

UNHEARD VOICES

DAWN MAULDON

ABOUT THE BOOK

Dawn Mauldon's world was made of two languages, two cultures and two places of belonging. From an early age, she crossed between the hearing and Deaf worlds as an interpreter for her Deaf parents.

This is also the story of her mother, Evelyn, who was separated from her home and family at the age of six and set to live in the Victorian Deaf and Dumb Institution. Amid personal tragedies, Evelyn discovered her language, her place in the world and ultimately her own voice.

This tender memoir is a story of love, courage and curiosity in a world where difference comes to be nurtured and embraced.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

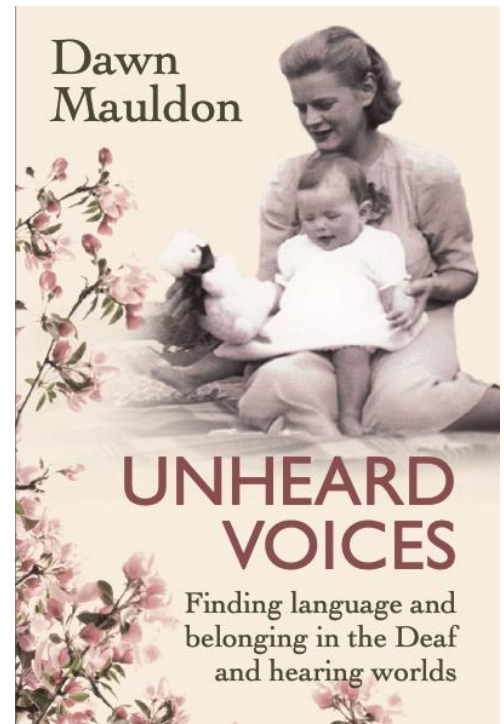
Dawn is the first-born hearing child of Deaf adults (a CODA). Growing up in post-war suburban Melbourne her family looked like most everyone else, until they started talking on their hands. Her first language was tactile, visual, physical and theatrical, teaching her to be aware of details, accept difference and informing her understanding of how stories are told.

At a young age, she became the interpreter for her mother's family, who never learnt sign. Her childhood was a constant crossing between languages and cultures as she witnessed people's varying attitudes towards difference. The Deaf world gave her a strong sense of belonging, but her parents encouraged her to find her place in the hearing world.

Later, she became a teacher of English, Literature and Drama and moved to Perth, where she taught for many years in the West Australian school and prison systems. Her aim was to challenge how voices of displacement, diversity and personal histories influence expectations and outcomes. Her place of belonging is North Fremantle where she has lived for the last thirty years. Stories have always been her purpose and passion. Dawn now spends her time writing about language and culture and discovering the silenced voices behind untold stories.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How familiar were you with Deaf culture and/or sign language (Auslan) before reading this memoir?
2. If you are not familiar with Auslan, how has this book and the author's descriptions of Auslan contributed to your understanding of this language?
3. In your own living memory, do you think that attitudes towards those who are Deaf have altered over time?
4. The author included her own interpretation of the three-day buggy ride that Arthur and Evelyn take to Melbourne. How does this creative approach shape your understanding of the characters in this story?



5. Why do you think Joey internalised her daughter's difference as her own fault?
6. Do you think Evelyn's family knew she was deaf before receiving the formal diagnosis?
7. Do you think that a formal diagnosis can pathologise or create a problem that wasn't there before?
8. Do you think, given the context of time and geography, that sending Evelyn away to the Deaf and Dumb Institution was the only option her family had?
9. What benefits and deficits do you think this decision gave her?
10. What do you think were some of the greatest challenges for Deaf people in the 1950s (as experienced by Eve and Art)?
11. Are any or all of those same challenges still relevant today?
12. In Part Two of the book, why do you think the author chooses to focus primarily on the first five years of her life?
13. What parallels can you draw between the lives of young Evelyn and young Dawn?
14. Do you think Dawn's passion for storytelling is the consequence of how she had to navigate the world from a young age?
15. How would you describe the relationship between Eve and Joey?
16. How did the trip to the cinema with her father and Lloyd shape Dawn's understanding of body language and communication beyond sign language?
17. As translator and ambassador for her parents, what benefits did Dawn receive from being bilingual?

INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR

Why did you decide to tell this story in two parts – as opposed to either focusing just on your mother's story or just on our own story?

