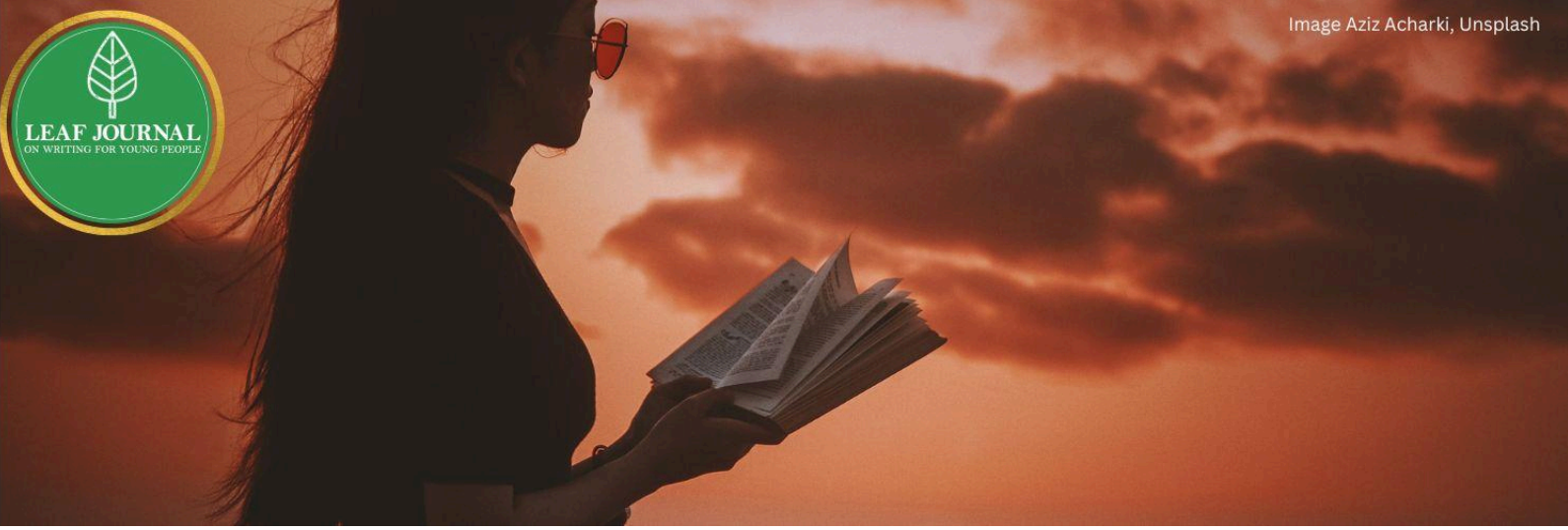

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Where's the Deaf Representation?

Fran Benson

Abstract
At a time when the publishing industry is promoting inclusivity and diversity, Fran Benson asks – where are the deaf characters and what can we learn from hearing authors writing outside of their own experience?
Although Fran has had hearing loss since childhood, it wasn't until she was an adult that she first saw someone like her on the page. So, what's it like for the 50,000 deaf children currently in the UK? Where and how can they see themselves represented in a book? Fran looks at recently published middle-grade and YA books featuring a deaf character. Predominantly written by hearing authors she looks at how they approached their books and what they did to ensure authenticity.
This talk, which represents a small part of a researched article Fran wrote during her MA, is for anyone interested in disability and deaf representation, as well as those striving for authenticity in their writing.

Keywords: *Deaf, representation*

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I am moderately deaf and have been since either birth or early childhood. Because of this, when I did the MA in Writing for Young People at Bath Spa University, I was very interested in deaf representation in children's literature. One of the questions I asked myself when I did a piece of research for the publishing module of the course, was, for the 50,000 deaf children in the UK, how easy is it for them to see themselves represented in books? Specifically in middle grade and young adult? My research also considered accessibility in the industry, but for the purpose of this paper, I focus on the books and what we can learn from hearing authors writing outside of their own lived experience.

In answer to my question of what choice is there for children to see deaf characters in books, the answer is, there isn't much choice at all. Certainly, deaf authors are not represented well. From the hearing authors, again, there aren't many books, although what there is, is written really well. This paper looks at: Lynn Kelly's *Song for A Whale*, Frances Hardinge's *Deeplight*, Ross Montgomery's *Max and the Millions*, Victoria Williamson's *War of the Wind*, and Sara Barnard's *A Quiet Kind of Thunder* and is based on email interviews I had with them.

Writing outside of their own experience – Why?

Whenever I've been in writing workshops and somebody has asked the question about writing outside of their own experience, the editor or the agent taking that workshop typically has come back with the question, why? Why do you want to do this? And I think, why is a really important first question to ask, because we tend to think about all the things we should do to ensure authenticity, how we're going to make this happen. But the question to ask first, I think, is, why? As a result, it was the first question I asked the authors. The answers are broadly split into what I call the authenticity why and the story why.

Song for a Whale – Lynn Kelly

Kelly has been a sign language interpreter since her college days, so she has been working with deaf students for many years. When she was planning her book, which is about a real-life whale who sings a song unlike all other whales, and as a result is all on his own in the ocean, she knew she needed a main character who could have a strong connection to the whale. It occurred to her that a deaf child would be the perfect connection for this whale, and would be able to relate to the whale's isolating experience. So, Kelly had a really good way into her story from an authenticity point of view because she'd been working with deaf students, but also she had a really strong 'why' from a story point of view.

