

## **Book Review**

**Title:** Damned for Their Difference: The Cultural Construction of Deaf People as Disabled

**Author:** Jan Branson and Don Miller

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**Reviewer:** Albert B. Robillard, Ph.D.

A linguist and an anthropologist from Melbourne, Australia produced this finely written book. They have done a marvelous job of a kind of Foucaultian discourse analysis of how deaf people were framed, talked about, and physically handled since the 17th century in Europe and beyond. The early focus is on France and Britain, examining the texts from institutions for the deaf.

The authors take us through the early development of natural sign language and the subsequent institutionalization of standard sign languages. They also take us through an attendant institutionalization of careers and bureaucracy in the teaching of the deaf. The conclusion, found in chapters 8 and 9, is that the standardization and the natural incrimination of associations of teachers of the deaf, either deaf themselves or hearing and speaking, have unconsciously limited the free expression of deaf students. This is not unique to deaf people and affects everyone who goes through a system of education that forgets the irruptive and dynamic structure of life.

The authors are acutely sensitive to the reflexive effect of language and writing on how deaf people have been treated through history. They have several horror stories. The first is insistence by teachers of the deaf that deaf students learn to speak. The writers describe the history of oralism and lip-reading. The second horror story is the history of the cochlear implant, a surgically implanted mechanism to let the wearer receive the vibrations of conversation. The vibrations are transmitted to the wearer's skull.

In the last two chapters, the authors make a strong plea for letting deaf sign language and deaf culture flower, be appreciated, encouraged, and left alone. The plea also includes a request that the so-called "normals" not impose their imperialist culture on the deaf, feeling the deaf need improvement, that they are disabled.

**Albert B. Robillard, Ph.D.**, Professor of Sociology, University of Hawaii, has a neurological condition that has robbed him of speaking. He has his own system of lip-reading. However, despite the academic success of writing books, articles, and actively teaching, he is not immune from the constant onslaught of people who are trying to standardize, digitize, and otherwise remove the spontaneity from language.