

First Opinion: Honoring Diversity, Visual Storytelling, and Complex Friendships: Cece Bell's *El Deafo*

Bell, Cece. *El Deafo*. Harry N. Abrams, 2014.

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The 2015 Newberry Committee must have had a difficult time in their deliberations. All three of the books recognized—Kwame Alexander's *The Crossover*, Jacqueline Woodson's *Brown Girl Dreaming*, and Cece Bell's *El Deafo*—stand out as “distinguished contribution[s] to American literature for children”; all are “significant achievements,” “marked by conspicuous excellence,” and “individually distinct” (“Newberry Medal Terms and Criteria”). Any one of them might have been the medal winner.

Cece Bell's graphic novel, memoir-esque *El Deafo* tells the story of a child navigating grade school and neighborhood friendships from the time she is four and loses her hearing after an illness through fifth grade. I mean to draw attention to the complexities of classifying this book's genre. At first, the book seems to be a kind of nonfiction—either autobiography or memoir. The difference between autobiography and memoir genres is fuzzy but important. For most, the distinction lies in how fully a life is rendered, where “memoir” indicates a limited life story told through only a particular aspect. By this definition, *El Deafo* might be categorized as memoir. However, Bell admits in her Note From the Author that, while the book is based on her childhood, she has taken great liberty with details (236). This perhaps tips the book's genre classification from memoir to fiction—or at least to “memoir-esque.”

Reviews, as well as scholarly discussions of the book, have had much to say about its representation of a child with a hearing challenge. On the whole, the evaluations have admired the book's efforts, noting that while the book's use of animal characters (bunnies) might seem problematic in light of other books that have used the technique to dehumanize people with disabilities, Bell's book undercuts and recuperates the technique as a way to draw attention to the big role ears or hearing play in the main character's experiences. Other strengths include the book's effective reimagining of the stereotype disability studies calls "the super crip." Rather than presenting the person with a disability as having a kind of superpower that serves to compensate for "deficiencies," *El Deafo* rejects the idea of disabilities as deficiencies, replacing it with "disability is difference." It also actively unmakes the super crip stereotype by using the book's format (comics) to transfer "super" to the main character's imaginary superhero alter ego (El Deafo), who takes up the role of a foil character.

Although deaf culture advocates could have concerns about the story's efforts to correct Cece's deafness (rather than embrace deafness as its own mode in the world), Bell herself anticipated the criticism, noting that her book is in "no way a representation of what all deaf people might experience" (236). Also, I think that there is little room to suggest Bell is representing deafness inauthentically or disrespectfully, as the story details are drawn from Bell's personal experience as a child with hearing challenges. I do, however, have a quibble with Bell's choice to name a character (and her book) "El Deafo." For, despite the book's otherwise thoughtful and sensitive work with diversity matters, this in particular feels insensitive to Latinx concerns with the ways Spanish is mocked and distorted regularly in texts for children. I recognize that the term likely emerges without conscious intent from Bell's own experiences growing up in the 1970s and '80s, but I also think such usage need not be casually perpetuated in the twenty-first century.

In terms of other strengths and potentials, though, Bell's Newbery Honor book fits well with other recent Newbery-recognized books in a number of registers. Like Vince Vawter's 2014 *Paperboy* and Jack Gantos's 2001 *Joey Pigza Loses Control*, it effectively places disability, the character with challenges, and that character's experiences and perspectives at the center of the text (no "abled gaze" here!). Bell's book also compares interestingly to books that tell their story as much through the visual as through words: 2016's award-winner *Last Stop on Market Street*, 2016's Honor book *Roller Girl*, and 2014's award-winner *Flora and Ulysses*. It likewise pairs well with Newbery books that take up the theme of friendship, which, though common in children's literature in general, appears surprisingly infrequently in Newbery-honored titles. Still, like the other two-kid, world-centered friendship books among Newbery titles in the twenty-first century (2016 Honor book *Roller Girl* and 2010 Winner *When You Reach Me*), and in contrast to earlier, more idealistic Newbery friendship books (e.g., 1997 Winner *The View from Saturday*, 1973 Honor book *Frog and Toad Together*), *El Deafo* looks deeply at the confusing complexities of friendships.

In fact, I think the book's work with the thematic of friendship may be its greatest accomplishment—its most significant achievement. As Cece cycles through a series of friendships, the book draws attention to aspects of friendship that work and those that don't. For example, throughout the first third of the book, Cece has a sequence of two friends who are fairly unkind to her but whom she tolerates because one "does not care about hearing aid" (57) and because she shares interests with the other (64–66). As Cece grows and learns from her experiences, she does eventually find a friend who has both of these characteristics. However, the book does not offer an easy goldilocks-just-right solution to the problems of friendship, but rather takes the opportunity to turn the difficulty of having a good friend into the complexity of *being* a good friend. Moreover, and following that turn, *El Deafo* continues to deepen its look at kid friendship both by layering in connections to heterosexual romantic interest (of the completely appropriate grade school crush variety) and by introducing (but not resolving) the extremely complicated conflict that arises when a choice between being a good friend and being an ethical person must be made.

El Deafo's work with the thematic of friendship is, in fact, truly extraordinary. Friendships are not easy, straightforward, or even static—in childhood, adolescence, or adulthood. This is likely why there are so many books about them. *El Deafo*, though, stands out among such books in its representation of friendship as a dynamic, complex, often confusing and fraught relationship. The book's representation of friendship stands out because it does not offer easy answers, rules, or a map. Instead, it feels real.

Bell's book more than deserves its Newbery sticker on its cover. It is a significant achievement in American children's literature, offering a story and perspective that is "individually distinct" and is executed with "conspicuous excellence." It is even a significant achievement among Newbery books, bringing attention to a diversity issue not represented among Newbery titles, standing as the first of its format (graphic novel) to be recognized by a Newbery committee, and portraying friendship in all of its joys and challenges.

About the Author

Gretchen Papazian, Professor of English at Central Michigan University, teaches and studies children's literature, American literature, and cultural studies. She has published articles on representations of motherhood in picture books, the early reader format's notion of readers and reading, video games and child agency, and (forthcoming) picture books' use of color as a kind of diversity activism.

Works Cited

"Newbery Medal Terms and Criteria." *ALSC, ALA*, <http://www.ala.org/alsc/awardsgrants/bookmedia/newberymedal/newberyterms/newberyterms>