stare fixedly at his own reflection in the sea. As the Moon orbits away, Old Qfwfq catches a glimpse of the Captain's wife in the celestial distance. He sees her wandering among the wastelands, "mumbling dirges and stroking her harp" as if she finally realizes that The Deaf One "loved only the Moon, and the only thing she wanted was to become the Moon, to be assimilated into the object of that extrahuman love" (p. 14). As in the myth of Narcissus and Echo, The Deaf One, like Narcissus, rejects Mrs. Vhd's advances. Echo wastes away until only her voice remains. Like Echo, Mrs. Vhd Vhd proves that "her passion for the deaf man hadn't been a frivolous whim but an irrevocable vow" (p. 15). Since he only loved the Moon (or was enamored with his own mirror image in the water), "then she too would remain distant, on the Moon" (p. 15).

Old Qfwfq's last sight of Mrs. Vhd Vhd is of her pining away on the lunar beach, playing her harp. Thereafter, only the sound of her harp is heard. As such, she seems to parallel Echo.

In another complex science fiction story, a novella titled *Mother and Child* by Joan D. Vinge (1978), the writer moralizes on an epidemic-like plague which had caused Mother-



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Earth's "Humans" to become deaf and mute. They are further handicapped with poor vision; however, the main character, "Etaa," possesses normal hearing and sight. Her name sign, Etaa, means "blessed by the Mother" (or Mother Earth) and she is regarded by the Kotaane, her clansfolk, as being clairvoyant. The irony is that she does not realize she has normal hearing but communicates in sign language at all times; however, this "second sight" and sixth sense (hearing) elevates her to the status of priestess.

The story deals with her marriage to Hywel, the tribal smith, by whom she is impregnated; her abduction by Meron, King of the Neanne, a rival warring faction, who believes he is the father of her upborn child; the birth of Alfilere, her son (who also possesses normal sight and hearing); and the kidnapping of both Mother and Child by a god-like alien who suddenly arrives in a spaceship from another planet. The alien not only has regenerative powers but also is a "creature of the air" whose flaccid body has "expansible air sacs" which fill up with air and allow it to take off like a balloon or a glider. Its sex is dual (male and female) and it has clone-like powers of self-reproduction. Named "Tam," this alien is a member of the Conservatives in the interstellar Colonial Service, and he explains to Etaa that she was kidnapped so that both the Kotaane and the Neaane, who now live in a primitive state, would stop their senseless wars.

He then relates the reason why her ancestors, the "Humans," were smitten with the plague which left most of the survivors genetically mutilated, sterile, deaf and blind. They were punished by an alien super-race who condemned their wanton use of technology which led to continual violence, war and destruction. As Tam opines, "Maybe if you begin to learn now how to live with one another, when you come to us as equals between the stars, you'll be able to live with us as well" (p. 81). Looking at Alfilere, her son, he says, "the time is perfect now . . . to show Humans the unity of all life, and how to respect it . . . when they follow the teachings of the Mother. And there is the

perfect sign of that unity, the perfect Human to begin it: your son" (p. 81). Because Alfiler is "the child of the Kotaane and the child of the Neaane," Tam foresees that the boy could thus "inherit his father's throne and close the wound between your peoples forever" (p. 81). Accordingly, he begs Etaa to make the supreme sacrifice: "Etaa, will you give me your son? Let me raise him, among my people, and give him the chance to change your world forever" (p. 81).

The scenario reminds one of that thought-provoking movie of the early 1950's, "The Day the Earth Stood Still," in which an enlightened alien from outer space lands unexpectedly in Washington, D.C., to warn the petty-minded earthlings of the dangers and futility of international tension in our atomic age.

Of special interest is the alien's approach to resolving this problem. Tam stops using sign language and begins teaching Etaa how to speak. She is startled to hear his voice, especially when he sings a song "from one of the pre-plague Human tapes" (p. 64). He explains that, once, all Humans could talk but that after the plague "they forgot how to use their voices because no one could hear them" (p. 65). He goes on to state, "You've seen the Tramanian nobles move their lips and understand each other—they've forgotten their voices, too, but they remember how a mouth was used to make signs" (p. 65).

Shades of oralism and simultaneous communication emerge and the reader soon begins to wonder if Joan D. Vinge, the author, had once been a speech therapist or a teacher of deaf students. There follow some pertinent pages on how Etaa learns to talk. Gradually, the alien puts away pad and pencil after teaching her "the phonemes of the pre-plague speech." Etaa responds in "an earnest singsong of slurred and startling imitations, making her own translation by hand (signs) as she went along" (p. 65).

