

# Foreword

John Lee Clark

What you have in your hands is a bomb. But it is the kind you need to hold on to for dear life, not run away from. For this reason, this book is already a classic.

The Nobel Prize in literature laureate J. M. Coetzee once defined a classic as a work that a community cannot afford to lose. I knew right away that *Bug* would be something the Deaf world needed when, sitting with me on the steps outside of my apartment building on a lovely afternoon in early August, Christopher Jon Heuer signed under my listening hand: “My book: Every essay me write, me try my best do what? Piss off someone!” This may seem like a shallow object for writing a book, pissing people off—a crude gimmick. But it is not. It is a noble goal that, if accomplished, will let the Deaf world grow. I write *let* instead of *make* because no one can make anything so magical as growth happen in someone else. But one can provide all of what is needed for growth.

The most important thing this book does to promote growth is to make *room* for that growth. How can anything grow if it doesn't have room to grow? The essays in this book are important and have explosive value because there is so little space for growth in the Deaf world. What I mean is that, to be a member of the Deaf community, you have to be audiotogically deaf, a fluent signer, and preferably a graduate of a school for the Deaf.

For you to access the highest social standing and positions of leadership, you have to come from a Deaf family—the more generations of unbroken Deaf lineage, the better. You don't *really* have to be all of that, but the community is structured so that you have more to overcome the less you fit the criteria.

Now, this model of what a Deaf person should be was absolutely necessary. For centuries, Deaf people have internalized mainstream society's belief that they are inherently inferior beings. Deaf people have been utter outcasts; deaf babies were thought to be unworthy of life and were thrown into rivers. Despite the pride Deaf people instinctively took in their sign languages, they were uncertain whether these were legitimate, bona fide languages until the latter part of the twentieth century. So the Deaf Pride movement *had* to establish an ideology complete with the community's idea of the perfect Deaf person, or as we say in American sign, "Deaf strong."

There is no one at fault for this, but there was one crucial weakness in this ideology, which is primarily concerned with identity: It failed to take into account that Deaf culture and what is generally known as the Deaf community are two different things. Deaf culture is only one group among many true components of a diverse and inclusive community. But Deaf culture became the standard for the rest of the community, a standard that was often simply impossible for members of other cultures and groups in the community to meet. After the Deaf Pride movement's crowning historical moment—the Deaf President Now protest at Gallaudet University in 1988; then *The Deaf Way*, the first international festival celebrating Deaf culture in 1989; followed by the passage in 1990 of the Americans with Disabilities Act, amidst many other smaller

revolutions—the community found itself diving headfirst into a boiling cauldron of an identity crisis. What about all of those young people who were the products of mainstreaming programs at public schools and who now constituted the majority of the Deaf population? What about the Black Deaf people and other Deaf people with different and relevant ethnic ties that make them distinct from Deaf White people? What about the hearing children of Deaf adults who are so torn between two worlds, between what is in their hearts and warring expectations imposed on them? What about someone like me, who was born Deaf but became blind, finding that I no longer fit in fully with sighted Deaf people and yet am still a part of “their” community? What about someone like Christopher Jon Heuer, who mouths too much, who graduated from a public school, who at times wears hearing aids, whose hearing wife signs better than he does . . . all the while being someone who cares, probably too much, about Deaf people, who believes passionately in Deaf equality and in the value of American sign in the education of Deaf children, and whose heart quite simply bleeds more for the love of Deaf people than that of anyone else I know?

All of them are members of the community, but all of them feel like misfits. Why? Because there is no room for them in the leading ideology of the so-called Deaf community. What defines a culturally Deaf person is, as it should be, the purview of Deaf culture, which has its own exclusive values. But this ideology has been so powerful as to extend its limiting forces all around it in the larger community. Christopher Jon Heuer has written this book hoping to destroy such forces, dropping a bomb into the landscape of the signing community. But it will

not detonate by itself. Only readers can do that, by responding to the words in this book.

That is why Heuer's *modus operandi* is an earnest and sustained attempt to piss someone off, because that will trigger a reaction. For every pissed-off reader, there is going to be a reader weeping for joy, so happy to find that she is not alone and that she is not crazy for being who she is. Heuer's main concern is not whether someone hates him or loves him, but that the explosive materials he offers detonate, opening new space where the community, in all of its parts and as a whole, can advance to the next age in its long and embattled, but proud, history. It is because of this that many readers will try to dismiss Heuer as a radical. Deaf people will do this for different reasons than hearing people, but the primary reason people will dismiss Heuer is because they are afraid of change.

Heuer is a radical only in the sense that he is doing what should have been done a long time ago. That is all. He is not extreme in any other regard. Hearing people have found justification in trying to eradicate the Deaf "variety of the human race." They have forbidden Deaf people from signing. They have said that signing is wrong and that speaking is right, and that all Deaf people must speak. They have sought to make deaf children as like hearing people as much as possible. You will not find anything remotely similar in reverse; that is, Deaf people as a group have never imposed their will on hearing people, nor have they ever been in a position to do so. Heuer does not say that hearing people should be wiped out. He does not say that all hearing people should sign. He does not say that hearing children should be deafened by every possible means and made to be upstanding citizens of the Deaf world. In light

of this, even Heuer's strongest opinions are excruciatingly sensible, his points the very picture of reason.

But his words—the way he proposes his ideas—are a whole different matter. He does everything in his power to make every word inflammable. He has to do this to get through the murk of apathy and uncertainty that pervades much social thought in the community today. He knows there are flames raging deep inside each and every Deaf person, and his greatest gift to them in writing this book is bringing new ideas, new perspectives, and new strong and sure signs as close to the flame as he can. The rest is up to you, the reader. It does not matter if you are Deaf, are a signer, or have nothing to do with our community, and it does not matter in what way you respond; however, the reader's response is what we cannot afford to lose.