

Readers Guide/*Deafening*2003

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IN HER OWN WORDS:

1. When did you first realize that you wanted to be a writer?

Unlike some writers, who start the lifelong apprenticeship during their middle childhood, I did not begin to write until I was 19 or 20 and even then, not yet seriously. I always loved to read, however, and my parents read to me and my four siblings throughout our early childhood. There was no library in the small village where I was raised in Quebec, and I always felt that there were simply not enough books! I couldn't wait to get back to school every September, just so that I could get to the books. Until I was in grade five I attended three one-room schools, but there were no libraries there, either. The reading material often amounted to texts plus a dozen books on a shelf above a water cooler at the back of the room.

I was encouraged by several professors during my university years to do something with this writing but I did not actually make the commitment until I met W.O. Mitchell at the University of Alberta in 1972. He encouraged me with the kind of enthusiasm that only W.O. could muster, and the timing must have been right because I began to believe in the possibility of becoming a writer. I was 29 when I began to venture into poetry and fiction. I had already practised and taught Nursing for 8 years and had worked in 5 Canadian provinces and in 3 countries. I had one child and would have another when I was 30. During those early writing years, the acts of child-rearing and writing became so entangled, they are now hopelessly enmeshed in my memory. It would be impossible to untangle the writing, the studying at night while I completed two Arts degrees, and the raising of two babies.

2. *Deafening* represents an extraordinary amount of historical research and background reading and yet there is a cohesiveness to the novel, and the characters move effortlessly through your narrative. Can you talk a bit about what it is like as a writer to create such a

story and how you were able to make the emotional lives of your characters shine through?

I confess that at the beginning, I had no idea where I would take the story I was trying to create. I knew that the novel would encompass thematic contrasts of sound and silence, love and war, survival and loss. I knew that I would be writing about a deaf woman. But when I started to do World War One research, I had to trust my instincts that two separate and very disparate paths would somehow intersect. I began to imagine and visualize various scenarios of sound during possible war scenes while, at the same time, I was reading archival material at the former Ontario School for the Deaf and probing possible ideas about Grania's world of silence.

Perhaps simultaneously, I was imagining what kind of people Grania and Jim might be and what shape their love might take. As I began to piece their outer world together from my overwhelmingly extensive research (including a visit to World War One battlefields on the Western Front), I was also permitting their inner selves to move around my imaginative landscape. I knew, from the beginning, that Mamo would be a strong and important influence on Grania's life. Also, that Grania would have a sister with whom she would have a close and complex relationship. I became interested in the way strengths and dependencies shift back and forth between sisters, as well as between other family members. I knew that Grania would have to have strengths of her own if she were to be interesting at all. And I wanted Jim to sing. To have an ability that would be outside of Grania's sensory realm.

Creation of character happens at so many levels, it would be impossible to be definite about how all of the musings, thoughts, dreams, ideas while I'm out walking, etc., come together to make up credible fictional people. Also, I sometimes use an overheard detail or an observation from an interview or from my own memory to shape the main trait or action of a character. Of course, I was dealing with an entire family and had to work out the multiple relationships within that intimate group. I also had to create and invent the characters of young men who were going off to the Front and who would soon experience the terrible horror that was World War One. I listened closely when I

interviewed veterans and experts in the field. I gathered up some of their stories; I paid attention to detail, and I read and I read.

Because I create fiction in an entirely organic way, I allowed the material to begin to lead me. As it grew out of itself, I followed. It is the only way I can write. I never start a story or a book with an overall plan.

3. What writers do you read and is there any writer who has greatly influenced your work?

I would say that the biggest influence as far as craft goes is Chekhov—his attention to detail and his ability to use the suggestion of brush stroke to create an entire picture. For story-telling, it would be Heinrich Boll. For sheer beauty of prose and imagination, Virginia Woolf. I loved reading her letters and journals, and those many volumes helped me enormously during the first decade I began to write. Also, the early stories of Audrey Thomas helped me to believe that I could write about my own world. Paulette Jiles has a wonderful and unique imagination. Her poetry stops me in my tracks, every time I read it, because it always takes me by surprise. Lorna Crozier's poetry is astonishingly concrete and moving. The poetry of Michael Ondaatje and Seamus Heaney carries me through times when I can't read fiction while I am writing fiction. I love the stories of William Trevor. His novel, *Fools of Fortune*, is an engaging work of perfection. I like to read fiction that allows the reader to move in emotionally, fiction that does not rob me, as a reader, of my right to enter the story and feel what the characters are feeling. I learned an important lesson from W.O. Mitchell: when to exercise restraint. He also taught me the importance of using concrete, sensory detail to tell my stories. I experimented, early in my writing career, with building story from that which is concrete so as to allow the reader to move in to abstract.

