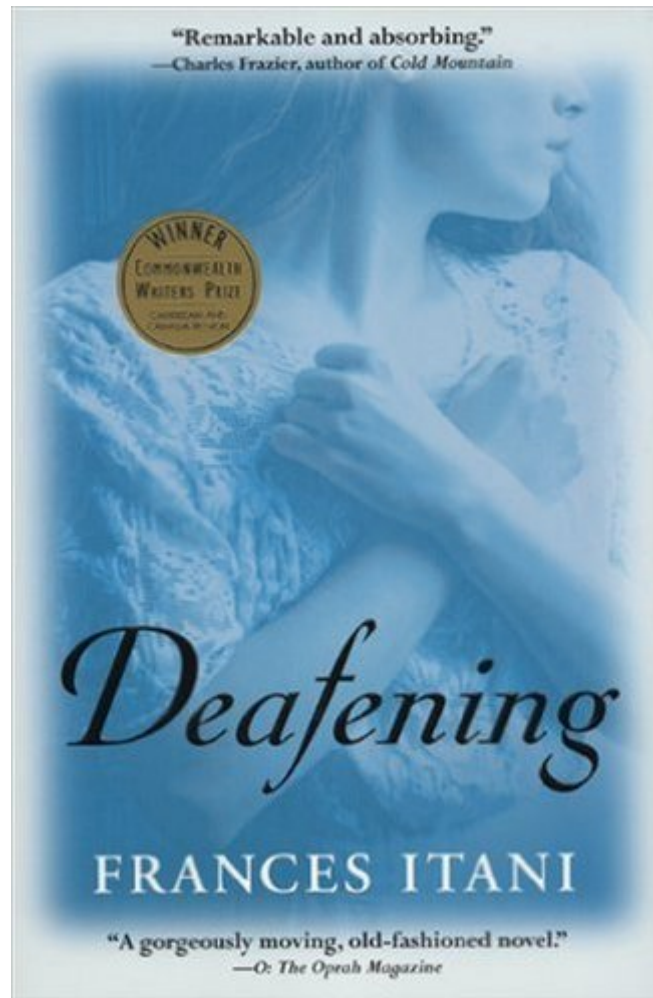


The book was found

Deafening



Synopsis

Set during 1915-19 in Canada, United States, England, Belgium and France, this is the story of a young woman in her 20s, Grania O'Neill (pronounced GRAW-NEE-YA, an Irish name meaning 'Love'), profoundly deaf from the age of 5 as a result of scarlet fever. She marries Jim Lloyd, a hearing man who, 2 weeks after their marriage, leaves home in Ontario to serve his King and country and 'do his bit for Mother England.' Jim tries in every possible way to understand his wife's experience of deafness, and together they explore their love through the silence in which she lives. Jim is trained as a stretcher-bearer in one of the large camps on the southeast coast of England. He serves in Belgium and France with Number 9 Canadian Field Ambulance. His war experiences, friendships, and care of the dying and wounded during this brutal war of attrition, are moving, intimately detailed and carefully researched to show the realities of the life of a stretcher bearer serving in the front lines. On the home front, Grania's childhood in a small town on the edge of Lake Ontario, where her father owns a hotel; and as a residential student at 'The Institution for the Deaf and Dumb' in a small Ontario city. A bright child, she has to learn 'real' sign language (which replaces the private language she and her sister had, as small children, invented). She also learns, by necessity, extreme self-discipline and control over her emotions, which enables her to survive the trauma of leaving home and the facts of institutional life with 300 other deaf children around her. No visits home are permitted during the school year. Grania's Mother, guilt-ridden and never accepting of Grania's deafness, tries to make Grania hear. She tries for cures by miracle, and by taking her to Rochester, New York, in hopes of finding specialized medical treatment. Grania's early experiences inside her own silence and within a family that tries to overprotect; despite her gradually developing independence and strengths; later illuminate the complexity of her adult relationships: with her closest deaf friend, Fry; with her older sister Tress; who was once her lifeline; with her Irish Grandmother, 'Mamo' (the most important person in her life at home and the one who teaches her to read and to speak, and whose love twice; in separate ways; saves Grania's life); with her 2 brothers; and with her parents. After Jim departs for the war, both Grania and her sister move back to their parents' home and hotel, where everyone in the family helps out with the hotel business. The tension in the book is held through the juxtaposition of two worlds: the world of war, violence and sound as shown through Jim's horrific experiences at the Front (which include several major battles); and life for Grania inside the silence of her own world during the long years of waiting on the home front; where news is frequently bad as more and more local boys are reported killed in the war. Grania's brother-in-law, Kenan, returns from the war in early 1918. He

