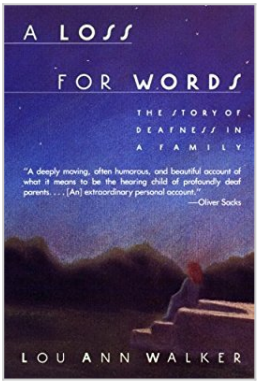

A Loss for Words: The Story of Deafness in a Family

By Lou Ann Walker

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A Loss for Words: The Story of Deafness in a Family By Lou Ann Walker Bibliography

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly
This is much more of a story than the subtitle suggests, beautifully written and deeply affecting. Born in the Midwest in 1952, Walker is one of three hearing daughters of Gale and Doris Jean Walker, both deafened as babies by illnesses. As the oldest child, the author served as her parents' "interpreter," dealing with outsiders. There is humor in her recollections but nothing lighthearted in accounts of crude or condescending reactions to her father and mother from indifferent people. Walker is candid in detailing her own frustrations and the burdens of life with the deaf. Having graduated from Harvard, she eagerly went her own way, establishing a writing career in New York, but she reunites frequently with the family in a home warm with love and shared memories. The reader says a fervent amen when the author declares, "I'd seen plenty of families where there was more communication and less love."

Review
"A deeply moving, often humorous, and beautiful account of what it means to be the hearing child of profoundly deaf parents . . . I have rarely read anything on the subject more powerful or poignant than this extraordinary personal account by Lou Ann Walker."-- Oliver Sacks"[Walker) describes in moving detail the joys of growing up in a family where the simplest communication was never taken for granted." -- "Newsweek""In this remarkable memoir, Walker recreates the pain and the joy ofgrowing up between two worlds: her parents' loving but silent home, and theoften confusing world she encountered outside those walls, and of which shewas inevitably a part." -- "Seattle Times-Post Intelligencer""I have never thought hard about this before, but now I see that what deaf people do in sign language is even more mysteriously and specifically, biologically human than speech itself. My respect for the deaf, always high, is now still higher. My awe for the human mind is out of sight." -- Lewis Thomas"Readers will come away from this book informed, deeply moved and full of admiration for Walker's marvelous parents."-- "People""I loved "A Loss for Words." [The] style is brisk and clear and, it seems to me, never sentimental . . . The Lou Ann who emerges to find her own voice and write this book is a character whom I admire as much as any literary hero." -- Max Apple"In the end, I wanted to cheer Lou Ann Walker for having thegumption to write about a matter so close to her heart, learning to love and accept her parents as they are, not as she wished them to be. This is a gem of a book." -- "Glamour""Beautifully written and deeply affecting . . . There is humor in [Walker's] recollections but nothinglighthearted in accounts of crude or condescending reactions to her father and mother from indifferent people. Walker is candid in dealing with her own frustrations and the burdens of life with the deaf." -- "Publishers Weekly""So profoundly other is the unhearing culture . . . that moving itinto a language we learn by hearing took both gifts and a nearlysavage determination." -- "New York Times Book Review"This book is worth reading simply for its celebration of the strength and perseverence of the human spirit and for its account of a woman coming to terms with herself and a family coming to terms with itself."-- "American Annals of the Deaf"

Chapter One

Rearview Mirror

En Route to Cambridge, Massachusetts
September 1973

Mom and Dad drove me out to Harvard the fall I transferred. I'd never been east of Ohio. Looking back now, I know I was frightened. That day it came out as sullenness. I was scared of being a small fish in a big pond, terrified of being looked down on as the hayseed from Indiana. I was convinced that once the Harvard and Radcliffe administrations actually saw me, they would tell me to go home.

I was looking forward to getting away from home. Not from my parents. I was itching to break away from small-town thinking from plainness, from flat land and houses that looked alike, from the constant interpreting, carrying out business transactions, acting as a go-between for my parents and a world that really didn't have much patience.

My head was filled with the aura, the stateliness of the Ivy League. Names resonated with import: Currier, Lowell, Winthrop. I could smell and hear things I'd never encountered, but in my imagination I knew they existed, and I felt sure that upon my arrival--if I wasn't sent home--wonderful happenings would occur. I wouldn't be burdened by timidity. No one would know of my mistakes unless I repeated them.

I'd just spent two years at Ball State University in Muncie, Indiana, with some vague idea that I wanted to be a teacher of the deaf. When the program turned out to be less than I expected, and when I didn't feel I was getting enough challenge in my other classes, I applied to four eastern colleges and was accepted. Harvard took very few transfers that year--the next year, none were admitted at all--and although the admission officers were very kind to me, all the literature they'd sent warned how difficult it was to switch colleges in midstream.

Now I looked up at the back of my parents' heads and I sank down low in the car's back seat. Filling out the application, I'd made prominent mention of the fact that they were deaf. The entrance essay, which was supposed to be about me, was actually about them. Many applicants use a father's or grandfather's degree to get them into the family alma mater, but neither of my parents had set foot in a college classroom. The irony that I was shamelessly using my deaf mother and, my deaf father to get into Harvard was not lost on me. Neither was the fact that although I'd willingly and openly tell people they were deaf and I would briefly answer questions, I just wasn't going to say anything else. It was all too complicated.

Most of the sixteen-hour trip to Cambridge I brooded over a freshman reading list, the kind given out to high school seniors that includes all the books they should have read by the time they matriculate. I'd read very little of what was on that list. When I'd received it in the mail, I had gone to the library, taken out *Ulysses,* and despaired. I understood nothing.

I sat in the back seat for hundreds of miles, worrying that I'd have nothing to discuss at the dining table. And every once in a while I'd look up to watch my parents' conversations.

When the highway was deserted, Dad could comfortably shift his eyes from the road to Mom's hands. When traffic got heavy, he would have to watch the road and then his glances were shorter. If he wanted to pass a car, he'd hold up an index finger at Mom, signaling her to suspend the conversation for a moment. It was always easier for the driver to do the talking, although that meant his signs were shortened and somewhat less graceful. He would use the steering wheel as a base, the way he normally used his left hand; his right hand did all the moving.

Curled up in the seat, chin dug into my chest, I noticed there was a lull in the conversation. Dad was a confident driver, but Mom was smoking more than usual.

"Something happened? That gas station?" Mom signed to me.

"No, nothing," I lied.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. Everything is fine." Dad and I had gone in to pay and get directions. The man behind the counter had looked up, seen me signing and grunted, "Huh, I didn't think mutes were allowed to have driver's licenses." Long ago I'd gotten used to hearing those kinds of comments. But I never could get used to the way they made me chum inside.

Mom was studying me. Having relied on her visual powers all her life, she knew when I was hiding something. "Are you afraid of going so far away from home? Why don't you stay in Indiana? This distance. Why wasn't college in Indiana good enough?"

"Mom. No! Cut it out."

She turned and faced front again, then she tried to distract both of us by pointing out a hex symbol on a barn.

Dad hadn't seen exactly what either of us said, but he'd caught the speed and force of my signs from the rearview mirror, and he could feel the tension coming from behind him. Mom had struck several nerves in me. Not only was I stepping into foreign territory--I hadn't been able to afford to visit any of the schools to which I'd applied--but also, back home in Indiana, none of my relatives or high school friends had been enthusiastic about my going east. To Hoosiers, Harvard means highbrow and snotty, too good for everyone else. Before I had left, Grandma Wells, my mother's mother, had admonished me, not once but several times, "not to get too big for my britches."

Users Review

From reader reviews:

James Alvarez:

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