Of course, as part of my research, I had to read extensively to prop up my World War One background. During the past six years I read many volumes of history, letters, biography, journal and memoir. I read about sound: John Cage, R. Murray Schafer. For research about the Deaf Community, I read as many books as I could find that were written by Deaf people. I accumulated an extensive library in both fields of research.

Writers I've read and re-read within the past two or three years whose work I like very much are: Kate Grenville, Helen Dunmore, the plays of Arthur Miller and Don Hannah, Richard B. Wright, Alistair MacLeod, David Guterson, Charles Frazier, Gabriella Goliger, Robert Graves, Sharon Butala, Rudy Wiebe, Sheri Holman, Bonnie Burnard. There are more, of course, but these are writers whose work I've recently read.

4. In *Leaning, Leaning Over Water* and in *Deafening*, you admit to drawing on your family experience for imaginative inspiration. Why are you attracted to such experience as a basis for fiction?

I am blessed to be part of a large extended family, particularly the family of my late deaf grandmother. She had eleven hearing children, nine of whom are alive, and each of these had children and grandchildren. When there are more than a hundred people in your background when you are a small child, of course you are going to absorb the many facets of human experience that surround you.

But I don't write about my own family!

What really interests me is voice and setting. The more human experiences and relationships you have and know, the more possibilities you have to draw upon when you are writing. In *Leaning, Leaning Over Water* I wanted the Ottawa River as a setting because I grew up beside that river during the 50s and wanted to write at least one book in which River was Character. I knew my territory intimately and from there it was nothing but enjoyable to create characters in that setting. I also knew what it was like to be a child growing up in the 50s. I knew the language, the sights and sounds, the sensory detail. The characters were invented.

For *Deafening*, I remembered driving my grandmother, my mother and one of my aunts to Deseronto during the 1980s to have a look at the old hotel where my grandmother had lived as a child. I shall never forget the picture of her getting out of the car, walking around the hotel, looking up at the old place that was practically in ruins. She was disturbed and upset, because it had been a grand hotel during her childhood. Some of the windows were boarded up, but she took me up the front steps of the hotel and we peered through a window, which she explained had been the dining room. She

pointed to one corner and told me that her family had had their own private table there, where they ate all of their meals.

There is something indelible about such experiences: you know, as a writer, that you are storing them away for some future use.

But my grandmother never spoke about her childhood in the former Ontario School for the Deaf in Belleville, Ontario, where she had been a residential student for seven years, 1908-1915. That is one of the reasons *Deafening* is not a non-fiction book about the life of my grandmother. I had to invent an entirely original character, provide her with a family and an emotional life. All of the detail about the school comes from research and interview. What sustained me, through six years of research and writing, was my love for my grandmother, who died in 1987 at the age of 89. In order to honour her, it became important to me to try to imagine what life for a deaf child might have been, at the turn of the last century.

In actual fact, as a writer, what I probably use most from family is a certain way of understanding language. Language and VOICE. I use and value and know the voices that are and have been around me, all of my life. Particularly the voices of my mother and my aunts and uncles. A certain way of using speech, the expressions of an area, the particularities of a wry kind of humour and a toughness and ability to laugh through sorrows and woes. All of my relatives on my mother's side use language in an exaggerated way because of my late grandmother's deafness. She was an expert lip reader and, of necessity and to include her in everything, her eleven children became experts, as well. It is easy to read an entire silent conversation, across a distance, from the lips of any of my aunts and uncles. They can all lip read one another, and do. I grew up watching the people I love motioning and waving their hands, words spilling from their lips, fingers spelling through the air for my grandmother or hands tugging at her sleeves, feet stomping the floor or fists pounding a table to create vibrations, and I was surrounded by much laughter. All of these things made up what was normal for our family, our everyday language. It is interesting to me now that even though my grandmother has died, when her family gets together they still use 'grandmother present' speech. I welcome and use everything I can about this sort of language in my work. I love

language and voice. It is voice that makes a work authentic, the voice that is an integral part of a writer's inner self.

The next step is to create characters that will embody this voice of a time, of a place. I often purposely use physical models or photographs of people I have seen, but whom I don't know. That way I can fill their heads with my own imagination. That is what a fiction writer does: creates from the imagination. If one were to try to write about real people in fiction, the real selves would invade and dominate and overtake the ultimate purpose, which is to create illusion. As the late W.O. Mitchell told me many times: Life ain't Art!

