

**2nd Edition**

**For Hearing People**

**ONLY**

*Answers To Some of the  
Most Commonly Asked  
Questions About the Deaf  
Community, its Culture,  
and the "Deaf Reality"*

**MATTHEW S. MOORE & LINDA LEVITAN**  
**With a foreword by Harlan Lane**

**or Hearing People**

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Answers to Some of the  
Most Commonly Asked Questions  
About the Deaf Community,  
its Culture, and the "Deaf Reality"

Second Edition

a newly-revised and expanded compilation  
from the popular monthly magazine

**DEAF LIFE**

by

Matthew S. Moore

and Linda Levitan

Co-Editors-in-Chief

**DEAF LIFE**

With a foreword by Harlan Lane,  
author of **When the Mind Hears: A History of the Deaf** and  
**The Mask of Benevolence: Disabling the Deaf Community**

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For all hearing people who want to better  
 understand our community and our language,  
 and for all those, deaf and hearing,  
 who helped make this book possible.

For my mother, JoNelle, who sought out  
 the best education for me;  
 for Tom Connor, Jr., my best friend,  
 for allowing me to be me;  
 and for Charles Francis Bancroft—  
 T.R.A.G. and D.F.S.S. now and forever!  
 —MSM

For my parents, in the hope that  
 they will *finally* understand;  
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 “living well is the *best* revenge;”  
 and, especially, for my boss, who taught me  
 something about “thinking positive.”  
 —LL

And to the memory of all those deaf people  
 who died because of failed or inaccessible  
 communications, misunderstandings,  
 and ignorance on the part of society.



## Foreword

I doubt whether people are more curious about anything in life than other people—especially other people with another culture. Imagine for a moment striking all discussion of how other groups act, think, socialize, and view the world from conversation, literature and the other arts (not to mention travel books); really, what would we talk about? How many of our sentences start something like: “Although the Germans . . .” “The thing about people from California . . .” “Despite the way Japanese people . . .” For many years, I resisted. French people, I said, are so different one to the next that I refuse to generalize. (Besides, the stereotypes were either adoring or totally damning and neither extreme was plausible.) But in the end I had to give in and generalize—I found I was being left out of too many conversations.

The trouble is, these descriptions of people with another culture are rarely unbiased and rarely well-informed. You are told that French people are unfriendly, Japanese self-effacing, Deaf clannish; what you are not told is: I feel more comfortable in familiar surroundings; I didn’t know how to read the taxi meter; I had no idea how to begin politely; I couldn’t communicate well enough to be interesting. (If only people said what they meant and meant what they said!) The problem, in my opinion, is that we have too much hasty and deceptive description of others and not enough self-description.

This is especially true for relatively invisible cultures like Deaf culture. How are outsiders to learn about it—to learn even the rudiments; for example, that there *is* such a culture? I think the members of the Deaf community may fail to appreciate how utterly unaware hearing



people are of the existence of their culture. (The published remarks of some distinguished Deaf people denying that there is such a culture have not helped.) There is, after all, no Chinatown or Little Italy of the Deaf. Until recently, the language of the Deaf community was not taught in our high schools and colleges. (That has changed dramatically but the language is still grudgingly granted second-class status in most schools.) Deaf culture is rarely portrayed in the media, as infrequently as Black, Native American or Gay culture was portrayed when I was a boy.

There is a special obstacle to hearing people's understanding of Deaf culture in particular. Whereas few Americans construct for themselves an image of Hispanic culture (for example) by extrapolating—by imagining themselves with mastery of their high-school Spanish and a meal ticket to Taco Bell—most Americans who are led to think about Deaf culture do construct their idea of the lives of Deaf people by extrapolating—by imagining themselves without hearing. Of course, a real difference in culture does not enter into this equation (only abrupt silence, a loss, not a gain) and so it is utterly useless to solve any problem that concerns culturally Deaf people. This acultural approach to Deaf culture leaves hearing people with only the concept of handicap to guide them.

Although we never tire of figuring out what the other person can't do, we are almost invariably wrong. Blacks, women and gays couldn't fight alongside straight white males; a deaf person could not be a major actress, lawyer, doctor. We underestimate human ingenuity—and thus ourselves. The same flexibility (miraculous plasticity, really) that fosters spoken languages in hearing people and signed languages in visual people, fosters novel solutions to many of life's challenges. Then,

too, “can’t” can be a self-fulfilling prophecy. The only clear human “can’t” is—you can’t figure out most of the time what someone very different from yourself can and cannot do.

Alas, uninformed guesses at what deafness must be like are frequently presented as authoritative by hearing people who stand to gain by such pronouncements. There is a vast literature on “the Deaf”—countless journals, books, texts, theses, etc. (I review it critically in my new book, **The Mask of Benevolence: Disabling the Deaf Community**.) This is the record mostly of hearing people explaining their ideas about deafness to other hearing people. It has many false stereotypes; it suffers from ignorance of ASL and Deaf culture and Deaf history; it is as bad for what it fails to say (about Deaf art, for example) as for what it does say (about Deaf thought). It is about as useful as Europeans’ explanations to each other about what Africans are really like. It is, however, more dangerous because it is presented as the product of social science research.

