



In This Sign

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The highly acclaimed novel of a family whose love and courage enable them to survive in the silent world of the deaf.

In This Sign Details

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From Reader Review In This Sign for online ebook

Lisa Vegan says

Torn about this book. I Never Promised You A Rose Garden is one of my all time favorite books and was the first book I read by Joanne Greenberg (under the pseudo name of Hannah Green), and I couldn't help but make comparisons. But this is a great novel. Very interesting and moving. A terrific job is done showing the palpable isolation and loneliness of the deaf couple and also the struggle of their hearing daughter. A wonderful family story. Read it years ago but remember so many details. One part that made an impression on me was how after dark in bed the deaf couple could not talk with each other because they couldn't see each other's hands.

Sunni says

Really loved this in my early 20s...read twice. Not sure how I'd feel now, but probably the same way.

Hannah says

Wow I did not like this

Jeanann says

Working with the Deaf community, it is hard to know how they experience the world. This book truly makes its way inside the lives of a Deaf couple and their family. It can be heartbreaking at times and yet their ability to persevere in the face of the discrimination they encounter daily is inspirational.

Michelle says

I was assigned this book as part of a class on sign language, and am so thankful. I think of it often these many years later, as it gives a poignant and realistic view into the world of the deaf.

Melanie says

This was a slow read and I had to fight to get through a lot of it, but that was more because of the style of writing. The amount Deaf culture is excellent.

Jenny January says

SPOILERS!!!!

I first read this about 8 years ago when I was taking an ASL class at university. I decided to re-read it and I really failed to see how negative Janice was the first time I read it. She is a constant toxic cloud of negativity that hangs over Abel and their children. Abel tried to remain positive in a world that discriminated against the deaf by suggesting to Janice that they go out and mingle with other deaf people that might have been going through the same thing, and all Janice could do was tell him how stupid he was being for even trying. I understand that society made it hard for them to feel completely accepted, but it's even harder when you choose to have such a defeatist attitude all the time like Janice, and she brought everyone down along with her.

I also hated how the author made Janice and Abel so naive to the point that they were just outright stupid in some situations. In the beginning you feel bad for them because of the misunderstanding with the car they purchased and because their interpreter berates and belittles them for being deaf, but after that they react inappropriately (coffin shopping) and fail to put Margaret in school, and it all adds up to the reader not even giving a damn what this family goes through because it's all at the expense of their own ignorance.

The ending where Abel, Margaret, and Janice gather around the table and have a good laugh over everything they went through was really inconsistent on Janice's part. What the hell is Janice doing laughing joyously when she was so negative throughout the entire novel? It was so out of character for her. I didn't even think it possible that she knew what laughter was! I would have much preferred if the laughter at the end was a private moment between and ONLY between father and daughter since they had a better understanding and better relationship with each other. Kudos to the family for persevering through hard times, but Janice's attitude made it that much harder to get through this book.

The book was first published in 1970 and anyone who reads it now will find it extremely dated. It's also very wordy.

I remember reading another book for my ASL class called *Deaf Like Me*, and that was a much better book than *In This Sign*.

Rachel Mazique says

This is a powerful book that I would love to talk about with others. Right now, I'm contemplating the possible meanings of the last page; how is the one thing that Abel and Janice can do to end poverty "right now, for everyone" (286) something "very much like Sign"? (287)

I'm looking forward to seeing how this book goes over in a class I'll be teaching next Spring. As a third-generation Deaf person from a Deaf family, the plot definitely evokes a lot of emotions and can be difficult to read at times (because many of the emotions Greenberg evokes are painful).

Greenberg does a great job of painting a picture of the Deaf community and Deaf culture from the 1920's to

the 1960's. Although she is almost entirely accurate in her depiction, some word choices and beliefs clearly come from a hearing-centric perspective--even as much of her novel works against audist ignorance.

This blurring of understanding and ignorance, however, show how important this novel is for people who are careful enough readers to question the difference.

Kerith says

I started this not knowing if I would like it or continue it, but then it got intriguing. The two deaf characters, Janice and Abel, are hard to like. Their stupidity upset me, and the upsetting upset me because their ignorance was not really their fault. I imagine their school did not do much to prepare them for living "Outside".

