



Everyone Here Spoke Sign Language: Hereditary Deafness on Martha's Vineyard

By Nora Ellen Groce

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From the seventeenth century to the early years of the twentieth, the population of Martha's Vineyard manifested an extremely high rate of profound hereditary deafness. In stark contrast to the experience of most deaf people in our own society, the Vineyarders who were born deaf were so thoroughly integrated into the daily life of the community that they were not seen--and did not see themselves--as handicapped or as a group apart. Deaf people were included in all aspects of life, such as town politics, jobs, church affairs, and social life. How was this possible?

On the Vineyard, hearing and deaf islanders alike grew up speaking sign language. This unique sociolinguistic adaptation meant that the usual barriers to communication between the hearing and the deaf, which so isolate many deaf people today, did not exist.

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Editorial Review

Review

When is deafness neither handicap nor stigma? When, as this remarkable book recounts, the entire hearing community learns from childhood to be bilingual in conventional speech and sign language, and when the deaf are wholly integrated into the community's social, economic, religious, and recreational life...A vivid ethnography of a hearing community's full acceptance of, and adaptation to, deafness. Groce also constructs a fascinating ethnohistory of this genetic disorder. (*Choice*)

Beautiful and fascinating...I was so moved by Groce's book that the moment I finished it I jumped in the car, with only a toothbrush, a tape recorder, and a camera--I had to see this enchanted island for myself. (Oliver Sacks *New York Review of Books*)

Brilliantly argued and lively...[Groce's] information consists of the oral history she herself garnered from some 50 witnesses, almost all more than 75 years old, and the documents in print and in manuscript that cross-check and extend their first-hand accounts. Human genetic theory, ethnographic counterparts and a clear-eyed account of social attitudes are the analytic tools that form her brief and telling work...[A] persuasive and compassionate investigation. (*Scientific American*)

Fascinating...Groce accomplishes much just by pointing out that "handicaps" are something a culture creates, and thus the joint responsibility of us all. That's what places this book squarely within the best tradition of anthropological writing, and makes it both moving and encouraging. (*Village Voice*)

About the Author

Nora Ellen Groce, a cultural and medical anthropologist, received her doctorate from Brown University. She is currently a Fellow at the Family Development Study, Children's Hospital, Boston, and in the Department of Pediatrics, Harvard Medical School.

Users Review

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Margaret Boyer:

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