Book Reviews

Culture Is Indeed Fluid!

For almost two decades as a Deaf Studies professor, I have used assorted texts related to Deaf culture in my classrooms and was beginning to hunger for a new one with contemporary themes. So it was delightful to review Dr. Thomas K. Holcomb’s Introduction to American Deaf Culture. I truly appreciate his taking 10 years to produce this refreshingly candid addition to the library shelves of Deaf Studies scholars. Well-researched with numerous references to other works, the text touches upon many facets of the Deaf experience, both historically and culturally. Additionally, selected parts of the book, especially Deaf Literature and Deaf Art, are presented in American Sign Language (ASL) on a Web site: www.americandeafculture.com. This Web site also lists Holcomb’s other publications.

This text is very current as Holcomb discusses the past and the present of Deaf culture. For example, he describes what it was like to be Deaf in America prior to the 1975 passage of the PL-142 and the proliferation of rapid technological advancements. Then Holcomb gives examples of how mainstreamed education and text-pagers and videophones changed the Deaf social landscape.

The organization of the 15 chapters flows very well, leading the reader from one concept to the next. Each chapter opens with artwork and ends with a poem. Additionally, each chapter begins with an abstract and a conclusion that is helpful for the reader to know what to expect of the ensuing pages. An added bonus is Holcomb’s personal anecdotes in most chapters, relating to the theme of a specific chapter. This brings a personal insight into the author’s life as a Deaf person, as a Deaf professor, and as a Deaf father.

The text delves into various themes typically associated with the Deaf experience and most of these motifs can be applied to the global Deaf culture: Deafhood, (American) Sign Language, Literature, Art, and Social Interaction. Of great interest are the delineation of disability and being Deaf and the wide range of diversity noted within the Deaf community itself. Chapter 14 digresses from the title, exploring in depth the global Deaf community and noting the similarities and differences of the Deaf experience in America and in other countries.

As Holcomb warns in the final chapter abstract that after reading about a vibrant Deaf community, the reader may find the remainder of this chapter to be rather somber. It however encourages the reader to pause and ponder the future of the Deaf culture as legal protection for deaf individuals increases, technology continues to advance globally and eradication of deaf people becomes possible through science. Holcomb also raises a concern that with the increase of multihandicapped deaf people, the face of the Deaf community may change from a cultural entity to a disability-based commodity.

I however do have beefs with this text. First is the list of references that were grouped under the heading of each chapter at the end of the text. I found this rather awkward. It would be more economic if a traditional format was used. For example, some references were repeated several times in various lists. Second is the absence of biographies of poets who permitted reprints of their works at the end of each chapter. There is a section of biographies of artists whose works were included in the book but none of the poets. I was curious about these poets. Overall, this fluid text is indeed a refreshing addition to my personal library and to my curriculum.

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