"He turned onto his side and bit his fist. Was it as hard to be a woman as it was to be deaf? he asked himself. Dearest Helena" (p. 215).

In Agneta Pleijel’s novel, *Sister and Brother: A Family Story*, the author pays homage to the lives of a pair of siblings in nineteenth-century Sweden: Albert Berg (1832-1916), deaf since birth, who, after receiving education in sign language, became a painter and central figure in the Swedish deaf community; and his younger sister Helena Berg-Petre (1834-80), a talented singer destined to fulfill her father’s musical ambitions but confined by the prevalent social expectations toward women of her time.

By recovering and juxtaposing the siblings’ experiences of nonconformity and voicelessness, *Sister and Brother* aptly captures contemporary views on what it meant to be a woman, as well as being deaf, in a deeply patriarchal and ableist environment. As the great-granddaughter of the male protagonist, Pleijel could draw inspiration from a multitude of sources, elegantly weaving together a narrative that is based partly on historical research, on oral anecdotes passed down in the family, and on imaginations of the characters’ musings and emotions. Retaining a simple yet sensitive and at times poetic language, Pleijel exhibits unmistakable affection for Albert and Helena. But how close can a hearing person of today, in her own words “a stranger and guest in the language and cultural history of the deaf,” come to an authentic interpretation of a non-hearing person whose identity and sentiments are rooted in the nineteenth century?[1] Pleijel’s triple role—as author of historical fiction, archival researcher, and descendant of her two subjects—manifests in a surprisingly immediate way. In between passages, written in bold letters, the author follows a metafictional approach by reflecting on the writing process as well as her own responsibility in creating a truthful picture of the Berg family’s lives, longings, and passions. Where this concerns Helena’s constricted life as a bourgeois woman, however, the narrative does not quite succeed in moving beyond the already familiar. More gripping and insightful are the chapters that shed light on Albert as a hearing-impaired person, placing his individual experiences into a wider context of disability and deviance. As of now, little research has been dedicated to the history of deafness in Sweden, and even less has been made accessible to an English-speaking public.[2] The novel’s focus on the historic figure, Albert Berg, and its rich references to Swedish and European deaf history, therefore, also makes it interesting for an academic readership.

Alternating between the two siblings’ life courses and perspectives, the reader observes Albert through four distinct stages of his life: childhood, education at the Manilla Institute for the Deaf and Blind, experiences as a traveling painter, and engagement in the Stockholm Association of Deaf-Mutes—the predecessor of the Swedish Deaf Association. Albert’s search for emancipation and acceptance becomes a mirror for prevailing societal perceptions of deafness as well as early processes of identity formation within the Swedish and European deaf communities.

Based on earlier research on scientific and popular perceptions of deafness, the first chapters imagine Al-
bert’s childhood as it emerged from the sparse notes and memories of his father and other family members.[3] Narrated through their eyes, Pleijel conveys a convincing interpretation of the insecurity and despair of the parents and Albert’s own growing sense of isolation. The narration continues with Albert’s admission to the Manilla Institute for the Blind and Deaf in Stockholm, set up by the Swedish philanthropist Pär Aron Borg in 1812. Here, the author could make excellent use of the fascinatingly rich original sources of former pupils and teachers that bring to life the school’s dire, but defining, routines. We learn about the complex application process—including a medical certificate, the recommendation of a parish priest, and an assessment of skills and moral education—as well as the school’s comprehensive curriculum and ideological structures. Manilla, the novel highlights, served a double purpose: “The deaf should form a skilled group of people, a colony of upright, industrious, and hard-working artisans and workers, who would, through their sense of responsibility and industry, gain the respect of the hearing world. They would also support each other in life after their years at the Institute. That was necessary, given the prejudices and animosity that prevailed in the hearing world” (p. 29).

Albert’s life as a student at the Academy of Arts in Düsseldorf and as a painter traveling to, among other locales, Flanders, Brittany, and Sicily, where he became witness to the Italian War of Liberation, is the topic of the next part. Although at Manilla he had acquired sign language and knowledge of hearing people’s social codes, Pleijel pictures him struggling in vain for acceptance. The question of language becomes central: what makes a language, how can we express our thoughts and feelings to others, and in what ways is language shaped by societal norms and constraints? This also reflects in Helena’s biography, appearing as a series of failed attempts at female emancipation. Her gender becomes a disability more isolating than Albert’s lack of hearing: “Women don’t have their own language. Women are not even thought to own music. It belongs only to men. Nothing is mine. I have no language” (p. 155).

Against increasing social and political pressure to abandon the education and use of sign language in favor of the “oral method,” the novel proceeds to expose new spaces of deaf interaction and collective organization, such as the establishment of the Stockholm Association of Deaf-Mutes in 1868, of which Albert was a co-founder and avid spokesperson, and his participation in the International Congress of Deaf in Paris in 1889. Based on Albert’s notes from the congress, Pleijel comes to the conclusion that the silence of the deaf community on the topic of education and language was certainly not shared by all its members. For Albert, signing seemed to provide the key to positively strengthening his deaf identity in a dual manner, internally and vis-à-vis the hearing majority. Pleijel’s analysis and presentation of the changing discourses around deafness are particularly interesting where they are combined with issues of gender, such as the equal admission of hearing-impaired girls at the Manilla Institute and women’s central executive positions on the board of the Stockholm Association of Deaf-Mutes. Women with disabilities have often been described as doubly marginalized and especially vulnerable. Pleijel draws a more nuanced picture, showing that deaf women could create their own sphere of freedom and articulation.

Though a work of fiction, Sister and Brother provides a rich tableau of experiences of deafness, social exclusion, and community. The novel has a double appeal: for the nonacademic reader to become intrigued with the rich culture and history of deafness and for the (disability) scholar to get a glimpse into the little-known situation of deaf people in nineteenth-century Sweden. By staying close to the two historical characters, the novel emphasizes that lack of hearing did not necessarily mean a life in dependence and isolation. Rather, it was a source of remarkable dynamics, be it in the development of sign language, artistic expression, associative life, or social and feminist activism. Yet despite these fascinating insights, the author at times seems to uncritically reproduce historical perceptions toward deafness, for example, by expressing surprise at the fact that Albert had been accepted to the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Stockholm “despite being deaf” (p. 62). Remaining firmly committed to the historical framework, the novel forfeits an opportunity to build a bridge to later struggles of the deaf community for emancipation and rights, as well as the current situation of deaf people in Swedish and other European societies, and to stimulate the reader into reflecting and perhaps rethinking his or her own position.[4] Nonetheless, Sister and Brother is a highly pleasurable read that provides plenty of impulses for future forages into the biographies of disabled individuals.

Notes


[2]. See, for example, Staffan Bengtsson, ”Varför får jag icke följa med dit fram?” Medborgarskapet och den


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