For the scenes about separation, I know a good deal about this because my own husband has been involved in wars and in peacekeeping and humanitarian missions during most of our marriage. We have often been separated for long periods—sometimes a year at a time. I know exactly what this feels like. I know the stresses placed on a family, on a partner and on young children when a loved one is working in a war zone, especially when that country's infrastructure is down and it becomes impossible to stay in touch. No phone calls, no telegrams, no human contact, only news, media, and imagination exist to fill the space. From these experiences, terrible as some of them have been, it is only the next step to call up remembered feelings and emotional responses and attribute these to characters who are separated because of the conditions of war. What a waste it would be not to use these experiences, particularly the emotional dimensions, to give my fictional characters depth and the illusion of reality.

5. Readers of the novel have commented on your remarkable ability to create a believable emotional world for a young deaf girl at the turn of the century. What were the challenges for you as a writer in creating such a world?

The biggest challenge was VOICE. I did not know the inner voice of a young woman who had been deaf since early childhood. This did NOT come out of my background. I knew from the beginning that if I was going to create a Deaf character, I would have to get to know people who are Deaf. In 1998, I contacted several associations in Ottawa and began to learn ASL (American Sign Language). I knew that it would be

hopeless to try to interview Deaf persons if I did not use their language. I studied ASL for several years and was welcomed into the community of the Ottawa Deaf Centre. I worked as a volunteer there, and I interviewed, studied, watched and listened, while stumbling along with my own rudimentary Sign Language. I had several excellent Deaf teachers. When I felt comfortable enough to cope with the communication barriers, I began to conduct interviews. Many Deaf persons were helpful and generous, obliging and candid; I could not have written the novel without their help. They answered intimate questions about childhood and offered detailed information about their inner lives, true inner lives I could never have imagined. It was in this manner, and by compiling the sensory detail, that I was able to create my character and to work with the inner voice of Grania O'Neill. Once I had her voice, I was able to begin to tell her story.

I also used actual writings from Deaf children (1900-1919), which I found in the bound newspapers of the archives of the former Ontario School for the Deaf in Belleville (now Sir James Whitney School). I saw, as soon as I began to read these old papers (printed in the school print shop starting in the late 1800s), that the children's voices emerged without any help from me. The Deaf children were, in fact, telling the stories of their time. I used these school newspaper excerpts exactly as I found them, to head most of the chapters of my novel. I could do nothing to improve them. For me, this part of the research—the discovery of the voices of children from almost one hundred years ago—was moving and interesting and exhilarating.

BACKGROUND NOTES TO DEAFENING

My maternal grandmother (1898-1987) was profoundly deaf as a result of scarlet fever, from the age of about 18 months. Born in Deseronto, Ontario, as a young child she was sent, for seven years, to live at a residential school that had been built in Belleville in 1870. At the time she entered the school it was called the Ontario Institution for the Deaf and Dumb. In 1913, it was renamed the Ontario School for the Deaf. It is now known as Sir James Whitney School. Belleville is the small city where my parents, my late sister, my four brothers and I were born. My grandmother married my hearing grandfather, and they had eleven hearing children, of whom my mother is eldest. Our own family moved

to a village in the province of Quebec when I was four, and it was in Quebec that I was raised and educated.

The beginnings of my new novel seem accidental enough. In 1996, I was driving with my husband along old Highway 2 in Belleville, and as we approached the school that my grandmother had attended, I suddenly veered through the gates and onto the property. Unannounced, I found my way to the main building and the superintendent's office, and there I was offered a tour. The school property is large—at one time it encompassed 100 acres. When I was taken to the various buildings, including the girl's dormitory where my grandmother had lived, I was very much aware of tracking her footsteps through the residence, probably walking in and out of her very room. During that visit, a document confirming my grandmother's admission to the school was found in a ledger next to the main office, and I was given a photocopy. Even though I was finishing my book, *Leaning, Leaning Over Water*, at the time, I knew that I was hooked. My research began shortly after this visit. As it turned out, I had entered the school and found the document on my late grandmother's birthday. I wept.

Deafening was never intended to be a book about my grandmother's life. Indeed, from the day the school document was turned over to me, I began to create a fictional world with the school as part of its setting. I knew that the book would be a novel. My grandmother never spoke about her years at residential school and I had no knowledge of her experiences there. I did, however, become interested in the way the voices of the children began to emerge through their contributions to the school newspapers of the period. The school had its own press and print shop, and papers dating back to the 1890s are preserved and bound in the school archives. As I read, and as I looked through albums and photographs, I realized, with rather a sinking heart, that if I were to tell a story set during the period 1900-1920, it would not be possible to ignore the First World War. Virtually every aspect of the children's lives was affected by that war. This was, of course, true of Western Civilization in general.

