

d/D/DEAF AND d/D/DUMB

**A PORTRAIT
OF A DEAF KID
AS A YOUNG SUPERHERO**

**JOSEPH
MICHAEL
VALENTE**



INTRODUCTION

There is no instruction manual on how to be deaf. Despite the lore shared among some American deaf people that one can go to Gallaudet University (the world's only liberal arts college for deaf and hard of hearing people) in order to earn not just a regular college degree but also to earn one's "HBD"—"how to be deaf" degree—there still is no instruction manual on how to be deaf. This lack of clear package instructions for the ontological baking of one's deaf cake is especially the case here in the post-IDEA and ADA milieu, in the age of "mainstreaming" and "inclusion" of deaf children, in the relatively new development of a global deaf "community," in the technological tide that has now so profoundly changed deaf people's access to information and social circulation, and even in the widespread popularity of American Sign Language (on both deaf and hearing hands). Deaf identities, it seems, are always already "in the making" (as Norwegian scholar Jan-Kare Breivik points out in case studies of 10 deaf people forming their identity and empowerment in a dominant hearing world through translocal and transnational frameworks). There are now, locally and globally, "many ways to be deaf," claims another book title in sociolinguistic study of international variation in deaf communities, and any "lens on deaf identities," as deaf psychologist and scholar Irene Leigh argues in her recent book of that title, will require a more or less kaleidoscopic view.

And most of the time—in these multiple makings, ways, and lenses—deaf identities here in the late 20th and early 21st century will fall between many cracks. "Stuck between" or in "betweenity" marks the toggling space I have suggested for my own deaf identity and that of many others I've come to know these days who are deaf...or Deaf...or hard of hearing...or hearing-impaired...or selectively hearing...or...go ahead, you fill in the blanks. But now, when asked to elaborate or illustrate what I might mean by this "betweenity," I don't just have to hold up the mirror, but I can also just hold up Joe Valente's memoir, point, and smile.

A big smile.

In both style and substance, form and content, Valente paints and blends for us a between space. He begins in a scene of urgent action, setting us down in the life of a young boy on the run—literally and figuratively—and for the rest of the story we will return, again and again, to this sense of perpetual animation while we also come to rest (but momentarily) in moments of Valente's suspended analysis. We are always immersed in details in this story—told by just the sort of "deaf eyes" that are typically keen on detail—and these details help place us, successfully set us down directly into scenes. Yet the details also keep us moving; they often spin and speed toward us with unsettling density, much as if we were onboard the *Star Trek Voyager* and had just been whipped into warp speed. Valente means for us, I think, to be in this vertigo. It is deaf space.

Inside this constantly moving narrative, the reader could essentially read one chapter plucked at random and then read another...and the connection and flow of the narrative would still be apparent. The reader can easily toggle between any and all of the chapters. Valente's imagination pulls together a not necessarily sequential or chronological tale but rather creates a kaleidoscopic story where colorful and

interesting elements are all there together in his life (tube), but we, the readers, get to hold it up to the light, jog it a little, and watch for ourselves how the pieces form interesting patterns. And then we can bump it again. Our own imaginations are sparked by the imaginative turns in Valente's storytelling space.

Valente also toggles identity in this space. He is variously a "hearing person who can't hear," as one dinner companion calls him in a Phoenix restaurant, and yet he also claims attitudes, experiences, and beliefs often accorded to "Big-D" Deaf identity. He "goes native" while visiting with Ben Bahan, a well-known Deaf leader, storyteller, and professor at Gallaudet University; yet he also remains foreign, as when a young deaf preschooler at the Arizona State Schools for the Deaf and Blind teaches him what he believes is the sign for *dog*—which he then proudly performs for others—only to discover that he has been tricked and taught the sign for *tiger*. He is student and teacher at once. He is often immersed in scenes with others, yet alone. He is often alone yet immersed in active imagination. He both struggles with, and yet is also empowered by, language—sign language, spoken English, written English. He is both storyteller and critic, narrator and researcher. And he is, as one of my students pointed out after hearing Valente read selections from his book, a seeming paradox—the "suicidal superhero."

While this book was in production, Valente visited my campus to give a reading and a workshop. Over 300 people filled the auditorium, taking up all the available seats and then lining up on the stairs and clustering on the linoleum floor of a large lecture hall. Those in attendance were predominately students in our (wildly successful) American Sign Language courses but also some members of the central Ohio deaf community as well as students from my senior capstone course on "Deaf-World: Global, National, and Local Perspectives." Valente captivated the audience, pacing back and forth as he read to them with masterful delivery skills. (Mrs. Kapell, his childhood speech therapist, would surely be proud!) He was a tiger at tale-telling. In the engaged questions and discussion that followed he further offered them complex yet direct, conflicted yet confident, serious yet humorous, honest yet "I'm-making-it-all-up-as-I-go" answers. They were impressed.

In follow-up comments they said, in fact, that "it was a completely unifying experience because his stories related to everyone" and called him "good at the self-deprecating humor he writes with." They also "appreciated his sincerity" and commended "the raw, explicit tone of his writing that communicates a sense of understanding and relation that is more easily accessible to people of our age group." In sum, there were many big smiles.

Yet many of them also found it "interesting" or even "puzzling" when Valente discussed his (lack of) skills in American Sign Language. Immersed in ASL courses themselves, these students had obviously already come largely to believe (in yet another myth about deaf people) that all deaf people—especially those with "Big-D" Deaf attitudes and ideas—were skilled sign language users. One student summarized well how "new" that perspective was to them:

It was interesting when Joe Valente decided to stop being “politically correct” and told us that he wished he had been sent to a Deaf school as a child, and encouraged all parents to consider it. He then went on to describe how he knew barely any sign language, but still considered himself part of “Big-D” Deaf culture. It was the first time I had ever heard a non-signer say this.

Well, Valente has not only said that, but he has written it—in English—in this powerful book. Words are superpowers, the young Joe Valente discovers (ironically, too, not in his English class or from his English teacher, but rather from his speech therapist), and through writing, he has indeed then become a superhero. In a book on the “performance of self in student writing,” Thomas Newkirk claims that “writing is always the hero of writing.” There is perhaps no better poster child for that quip than Joe Valente.

Welcome then to “Joe Culture”—a culture *neither* but *also*, *and* but *or*—a culture made up of immense and intense imagination, illustrating deaf identity in the making, and told by a superhero who is sometimes closeted yet fearlessly flying through both deaf and hearing spaces.

Brenda Jo Brueggemann
Ohio State University