Janice was the really hateful one. Abel had his moments but he was so concerned with appearances and being important. Janice could never forgive him for incurring the debt that begins their story. And they both used their young daughter to interpret for them, something she never got over. So mostly, this was an upsetting story. The history was interesting, at least.

rosamund says

Joanne Greenberg is a writer of great insight and subtlety, and it is a shame that this excellent novel is no longer in print. The main characters, Abel and Janice, are both Deaf, and have met at a school for the Deaf and Blind. Beginning in 1920, Abel and Janice face constant hardship to survive in a world that their education and families have done little to prepare them for. The copy on the cover of the book describes the story as being about "a family whose love and courage enable them to survive in the silent world of the deaf" but this does not get close to the heart of the story. Faced with debt and poverty, it is Abel and Janice's hard work, pragmatism and stubbornness that enables them to survive, and the narrative shows that at times loving someone can be impossible, but tenacity and refusal to give up can keep you going, however difficult and bitter it can be.

This is not a happy novel, but it is not without hope. Greenberg is very interested in language, and how Janice and Abel have not been taught Sign properly as their schools forced them to lip-read, and as the story progresses their Sign increases, and having a greater understanding of words and language allows them, Abel in particular, to expand their understanding of the world and discover more about themselves. Their daughter, Margaret, is born hearing, and from a very young age acts as their interpreter in a world they and she find very confusing. There are some heartbreaking scenes where Margaret is forced to face adult decisions when she is much too young to do so. Margaret comes to resent her role of interpreter and how she is forced to act as her parent's bridge to the hearing world, but she also comes to realise how important Sign is to her. A complex story, none of the characters are entirely likeable or perfect, but all are well drawn.

Book Concierge says

The novel follows a deaf couple – Abel and Janice – through their lives from shortly after WWI to the mid 1960s. They start out confident and sure, having gone to a “Deaf school” to learn trades which will assure them of work, Abel in a print shop, Janice as a seamstress in a cap factory. But they soon discover that

despite learning to read lips they are woefully ignorant of the World of the Hearing.

I read this novel back in the mid 1970s, shortly after it was originally released. I had read Greenberg's earlier novel – *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden* (written as Hannah Green) – when I was in high school and enjoyed that exploration of mental illness and recovery. A challenge to read a book featuring a deaf character made me remember this little gem and I went searching for it.

I find myself conflicted in my feelings for Abel and Janice. I feel sad that they are so lost and truly “dis”-abled by their deafness. I want to befriend them and welcome them to the community. I want to throttle the people (landlady, boss, car salesman, etc) who take advantage of them. At the same time, I feel angry with Abel and Janice for being so prideful and refusing any sort of help. Janice, especially, is so paralyzed by fear of what others will think of her that she nearly alienates her only daughter and husband.

The way they rely on the child Margaret (who is Hearing) to interpret for them mirrors the way many immigrant families rely on their children to help them navigate interactions with businesses, doctors, teachers, etc. They never recognize the burden this places on their daughter, or that merely being able to hear the words does not equal understanding concepts unfamiliar to the child. Here is Margaret coming home from school after getting a disappointing grade on a test:

“If she had been called stupid or a failure, she would have felt less weakened. This weakening was of a kind she did not understand. Miss Lester’s hand on her arm had been comforting and gentle and those words which she had understood were praising and not for blame. ... A single word could have a dozen meanings; it could mean the opposite of what it said, and when it was most a game, it was the most serious. The hearing of the words was not enough. Her parents thought that hearing was everything. How could they know that she, with all her hearing, was suffering death by thirst even as she sat in school, lost in a meaningless tide of words?”

As Margaret grows up she begins to resent more and more the way her parents rely on her to be their voice; she struggles to find her own life in face of the duty she feels to help her parents. Here is her father talking about what it means to lose her to marriage:

“When Hearing have a child and she grows to be a woman and is married, the parents cry at the wedding because she is leaving them and they know they will be lonely for her. When Deaf have such a child, a Hearing child, she grows up in the Hearing world, and when she is married, mother and father do not cry. When the Hearing child leaves the house of the Deaf, their mouths also are taken away from them and their ears are taken away and the child also, whom they love. For this, tears are not enough.”

There are many such passages in the book which made me think – and rethink – my impressions, reactions, and assumptions about the Deaf and others who are faced with obstacles that most of us never even see. I’m so glad I re-read it. It is poignant, eye-opening, and thought-provoking.