Deeplight – Frances Hardinge

Hardinge was contacted by a deaf fan of her books. A 13-year-old girl, called Ella, wrote to her and asked if she'd considered putting a deaf character in a book. Hardinge hadn't, but she was in the early planning stages of *Deeplight* at the time and thought the ideas and the setting for it would be a really good place to bring in a deaf character and a deaf community. Hardinge created a really great story world for her deaf characters to inhabit. She didn't have the experience of working with deaf people, but equally, she didn't create the protagonist as a deaf character. And I think there is a difference there between whether you're looking at a protagonist or an additional character.

Max and the Millions – Ross Montgomery

In Montgomery's book, the protagonist, *Max*, is a boy who is partially deaf and who wears hearing aids. At the time Montgomery wrote this book, he was still working as an ICT teacher in a primary school. His ICT assistant was a deaf man who wore hearing aids, and they'd been working together for about 18 months when his assistant spoke to him about the mistakes that Montgomery was making when talking to him: he was mumbling, he was turning away and not ensuring he had his assistant's attention fully before speaking. Montgomery was really embarrassed at how little he understood about how to work with a deaf person, and it made him think, if he didn't know anything about this and he'd worked directly with a deaf person for a year and a half, how little does everyone else know? And he also began to think about the children he taught and he realised that he couldn't think of a single deaf main character in a children's book. His story really came out of a conversation that he had with his assistant, who said something along the lines of deaf people are very observant and tend to notice the small details. Montgomery's book is about a boy who discovers a miniature world, so it was a perfect story fit.

War of the Wind – Victoria Williamson

Williamson is a former teacher with a Master's degree in special needs and education, and she'd spent a number of years working with children with additional support needs, including children with hearing issues. She had a strong way into writing authentically with deaf characters. War of the Winds is a lovely diverse book. It has two deaf characters, plus other children with special needs, and it's these children who, after Max, the deaf protagonist, notices something wrong in their small community, do something about it. What Williamson does really well, because of her experience, is to show how different deaf children can have very different experiences. The protagonist loses his hearing very drastically in an accident at the start of the story, and it's a struggle for him and his family to adapt from being in the hearing world to a silent world, whereas the other deaf character has been deaf since very early childhood or birth and grows up with their family using sign language which means that this character is very comfortable and at ease with their deaf identity. Again, it's another book with a strong story and authenticity 'why'.

A Quiet Kind of Thunder - Sara Barnard

In Barnard's book, the protagonist-viewpoint character is a girl called Steffi who has selective mutism and severe anxiety. Interestingly, Barnard didn't feel that she had a way in to authentically write a deaf protagonist. So, the deaf character in this story is the love interest for Steffi. Barnard has a fantastic video (Barnard, 2020) about writing this book, about authenticity and her thoughts on why she felt she couldn't write a deaf protagonist, but felt comfortable with writing it as this additional character. The story is between these two characters, one who struggles to speak and one who is deaf. Barnard wanted to show in this novel that these two characters are perfectly able to communicate, though not in the way that most consider to be normal, and she wanted to know how that experience would affect their relationship. It's a really lovely story with a good story 'why'. Her authenticity 'why', was perhaps weaker than the others, but again, like Hardinge, she wasn't writing the protagonist character from a deaf point of view.

Writing outside of their own experience – How?

Not surprisingly, these authors did a lot of research, reading various books and researching on the internet. They also spoke with deaf people. Montgomery obviously spent a lot of time talking to his assistant. Hardinge set up a group of 'deaf consultants' made up of deaf teens. She regularly spoke with them and was able to ask them questions as she went along. Charities are a good resource. All of the authors were in contact with either the British Deaf Association or more typically, the National Deaf Children's Society. Barnard spoke of doing a sign language course. Obviously, Kelly already knew sign language. Hardinge and Montgomery talked about how they watched sign language videos. Montgomery also mentioned watching lip reading videos.

They all had sensitivity readers. Typically they had two, although Hardinge had seven! The sensitivity readers gave feedback on various aspects of the novel, for example, because sign language is a very different language to spoken language and uses a different grammatical structure, there was typically feedback on that structure to make sure the sign language dialogue was authentic. Another point Hardinge mentioned, was that because sign language is a visual language with a lot of facial expression, her sensitivity readers were able to give feedback so that she could tweak that and make sure that felt accurate too. But sensitivity readers aren't just there to point out where maybe an author has got it wrong. Hardinge gave an example of one sensitivity reader who pointed out that it would be interesting if her deaf character dreamt in sound, but woke up to silence. Hardinge thought that was too beautiful an idea not to include in her story.

Conclusion

Hopefully, learning a little about the 'how' and 'why' of these authors' books is useful if you're thinking about writing outside of your own experience.

Bringing it back to the question that I asked myself at the beginning of my research: What books are there for deaf children to see themselves represented? The answer was, not many, although these are all brilliant books. There are some more in picture books and chapter books. Of particular mention is the Major and Mynah series by deaf author Karen Owen. It's a fun series of chapter books, with two published and two more commissioned. Hot Key has just signed Tasha Ghouri and Lizzie Huxley-Jones to produce a YA romance with a deaf character next year.

So, there's progress, but not much, and those 50,000 deaf children deserve better.

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Author Biography

Fran Benson recently graduated with a distinction from the MA in Writing for Young People at Bath Spa University where she wrote a Middle Grade novel featuring a deaf protagonist which has just been longlisted for SCBWI Undiscovered Voices and the Searchlight Best Novel Opening Award. She has previously been longlisted for the Bath Children's Novel Award and Penguin Random House's Write Now programme for underrepresented writers.