Hearing people’s account of Deaf people is, then, very faulty, yet our government listens exclusively to hearing people in matters concerning Deaf people. Only hearing people at the Food and Drug Administration decided to approve cochlear implants for young deaf children (down to the age of two). Only hearing people at the National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders [*sic*] decide on what research should be conducted concerning the Deaf community, ASL, Deaf literacy, Deaf heredity, and much more. Only hearing people in the Department of Education refuse to provide ASL-using children with the special bilingual programs provided children from other language minorities.

So we need more self-description by Deaf people

(among other cultural groups) and I think outsiders would ask for such descriptions more often if we were not so afraid of appearing the fool or of offending. There are two kinds of questions we are tempted to ask, if we only dared. The first kind satisfies our curiosity about obvious differences. I recall an African friend arriving in Boston at midnight on his first trip abroad. As we left the airport, we encountered a few other cars on the highway. "Where is everybody going?" he asked. A question of this first type addressed to Deaf people might be: Is there one universal sign language for Deaf people?

The second kind of question, harder to formulate (why haven't anthropologists helped us more here?), concerns carving an unfamiliar fowl at the joints. What are the revealing questions to ask? We want to know whether the other group, so startlingly different on the surface, doesn't really see the world much as we do and, if not, how its vision differs. Is there another (better?) way to conceive and manage intimacy? Decision making? Spirituality? Wealth? What constitutes achievement? Great art? A good life? These are the more interesting issues, but if we ask any questions at all we are more likely to ask the first kind, the easy ones. And perhaps, after all, those elementary matters need to be cleared up first.

Deaf people have long been trying to explain themselves to hearing people if we would only listen. The first published trace may be Pierre Desloges' well-known book, published in Paris in 1779, where he defends French Sign Language against the false claims of its detractors, hearing teachers who didn't know the least bit about it. The first traces of this self-description in America may be Laurent Clerc's public speeches throughout the northeastern United States, reprinted in the newspapers in 1816. Ever since, there has been a great tradition of Deaf self-description through art,

drama, poetry, literature and nonfiction. Just a few examples of the latter are **The Silent Worker**, **A Deaf Adult Speaks Out**, **Deaf Heritage**, **DEAF LIFE** and now this book, **For Hearing People Only**.

In one sense the Deaf culture reflected in **For Hearing People Only** is unfamiliar—in another it is thoroughly familiar. Take language, for example. Sign Language is in an unfamiliar mode (visual and manual, not aural and oral) and it works in unexpected ways. But hearing people will find the puns, jokes, slang, highfalutin language, putdowns, tall tales and so on, familiar to them from their own language. Or, consider the Deaf club. In the neighborhood of Brooklyn where I grew up there were many ethnic clubs. For example, there was a Polish-American club over a nearby supermarket, its name stenciled in black on the windows. Many evenings when the subway brought me home from high school I looked across from the elevated station into the club and saw men in rolled-up shirtsleeves playing cards, thick plumes of purple smoke rising from their cigars. Sometimes I would pass them on the street as a handful would enter or leave the building. They had their own mysterious language, their own camaraderie—that much was clear. They had dances and parties, too (at those times, women were invited). I am reminded of all this on Las Vegas Night at the Boston Deaf Club.

**For Hearing People Only** contains the responses of the editors of **DEAF LIFE** to questions submitted by their hearing readers. Sincere questions deserve straight answers and that's what the reader will find here. Good common sense. Opinion backed by scholarship. Pride in Deaf culture. A sense of humor. The topics range over language (How do Deaf people learn ASL?), parenting (Is it better to be a hearing child of Deaf parents or a Deaf child of hearing parents?), history (Was Alexander Gra-

ham Bell as much of a villain as he appears to have been?), relations with hearing people (Why don't Deaf people trust them?)—and much, much more. How do hearing people come off in this Deaf cultural document? I have told how hearing people commonly describe Deaf people in unflattering terms—well, the compliment is returned! We are seen as woefully ignorant—prey to the most ridiculous beliefs: Deaf people can't drive well, shouldn't marry one another, they speak a universal language, read Braille, can't dance . . . In the last chapter Deaf readers sound off with gripes of their own about hearing people. They accuse us hearing people of having a low opinion of them and revealing it in our actions and our words. We rudely leave them out of conversation. We change our manner of speaking and exaggerate it when we learn someone is deaf, making lipreading more difficult. We expect Deaf people to perform on our terms and never we on theirs.

There is much for hearing people to learn here and much for us to reflect on. **For Hearing People Only** will interest anyone with a connection to Deaf people, of course—parents, teachers, co-workers, students of ASL, to name a few—but, more broadly, it will entertain and inform everyone who rejoices at the rich diversity of humankind and sees in its examination an opportunity to glimpse our essential humanity and to live a more considered life.

Harlan Lane

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