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Writing Deafness: The Hearing Line In Nineteenth-Century American Literature

writing
deafness

(THE HEARING LINE IN
NINETEETH-CENTURY
AMERICAN LITERATURE
CHRISTOPHER KRENTZ)



Synopsis

Taking an original approach to American literature, Christopher Krentz examines nineteenth-century writing from a new angle: that of deafness, which he shows to have surprising importance in identity formation. The rise of deaf education during this period made deaf people much more visible in American society. Krentz demonstrates that deaf and hearing authors used writing to explore their similarities and differences, trying to work out the invisible boundary, analogous to Du Bois's color line, that Krentz calls the "hearing line." *Writing Deafness* examines previously overlooked literature by deaf authors, who turned to writing to find a voice in public discourse and to demonstrate their intelligence and humanity to the majority. Hearing authors such as James Fenimore Cooper, Lydia Huntley Sigourney, Herman Melville, and Mark Twain often subtly took on deaf-related issues, using deafness to define not just deaf others, but also themselves (as competent and rational), helping form a self-consciously hearing identity. Offering insights for theories of identity, physical difference, minority writing, race, and postcolonialism, this compelling book makes essential reading for students of American literature and culture, deaf studies, and disability studies.

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Customer Reviews

This is an original and provocative book. Addressing W. E. B. DuBois's concept of "the color line" in the 20th century, Krentz argues that 19th century American literature grappled with a "hearing line," i.e. a contested boundary between hearingness (the author's coinage) and deafness. He examines how this hearing line appears in work by deaf authors and also in the canonical authors of the

century. The readings of Melville, Twain, Cooper, and others open new perspectives on their works that should be of interest to anyone concerned with the construction of American identity. The deaf authors included are contextualized in their literary and social locations as they articulate a deaf "I" or "we." Throughout the work, Krentz engages current literary theory on gender, race, class, and colonialism. Deaf American culture intersects with these theories, but also presents challenges to them. The similarities and differences between deaf experience(s) and those of other oppressed groups deserve serious thought by anyone interested in the dynamics of self-definition for oppressed groups. Krentz emphasizes the positive sense of deaf identity and community that emerged in the 19th century, as authors responded to the complexities of American identity at that time.

This is an informative (and nicely written) look at 19th century American literature in terms of the ways it understands the ideas of deafness and hearing. The theoretical matrix of DuBois's color line may be less necessary and less useful here than the social historicist theory Krentz is developing as a base for reading both deaf and non-deaf authors in their negotiations of the imaginative--and perhaps the real--space of deafness. May be engaging to anyone appreciating American literature and/or interested in concepts of deafness, as well as to academics in these and related fields.

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