is wounded and mutilated and has stopped speaking. It is Grania who, with her extensive speech training recalled from residential schooldays, makes the breakthrough to Kenan's speech. But this success creates resentment in her sister because Kenan is not able to confide or share his war experience with his young wife. Events move quickly toward resolution as first, Spanish flu sweeps through the town (a deadly pandemic), followed by Armistice (Nov 1918) and eventual demobilization. A moving sequence of events with her sister releases tensions between Grania and Tress. The loss of Mamo finally leads to the release of emotions Grania has never permitted herself to express. In the spring of 1919, Jim returns home. He and Grania have survived, but their separate experiences have altered them forever. Jim has been part of events that the mind will gorge upon in horror forever. He has lost his closest friend from the war, a man who has been a brother to him. But it is his love for Grania that has kept him going. Grania realizes, the instant she sees Jim, that neither of them will ever totally understand what the other has been through. Together they accept the realization that, in context of their love for each other, not understanding, not knowing, will have to be enough to move them forward.

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Customer Reviews

The true test of an author is the ability to portray the mind of someone else. Recently, that ability has been stretched by writers who describe the "abnormal". The young, autistic Christopher in "Curious Incident" is the prime example. Frances Itani takes us into a different world, that of the deaf. It's a world of endless confusion. There are sounds, so easy to the hearing, but meaningless

to the deaf. We think speech is the only important sound, but talk is hurried, undirected, and indistinct. Nature produces her own sounds which we use in speech, but for which there's no meaning to the deaf. Through Grania O'Brien's early life, Itani strives to introduce us to that world. Does she succeed? Grania, who would have been "Grainne" in her ancestral Ireland, lives in small-town Ontario as the story opens. Deafened by scarlet fever [remember that?], she's coached by Mamo, her grandmother. Blessed with a quick eye for lip-reading, Grania is given a book with words displayed as rope. The rope, of course, becomes highly symbolic as the book progresses, but Grania begins to equate the shapes with meaning. Mamo strains to have the girl equate printed words with proper sounds. It's important that Grania "blend in" with the rest of the community. With her parents running a hotel, Grania's only other tie is with her sister Tress, with whom she develops a secret sign language. All of Mamo's dedicated effort, nor trips to sacred shrines, can't force the pace. Grania is to leave home for a "Deaf School". Itani portrays the school as staffed with immensely caring ladies. No Dickens intrudes with harsh discipline or abuse, but the school draws children from across the Province. All the children remain in school until the summer holidays.

In this sensitive portrayal of love and war, author Itani reveals the life of Grania O'Neill from her earliest days in Deseronto, Canada, through her marriage to Jim Lloyd, who serves in the Ambulance Corps during World War I. Grania has been deaf since the age of five, and Itani opens her inner world to the reader, using Grania's voice to tell the story and gracefully conveying her deafness as part of her selfhood, not as a handicap. Using short sentences of twelve to fifteen words when Grania is a young child trying to figure out her world, Itani begins the story in a simple subject-verb-object pattern, using no complicated clauses or involved syntax, which Grania herself would be incapable of using. When Grania becomes fluent in sign language and lip-reading, the sentence structure becomes more complex. By the time she marries Jim, a hearing man, sentences and syntax are fully developed, and Grania's ability to recognize ambiguity, to see relationships between events, and to respond fully to a hearing world are obvious in her "voice." The point of view alternates between Grania and Jim, once Jim goes off to war, and important themes--war and peace, life and death, love and friendship, and strength and dependence--weave and develop throughout their contrasting worlds, Grania at home and Jim at the front in Belgium. Itani develops these age-old themes in new ways, sensitively incorporating them with the imagery of sounds and silence, sight and shadows, action and inaction, images we have come to associate with the life Grania and Jim share. In Jim's traumatic world, sound becomes overwhelming: pounding guns, explosions, screams of agony from wounded soldiers.

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