*In 1985, the book was adapted into a TV movie – **Love Is Never Silent** – which starred Mare Winningham as Margaret.*

Debbi says

I know that this book is not well-liked by some deaf people because the deaf parents at the heart of the story are portrayed as "inexperienced, ignorant, and bewildered" in a hearing world. What I absolutely love about

this book, though, is how it captures the complicated relationship with their hearing daughter who must become their voice and their representative. She both loves them and is burdened by them. I can't think of many books that have made my heart pound with such deep emotion while I wept quiet tears of heartbreak. This book moved me like few others have. It was turned into a rather cheesy Hallmark movie starring Mare Winningham which does not do it justice. If you need a good cry, this might do it for you. I loved it.

Jill says

I read this book at the same time as *Of Sound Mind* published in 2004, which is also about a deaf family with one hearing child who does the majority of the communication for the family. It was interesting to me how much and also how little things have changed between the time when the two were written.

Greenberg offers insight into how the deaf navigated through society, including work, socializing, and the details of day-to-day life. I loved how the perspectives of all the family members were integrated, and how the book follows them not just for a year, but pretty much through their entire lives. Even without a language barrier, the book is true to family dynamics - how misunderstandings can be carried over time to become something bigger than anyone anticipated, and how holding back one's emotional life from family can damage and complicate relationships.

This book is a lot different than many of the books being published today, and I can't figure out if that's because times have changed since it was written, or if the subject matter is just so original. The copy I read was yellowed and old, which made reading it like looking through old family albums, but I'm still not sure if this was a product of the physical book or the language and editing style. Either way, I enjoyed it and felt enriched for reading it.

Lizzie says

This is a very interesting and moving novel about a Deaf couple and their Hearing daughter, Margaret. It starts in the 20s, when Abel and Janet are newly married, out in the world, and have finally escaped the school for the Deaf where they met. They buy a luxury car, then sell it when it's too expensive to run, not understanding that the papers they signed were for a loan. The car dealer sues them and wins, dooming them to 20 years of poverty while they repay the loan.

The book does a fascinating job of showing us how Abel's life changed when he went to the Deaf school. He grew up in a Deaf family who used some signs, but didn't really understand words or language. School opened that world to him.

Margaret is their link to the Hearing world, and has to interpret for her parents at the doctor, the bank, and when they must buy a coffin for her young brother. Her teachers can't understand why she can read well but has such poor grammar. They have no idea that it's because Sign doesn't have the same kind of structure and she that gets little practice in spoken English. Later she's befriended by a storekeeper in their slum neighborhood who gives her a radio. A radio! It's her lifeline to learning and experience in the ways of the wider world.

It also demonstrates how isolated Janet and Abel are until they join a Deaf church. Janet is ashamed of their

shabby clothes and doesn't want to meet other Deaf people, but Abel insists, and for the first time since school, they have people besides each other they can talk to.

Janet does piecework for a factory and can't understand why Union representatives approach her and "talk, talk, talk" to try to get her to join them. She believes the factory has only her best interests at heart. She's faster than the Hearing workers, so she's pleased when WWII comes and she's asked to train the other seamstresses. Abel similarly benefits from war, when Hearing printers are drafted and he gets extra work. They're proud that for the first time their skills are recognized. Of course, after the war, they're no longer such valuable employees.

When Margaret meets a young man and gets serious about him, her mother is angry - doesn't she understand how they need her? How can she consider leaving home? Abel is more understanding how she needs her own life.

Margaret defiantly gets married. Her mother in law is surprised to find out that Margaret's parents don't read. She assumed Deaf people would have lots of books since, after all, there's no reason they can't read. But reading and that kind of language aren't a part of Deaf culture, or at least people Deaf from birth.

Although Abel and Janet eventually own their own home, Janet never gets over the bitterness and shame of the years when they were poor. She's angry, too, that Margaret has her own life. Though the grandsons learn to Sign when they're young, eventually they forget, and don't spend time with their grandparents. It's the grandson who becomes a social activist in the 1960s and goes to the South to help the poor who brings Margaret and her parents back together.

Heather says

This book is valuable if any person wants to attempt to understand the intricacies of the Deaf and CODA worlds, and is an excellent novel.