I returned to the school many times during the next several years, travelling between Ottawa and Belleville by car. In the meantime, I had finished writing *Leaning*, which was published in 1998, and then I dived headlong into full-time research for what would become the background for *Deafening*. Some of the research I did in preparation

for the writing of the book included learning American Sign Language (ASL). I studied Levels I to IV and then levels VII-VIII, taking classes with three Deaf instructors and one hearing instructor, all in Ottawa. I worked as a volunteer at the Ottawa Deaf Centre, became a member of the Centre, and served on the Board of Directors. Many people were patient with me and generous with their time. When I was able to communicate in a rudimentary way, using ASL, I began to conduct interviews. I had also begun to read the broader history and the literature associated with the Deaf Community.

In a parallel way, I had also begun to research World War I. It was easy to see that I could be overwhelmed by material, but I began to read histories, memoirs, letters, journals, telegrams, etc. I attended lectures, and spent one summer at Vimy House in the Archives of the Canadian War Museum. I poured through photographs, interviewed veterans at the local veterans' hospital, inspected surgical field kits and medical paraphernalia and tried to kick open a very stiff stretcher used in World War I. Because I have a medical background, I decided to approach the war sections of the book from the point of view of a stretcher bearer serving with a Field Ambulance unit. I felt that I needed to see the terrain of the Western Front, so I consulted a World War I expert in Ottawa and then travelled to France and Belgium with a friend to visit battlefields, museums and military cemeteries. When I returned home, I learned that word was getting out: people began to approach me to tell me where I could find one more journal, one more photograph album, a rare book or pamphlet. I received phone calls from descendants of war casualties, everyone wanting to tell me the stories of their grandfathers or fathers or uncles.

For the Deseronto research, I began to visit and walk around the small town, staying at a local B&B close to the hotel that my great grandfather once owned on the Bay of Quinte. Although much changed, the old part of the building is still standing. I was permitted by the then owner to go inside the padlocked, sealed-off original section, and my husband took photographs of the interior for me. The staff at Deseronto's Town Hall provided much help, and gave free access to old documents and town photos. I was even taken up into the clock tower of the beautiful old Post Office building on Main Street, and learned, along the way, that my deaf grandmother's aunt and uncle had once lived in the now empty tower apartment. I interviewed a 100-year-old woman who was a

first cousin of my grandmother and she described the apartment as it had been in the early 1900s. I was so taken by this, I decided to set several important scenes of the book in the apartment as it was described to me.

Throughout the 6 years of researching and writing the book, I knew that I was working with two parallel and separate worlds: the war experiences of the stretcher bearer and the inner world of a young deaf woman at the turn of the last century. I trusted my instincts, hoping that the two worlds would intersect. Sound and silence, words and language, love and loss, in particular, the love between the two main characters, Grania and Jim, eventually provided the connections I was seeking. But I was also exploring other kinds of love: between sisters, between child and grandmother, between war buddies, parents and family members, and school friends who were deaf. The Home Front years interested me as much as the horrific activity of the battlefields, and I tried to pace the book between these two different worlds, knowing that the participants of each were always yearning towards the other. I had proof of that in the research, especially in the letters and journals of the time.

The way I approached my story was to use densely layered detail that would drop the reader into the world I was trying to create, one that might have existed a hundred years ago. I used every level of experience I could muster from my own life and from lives overheard, and I worked very hard as I tried to recreate this world. I knew that the larger story would tell itself if I could get the fine detail right. Always at the back of my mind was my love for my late grandmother, whose deafness I hoped to honour.

SELECTED BACKGROUND READING:

1. *Seeing Voices* by Oliver Sacks.
2. *Goodbye to All That* by Robert Graves.
3. *Wired for Sound: A Journey Into Hearing* by Beverly Biderman.
4. *The Miracle Worker* by William Gibson.
5. *Ghosts Have Warm Hands: A Memoir of The Great War* by Will R. Bird.
6. *Influenza 1918* by Lynette Iezzoni.
7. *The Roses of No Mans Land* by Lyn Macdonald.
8. *Rilla of Ingleside* by Lucy Maud Montgomery.

9. *The Selected Journals of L. M. Montgomery. Vol. II: 1910-1921.* Ed. By Mary Rubio & Elizabeth Waterston.
10. *Letters of Agar Adamson.* Ed. By N.M. Christie.
11. *The Great War As I Saw It* by Canon Frederick G. Scott.
12. *Regeneration; The Eye in the Door; The Ghost Road.* 3 novels by Pat Barker.
13. *Birdsong* by Sebastian Faulks.
14. *The Wars* by Timothy Findley.
15. *Selected Poems* by Siegfried Sassoon.
16. *Pale Horse, Pale Rider.* Story by Katherine Anne Porter from her collected works.