Separating my story into two parts allowed me to explore the impact of my mother's deaf difference upon each member of her family, as that story has always influenced my sense of self and place in the world. I was twenty-four when my grandmother Joey Lloyd died, so I had enough time to gather many anecdotal stories from her. She told me about the relationship Evelyn had with her father and although it was only for six years, I wanted to understand the strength and the loss of that relationship in Evelyn's life. Leighton's character grew from my grandmother's memories, but also from my wish to give my mother a language companion before she joined her own language and culture.

Seeking stories is how I have made sense of my place in the world, but growing up I heard alternative and inconsistent narratives about the two worlds that I was crossing between. The hearing world was the dominant language and that created doubt about the world of my parents. Over the years, I overlooked the sense of pride and belonging within the Deaf world and how that contributed to my life. In writing this book, I aimed to capture and contrast two eras of attitudes, language and culture, as well as show how identity is developed through the language and the opportunities available at particular times in history. Through acknowledging how all past and present stories are interwoven, I hope readers gain insight into personal and social relationships outside or within their own experiences.

What was the most challenging aspect of writing this memoir?

I never wanted to moralise, dramatise, romanticise or politicise the story of my family or the Deaf world. My intention was always to stay true to the voices of ordinary people who turned up, made something from nothing and mostly had good intentions. The authenticity of the story was dependent on personal reflection alongside anecdotal and historical information to show how, despite not sharing a language and culture, stories of love and loss will always find a place of connection.

Although I understood the importance of strong storytelling, mastering the skill set was an ongoing challenge. Finding the individual voices of characters was dependent on dialogue and when I finally understood how to write Deaf dialogue, the story moved forward. It is important to me that the voices are viewed as part of my lived experience; the voices of the past are a creative interpretation and there are many other lived experiences of the Deaf, CODA or hearing worlds that are completely different to mine.

While researching and writing this story, what was your most surprising discovery?

I had never really immersed myself in what it is like to be born with a missing sense or to have a child who is born different to the rest of her family and how challenging that must have been, not only for my mother, but for all members of her family.

One rewarding discovery was revisiting the ingenuity and tenacity of the Deaf community to create families, and also live their lives with courage and commitment as a proud cultural group with a strong sense of belonging. I was fortunate to have witnessed a time in social history, when the Deaf moved forward without technology, NDIS and a language of inclusivity. It greatly enriched my own journey and informed my teaching career.

How powerful are all the voices in the past in influencing the life you live?

The voices of the past continue to turn up and shape how I am challenged and extended by the world around me. The past voices have given me an appreciation of how many languages there are that contribute to a sense of identity. Acceptance is one of my earliest life lessons, to allow others to find their own voice, refrain from judgement, but never compromise personal values. Although sadness and loss will always happen, with love, loyalty, humour and optimism, life will find its own way forward. Creativity and beauty can be found all around you. Tenacity is one family trait I inherited that has allowed me to find my own voice and give a voice to all those who did not have the opportunity to express their own stories. I still believe in hope and high expectations, expressing your passion, staying open to change, and recognising how each experience is part of learning about my place and responsibility in the world. But most importantly, I am forever influenced by my mother's most powerful language, her innate sense of kindness, love and joy.

What do you hope readers will take away from this story?

Unheard Voices is an opportunity to understand how people make sense of their lives and navigate circumstances while crossing between attitudes, language and culture. Language is a lived experience that adapts and changes over time; it does, however, have many configurations that contribute to a sense of identity and belonging which affects experiences, expectations and opportunities. The separation from primary relationships generates a sense of loss and grief for families in individual ways, therefore, having their individual voices heard can never be overlooked or underestimated.

Although it appears that we now have a more inclusive and accessible society, revisiting social history can offer many insights into the treatment and acceptance of difference. In the past, the Deaf were defined by disability, not as people who were deaf and had a different language and culture. Whenever a language is not shared people can feel separated, isolated and vulnerable. Today Auslan and the Deaf world show how language can be visual, physical, theatrical, creative, clever, inclusive and unique.

Language is connection – when it is not shared it requires a willingness to reach out in the way one hearing woman did to include my mother in suburban stories. Although my mother and grandmother did not share sign language, they did have their own language of love, good intentions and the many photographs that my grandmother gave to my mother so she was included in family stories. And children who experience courage, commitment, creativity, responsibility, resilience, honesty, humour, hope, beauty, joy, love and acceptance as strong languages will find their own way forward, their own voice and appreciate how ordinary stories belong inside their own journey.



@FremantlePress



Sign up for enews



fremantlepress.com.au