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Book Review

Lennard J. Davis
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Book Review

Shall I say a kiss? The courtship letters of a Deaf couple 1936-1938

Lennard J. Davis, Editor

Gallaudet University Press 1999, 175 pages

Reading *Shall I say a kiss?* is an enlightening experience for those of us who work professionally with deaf people. This book consists primarily of letters written between a courting couple who happen to be deaf -- Morris, an immigrant from England, and the target of his affection, Eva. The letters were written mostly by Eva from England to Morris. The letters document Eva's reactions to Morris's romantic appeals, and her trials in immigrating to the US. The editor of these letters is Morris and Eva's son, Lennard Davis. Davis provided the pre-WWII historical context for the letters, including the rise of Nazism in Germany and the restrictive immigration laws of isolationist America in the 1930s. That section of the book, in and of itself, was very illuminating. Davis's description made clear the hurdles that a deaf Jewish woman faced to immigrate; Eva's letters demonstrated her persistence and strength in handling those hurdles.

Two additional aspects were very interesting. First is that we have the opportunity to learn about Morris and Eva through their letters. It is very rare that we have documentation of a deaf person's life in any format, but it is even rarer to have the documentation in his or her own words. Eva's personality shines through -- tough, direct, sensible, caring -- although Davis noted that Eva seemed more forceful and sure of herself in her letters than as he observed her as Morris's wife. These letters provide an insight into the lived lives of these two deaf people that allows us to view them through their eyes.

The second aspect has to do with Eva's and Morris's perception of being deaf. As you read the letters it becomes very clear that being deaf was not a preoccupation for them. Certainly it was not insignificant; they realized that it impacted their daily lives. But they did not dwell on it, did not use it as an excuse. They simply lived their lives. Even though professionals may try not to let being deaf be the focal point of the interaction with a deaf client, it often becomes so. This book reminds us that, for at least some deaf people, being deaf is not always "on their minds." What was uppermost in their minds was work, family, friends and, of course, their relationship. Eva's letters make repeated references to her job as a seamstress, her family events (e.g., weddings, dinners), outings with friends (e.g., to the beach), and her testiness with Morris's entreaties. One of Morris's major activities was being in a track club. Their lives were remarkably ordinary in many respects, no different than any person's. And yet their lives were quite extraordinary.

In the end *Shall I say a kiss?* is a unique historical document on a dramatic time for the world. And it is a wonderful book to demonstrate to us that deaf people are simply people.

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