Eventually, Etaa not only masters spoken language but also teaches her little son to speak. The author's moral here seems to be that, if Etaa bequeaths her son to the care of the god-like aliens, Alfiler will go on to procreate a race of Humans with normal hearing and speech, such as Mother Earth once knew before the plague. In other words, a Hollywood ending to an unlikely story. Which is just how the novella ends—with the Mother sacrificing her Child to the superhuman aliens. And, by simple deduction, the dawning of a **brave new world!**

The complexity of modern science fiction stories is discussed by Isaac Asimov (1985) who contrasts the science fiction of yesterday with that of today. In many of the earlier writings, he explains, it was easy to tell the "good guys" from the bad ones and you could expect the good guys to win. "The newer generation of writers, however, appears to set itself a harder task. They face up to more ambiguous and realistic situations; they deal with worlds in which good and bad are not conveniently compartmentalized, in which there is confusion of emotions and motives, in which understanding comes not only from words but from all kinds of symbols. The result may be more difficult to understand, but, once understood, may be found to mean more" (p. 404).

This was the manner in which Asimov introduced John Varley's (1979) novella, *The Persistence of Vision*, which happens to deal with a utopian-like society for those who cannot see or hear. Varley won both the science fiction writers' Nebula and

Hugo Awards for his description of a society of deaf-blind people resulting from the rubella epidemic of the early 1960s. The inhabitants communicate by "Touch" in a beautifully-cooperative atmosphere. They have special rules and an almost shocking but believable lack of inhibition.

The story takes place five years after a nuclear reactor meltdown in Omaha. The principal character, a backpacker on his way through various "Geigertowns" and communes, comes upon a wall in a deserted country area. On the other side of the wall he finds the community where the sense of smell, and particularly that of touch, governs much of life. Less than an hour after he arrives, he is befriended by a young woman, "Pink." She is the offspring of deaf-blind parents, but possesses normal hearing and vision; however, Pink is totally immersed in the society in which she was raised. She helps the visitor to acculturate, including the intimate "Together," communal conversations which follow the evening meals. Once, he inadvertently forgets himself and leaves a bucket on a path. This mistake causes a woman to fall, whereby he accepts the jury's punishment—a spanking by the victim. Through time he progresses from "handtalk" to "shorthand" (which has similarities to the syntactical structure of American Sign Language and makes the reader wonder if Varley has more than a casual understanding of deafness). After this he learns "bodytalk" and goes on to "Touch," the "fourth-stage language." As the visitor describes, the language of Touch was not quite accessible to one obscured by vision and hearing and the deaf-blind inhabitants of the community "would sit at the Together and invent an entire body of Touch responses in a night; idiomatic, personal, totally naked in its honesty" (p. 440).

The traveler may remind the reader of the character Nunez in H. G. Wells' "The Country of the Blind," or even Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.'s, "Harrison Bergeron." Nunez is normally sighted and the entire community he joins is genetically blinded. Bergeron is a young man tired of his "handicaps" which society has imposed upon him because he is stronger, smarter and handsomer than the average citizen. He decides he wants to live without them and does so at the risk of violating the law. In all three of these stories we have "alternate realities" where everyone is sensory impaired, with the exception of the main character, who with normal sensory functioning, is viewed very much as a "stranger in a strange land." Varley's character, for example, states, "Unless I was willing to put out my eyes and ears, I would always be on the outside. I would be the blind and deaf one. I would be the freak. I didn't want to be a freak" (p. 444).

Lloyd Biggle, Jr., introduces in his full-length novel, *Silence Is Deadly*, an entire planet of deaf beings who communicate through signs and depend on the senses of vision and smell to communicate with one another. When Jan Darzek, the hero, arrives on Kamm, the "Silent Planet," he finds that deafness is synonymous with silence only for the deaf Kammians whose six-fingered hands fluttered rapidly in "finger language." Surgically altered to have impaired hearing, Darzek finds the planet nevertheless "revoltingly noisy." He encounters squeaking carts, and snorting, moaning and bleating nabrula, the ugly beasts of burden. The Kammians themselves hold no social constraint in their wheezing and bellowing as they sign to one another. Kamm is a world of color. Beautiful patterns are found



in the dwellings, floral displays and clothing worn by the deaf inhabitants. It is a world of scent where each Kammian's occupation is identifiable by the perfume he or she wears. But it is also an "uncertified" world, without space travel, and one that may be in possession of a weapon known as a "pazul." The ancient mandate that an "uncertified world" with a pazul must be destroyed led Darzek to investigate Kamm.

