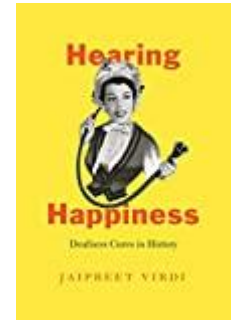


Jaipreet Virdi. *Hearing Happiness: Deafness Cures in History (Chicago Visions and Revisions)*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020. 328 pp. \$27.50, cloth, ISBN 978-0-226-69061-2.



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Published on H-Disability (May, 2022)

Commissioned by Iain C. Hutchison (University of Glasgow)

Hearing Happiness is a spell-binding book of research and stories. There is the story of Jaipreet Virdi's own life and experiences of deafness, the story of numerous deaf and hard-of-hearing people negotiating the hearing worlds of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and the story of those inventors and medics, often hearing, who, in claiming to "cure" deafness, articulated deafness as a "problem" to be treated and contributed to a culture where deafness is seen as a "deficit." From ear trumpets to chili peppers to aural surgery to electricity, the multifarious "cures" to deafness have had ramifications both in terms of the lived experience of deaf and hard-of-hearing people who came into contact with them, and in terms of the cultural construction of what it means to be "normal." The skillful way Virdi brings these narratives to life for the reader, and weaves between them, is testament to the power of an extraordinary writer.

One of the particularly impressive things about *Hearing Happiness* is the way in which it is peopled. Extensive and wide-ranging archival

work allows Virdi to tell the stories of a huge range of individuals, hearing, deaf, and hard-of-hearing, who populate her monograph. Dorothy Eugénie Brett is just one example. Born in London in 1883 and the daughter Reginald Baliol Brett, later Lord Esher, a close adviser to Queen Victoria, Brett was of aristocratic background and, quite literally, familiar with the corridors of power, playing as a child in Windsor Castle, sometimes with the elderly Queen Victoria in attendance. In 1901, Brett survived a burst appendix and subsequent appendectomy, a dangerous operation, performed in this case by Sir Frederick Treves (a prominent doctor, royal surgeon, and infamous for his connections with Joseph Merrick, sometimes labeled the "Elephant Man"). While the surgery saved her life, Brett ascribed the trauma of the episode as one of the sources of her gradual hearing loss, another being psychological bullying by her brothers. She later reflected that she "simply desired to shut it all out" (p. 81). A talented artist, in 1910 Brett enrolled at the Slade School of Art where she became part of the Bloomsbury Group of writers

and artists and, by 1915, she had become increasingly affected by deafness, which, in garnering mixed reactions from her friends, had the potential to be alienating. Increasingly, Brett found herself reliant on Toby, her flat tin ear trumpet, for communications. As Viridi astutely observes, “that she named her trumpet ... indicates the intimate connection she cultivated with her acoustic aid” (p. 83). In describing Brett’s relationship to Toby, and later, the unfortunate loss of the device to electrical hearing aids, Viridi allows the reader to reflect on the way Brett used technology to control her negotiation with hearing, sound, and silence. Viridi’s treatment of Brett is exemplary of how, throughout the book, Viridi positions deaf and hard-of-hearing people not as “passive recipients of a medical device” but instead as “active participants who evaluated, modified, and in some instances, even designed their own prosthetics” (p. 79). The inclusion of Brett’s 1925 self-portrait, where Toby is held in her hand, supports this and is one of the many visual sources with which Viridi illustrates her book. From Brett’s intriguing mix of the aristocratic and the bohemian to the Scottish physician Dr. Turnball, who claimed to restore sight to the blind and hearing to the deaf, Viridi brings each character to life and, through her lucid prose, equips the reader with the necessary historical context to position them in the modern transatlantic world she takes as her scope.

The broad scope of the book in terms of time and place demonstrates the ambition of this volume. It reflects a transatlantic world where, for example, British historical actors influenced developments in nineteenth-century North America. Ethnicity would have been an interesting avenue to have explored in more depth given the geography of the book, as the “normalcy” to which deaf and hard-of-hearing people were supposed to aspire must also have been inflected by the racism that structured nineteenth- and twentieth-century Britain and North America. I wondered, for example, whether the fact that so many deafness “cures” were designed for profit would have im-

pacted the uptake of new technologies across different social groups such as African Americans. Elsewhere, however, experiences of deafness and responses to it are shown to be intersectional, not least in the way hearing aids marketed at women were sometimes camouflaged as jewelry.

Perhaps what is most striking about *Hearing Happiness* is the way in which Viridi’s own story is threaded through the rich tapestry of the monograph. “When I was four years old, I became ill with bacterial meningitis and nearly died,” Viridi writes in an arresting opening paragraph (p. 1). The illness, which resulted in Viridi becoming deaf, is vividly described. The frustrated hopes of her family that she might be “cured” situate Viridi within the history of the myriad ways that science and technology have been mobilized in attempts to “correct” impairment. Throughout the book we gain glimpses of Viridi at home and at school, first in Kuwait, then in Canada, and later making the difficult transition from acoustic to digital hearing aids. And the personal is not only historical in pointing to the longevity of attempts to “cure” deafness, or rigorously theoretical in its elucidation of the framework of normalcy with which deaf and hard-of-hearing people negotiate, but political. In positioning her own story so centrally to the book, Viridi consolidates the power of her argument, and it operates as a political intervention into deafness as well as being a brilliant contribution to the historiography of deafness.

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Citation: Esme Cleall. Review of Viridi, Jaipreet. *Hearing Happiness: Deafness Cures in History (Chicago Visions and Revisions)*. H-Disability, H-Net Reviews. May, 2022.

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