As the agents of the Synthesis unravel the mystery, they find that the "pazul" on Kamm happens to be silence itself, likely "the most deadly silence in the universe" (p. 180). Darzek learns that the Winged Beasts of Kamm, now religious symbols still bred in captivity, were once capable of catching their prey with powerful blasts of ultrasonic energy. Surviving lifeforms compensated through evolutionary deafness and the Winged Beasts lost their dominance as Kammians developed civilization.

The analytical reader may wonder: If a beast can so dominate a world with blasts of sound, then would not such a weapon be conceivably used by a villainous human to gain control over his or her enemies? This is the case that challenges the heroic Flash Gordon who faces the madman musician, Pan, in Alex Raymond's story, *The Plague of Sound* (1974). Pan seeks to rule a planet through the use of ultra-high frequency sound and although Flash Gordon does not choose "deafness" to counter the painful attacks of sonic energy, he experiences a variety of difficulties in communicating as he attempts to track down the source of the plague.

#### Sign Language and Lipreading: Image and Function

The ability of deaf persons to lipread has frequently been exaggerated in other genres. We find this to be true in science fiction as well. Lloyd Biggle, Jr., for example, effectively portrays a world of deaf beings in *Silence is Deadly*. But the lipreading skills of Sajjo, the deaf Kammian orphan befriended by the agents of the Synthesis, are described unrealistically. On the last page of the novel we find Sajjo wanting to join her departing friends and become an interplanetary agent. "But—with her being deaf—" one agent questions the logic behind Sajjo's dream. "There may be a way to correct that," another argues. "I think she'll be able to learn to speak, too. She's already reading lips—and in Galactic, too . . ." (p. 184). Sajjo's galactic lipreading abilities perhaps symbolize the unfortunate extension of the lipreading myth into our future.

We see this again in Ray Bradbury's classic *Fahrenheit 451* (1953), the story about a bookburning fireman, Guy Montag, meeting a young girl and a professor who help him to reflect on the madness of his responsibility. Bradbury first published this novel in 1950 during the period when Senator Joseph McCarthy, campaigning as a foe to communist "infiltration" in the United States, waged a character defamation campaign and charged innocent people with guilt by association. One rare edition of this book, in fact, was bound in asbestos (Searles, Last, Meacham, & Franklin, 1979). In *Fahrenheit 451*, Montag awakens one morning to see his wife Mildred, wearing earplugs with "electronic bees" that hum the hour away. She was an "expert in lipreading," however, "from ten years of apprenticeship at Seashell ear thimbles" (Bradbury, 1986, p. 19).

In the film "2001: A Space Odyssey" (1968) we learn that a paranoid computer can lipread. While such a technological breakthrough may be advantageous in some ways, we doubt that in the future deaf humans will be any more Herculean as lipreaders than the best of us today.

Sign language and gestural communication appear relatively often in science fiction. This is not surprising, in view of the fact that the genre typically deals with diverse races of beings having strange and unexpected languages. In these encounters, gestures and signs seem to bridge the linguistic voids until oral languages are learned. In *Out of the Silent Planet* (1973), for example, the C. S. Lewis story which portrays Man as arrogant but fearful in the presence of alien beings on another world, the kidnapped philologist Ransom is kidnapped by a maniacal scientist named Weston. In this first novel in the classic "Space Trilogy" which reveals the inhumanities and discords of today's world, Ransom meets the "hross" on Malacandra and finds their language so different that they must resort to "sign language" and gestural communication. Neither the hrossa nor the human characters are deaf. The frequent use of gestures and signs in science fiction reflects a possible view of manual language as a communicative bridge among multilingual beings.

This idea emerges repeatedly in motion pictures in science fiction genre as well. In the classic film, "Close Encounters of a Third Kind" (1977), Spielberg accompanies musical tones with colors in the communication which occurs between the humans and the extraterrestrials. The very first face-to-face communication exchange between the races is in a series of gestures created, according to the French investigator, from Zoltan Kodally who used them to teach music to deaf children. In "E.T.—The Extraterrestrial" (1982), young Elliott's first communication with the alien botanist occurs through mimicry and gestures.

Of the two science fiction films we have located that actually involve deafness, neither one includes reference to signs or gestures. "Solarbabies" (1986) is a film about a legend named Bohdi who has returned to Earth to free humankind from bondage where the behaviors of people are controlled by rationed water supplies and children are confined to orphanages. When young Daniel finds Bohdi in a cavern while hiding from officials of the orphanage, he is made to hear and sheds his futuristic hearing aid. The first sound Daniel hears is a slow but emotional dripping of water in the cavern—symbolic of Bohdi's purpose.

In the second film, a 1989 TV episode of "Star Trek: The Next Generation," we find a deaf hero. "Loud as a Whisper" introduces the deaf actor Howie Seago as Riva, a mediator from the planet Ramatis who is called to negotiate peace between warring factions on another world. Riva has a strange and beautiful method of communication which has developed over centuries, and through this, the episode cleverly avoids the lipreading issue. Riva is emphatic and "speaks" harmoniously through his translators: two males, one who represents the intellect in matters of judgment, philosophy and logic; the second his libido and warrior who speaks for him in matters of passion as well. The third translator, a woman, is interestingly the synthesizer, the one who "binds the others together in harmony, wisdom and balance." When Riva's chorus of translators is killed by a

traitor, he is persuaded by Counselor Troi of the U.S. Enterprise, also empathic, to turn his "disadvantage" into "advantage." Riva's solution is to teach the warring Solari factions to communicate with him in his language of signs, and in the process, he hopes that they will learn to communicate with each other in peace. The story thus represents sign language in an heroic sense as well.

### Deaf Science Fiction Writers

Probably the first deaf person to pen a story in the science fiction genre was Konstantin Eduardovich Tsiolkovsky, the Russian rocket pioneer whose home, now a museum, has been visited by nearly every Russian cosmonaut and many American astronauts who have returned from voyages into space. Tsiolkovsky was almost completely deafened at the age of nine from scarlet fever. "Because of my deafness," he once wrote, "every minute of my life that I spent with other people was torture. I felt I was isolated, humiliated—an outcast. This caused me to withdraw deep within myself, to pursue great goals so as to deserve the approval of others and not be despised." (Riabchikov, 1971, p. 92)

Tsiolkovsky did reach great goals in his lifetime. Known as the "Father of Astronautics," he was the first to write a full account of weightlessness and authored several hundred articles, books and reports on principles of rocketry in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He has been honored in many ways. A crater on the far side of the moon has been named after him. When the Russians sent Sputnik into space in 1957, only the weather prevented them from launching the satellite on the hundredth anniversary of Tsiolkovsky's birth.

Tsiolkovsky's science fiction story *On the Moon*, written in 1887, describes a lunar trip, complete with a view of Earth from the moon's surface. In this story he presents an amazingly advanced description of free space and other aerospace conditions. Although written in 1894, another of Tsiolkovsky's novels, *A Dream of the Earth and the Sky*, was not published until after the Russian Revolution. Tsarist censors were angered at his description of "sky dwellers." The notion of people traveling into space upset both Church officials and those in science who were also under government control. As Riabchikov writes, "Tsiolkovsky's ideas on space travel made it plain, that in his dreams of a life 'without weight,' Tsiolkovsky also had another kind of weight in mind. He was also thinking of other chains—the chains that fettered the life of the people." (p. 98) In *A Change in the Earth's Relative Gravity* (1894) Tsiolkovsky again symbolizes Man's inhumanity to Man, describing the life of inhabitants of Mercury, where gravity is only half as strong as on earth: "... there are none of these disorders and conflicts among nations from which our poor earth suffers; there is not that great gulf between types of inhabitants which makes one the slave of another..." (p. 98)

The frustration Tsiolkovsky experienced as a peasant in the Tsarist regime must have been formidable. During his earlier years he conceived and submitted drawings of airplane and airship designs long before the successes of the Wright brothers and Count Zeppelin. His efforts to have his projects funded were repeatedly thwarted, and he was not adequately honored until late in his life.

Another nineteenth-century deaf writer who dabbled in this genre was Sir Edward Bulwer-Lytton who championed the superiority of women in *The Coming Race* (1874), a story about an underground civilization which possesses the powers to control weather, manipulate plant life and even fly with detachable wings. Mentally and physically superior to men, the women are even capable of exterminating them if they so choose. Bulwer-Lytton strongly influenced later science fiction writers, including George Griffith. In his story "The Angel of the Revolution" (1893), Griffith actually has one of his characters mention "the dream that Lytton dreamt when he wrote that book" (Moskowitz, 1976, p. 194). More recently, the late Barry Miller, an alumnus of Gallaudet University, published several short stories, including "The Dimensional Wasp" in *Other Worlds* (1956) and "Condition for Survival" in *Amazing Stories* (1964). Neither of these stories involves deafness or deaf characters. Jonathan Swift wrote *Gulliver's Travel* after his onset of deafness. In several of his poems he bewails his loss of hearing. Many writers have expressed astonishment at the uncanny resemblance in Swift's description of the orbits of the two moons of Mars as reported by his Lilliputian astronomers. *Gulliver's Travels* was published more than a century before the actual discovery of the moons *Deimos* and *Phobos* in 1877. When the discovery was made, there was much discussion in the literature about Jonathan Swift's book. Interestingly, the astronomer who made the great discovery was none other than Asaph Hall, the father of Gallaudet University's second president, Percival Hall.

### Summary

A glimpse into the "future" of deaf persons from the perspectives of past and present science fiction writers reveals both the prophetic qualities of the genre as well as how it serves as a mirror of today's society. Science fiction includes a great deal of escape literature with little value beyond entertainment. The stories may bring pleasure or fear to the reader. Some writers have developed abstractions of the concept of deafness in futuristic stories. In Orson Scott Card's *Songmaster* (1987), we find one such abstraction which places "deafness" in an oppressed state. *Songmaster* is a story about a young singer named Anset who is raised in isolation at a mystical retreat called the Songhouse. Anset's voice is both a blessing and a curse, for he had the ability to reflect all the hopes and fears his audience feels, or magnify their emotions. He could, through his singing, use his voice to heal or to destroy, and he is summoned to the Imperial Palace on Old Earth by the Emperor who tests his talents and his conscience. A minor character in *Songmaster* is Kya-Kya, a "Deaf," so-called not because she could not hear, but because, as her teacher told her, "Hearing, you hear not." "Deafs" learned no music in the Songhouse. The Songmaster in the High Room had declared Kya-Kya a "Deaf" and she would eventually leave the Songhouse without songs. While in the Songhouse, however, she is limited to maintenance work with the "Blinds" and after she leaves the Songhouse she would be assigned to a farm. Through this metaphor, Orson Scott Card provides a rather dim view of the life of such "Deafs" and "Blinds." He projects a modern day malady into the future.



In "Harrison Bergeron" (Bower, 1980), Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., presents a frightening view of social equality in the future. The year is 2081 and "everybody was finally equal," not only before God and the law, but in every other way. Amendments of the Constitution and unceasing vigilance of agents of the United States Handicapper General assure that nobody is stronger, smarter, quicker or better looking than anyone else. Bergeron, a 14-year-old youth, sheds his handicaps—the large earphones which slow his thinking, the thick spectacles which made him half-blind and the three hundred pounds of scrap metal harnessed about his body issued to him because he was strong. In this depressing futuristic interpretation of a "least restrictive environment," inequality can be fatal.

And what of deafness as an "alternate reality"? In comparison with other genres, science fiction stories which deal with deafness are largely uninspiring. Some have indeed traversed the boundaries where characters (and sometimes the readers) meet themselves "face-to-face." In Joan D. Vinge's *Mother and Child*, we come face-to-face with ourselves as our own worst enemies, polluting our world and fighting with one another. "Deafness" is inflicted upon us as punishment for not listening to our own warnings and fears, and then taken from us after we have learned to accommodate. As with many dystopias, *Mother and Child* has much plot, but little setting.

In *Silence is Deadly*, Lloyd Biggle, Jr.'s, character Jan Dazek reflects in numerous ways on the notion of living in silence, although somewhat superficially, as is to be expected in such an escapist yarn. The setting is the enemy more than any character.

In *The Persistence of Vision*, John Varley's character reaches more depth in his "face-to-face" encounter with deafness and blindness. After several years away from the community he realizes that he had never been happier than when he was with the deaf-blind people. Upon his return he finds his beloved Pink, now deaf and blind herself, and she offers him the "gift." He accepts, and as he explains, she "reached up and lightly touched my ears with her cold fingers. The sound of the wind was shut out, and when her hands came away it never came back. She touched my eyes, shut out all the light, and I saw no me. We lived in the lovely quiet and dark" (p. 447). As with many utopias, however, *The Persistence of Vision* is more a description of setting. The main character is even nameless. There is no plot and little dialogue.

Although these stories about deafness appear to run the gamut of the science fiction genre, they illuminate, entertain and instruct only to a certain degree. They introduce to the readers some truths and more myths of deafness.

All things considered, however, the genre of science fiction holds much more potential to deal with the alternate reality of "deafness." Through escapist literary devices, the subject of a sensory loss can be explored in unusual ways. Through limitless inventive wonders of science and technology, writers can be surprisingly prophetic in their fiction. And through the clever dimensions of this genre, people who live in a truly silent universe may wonder and dream.

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