

Introduction

On Small Things Easily Squished (and Alternative Destinies)

In March 2003, my good friend John Lee Clark asked me if I would be willing to write a column about whatever was bugging me that week.

Well . . . that's not exactly true. The publication I would write for was to be called *The Tactile Mind Weekly* (TTMW)—so yes, the column had to be a weekly one. But John never actually specified that my column had to be about something that was “bugging” me. All he really said was that it had to be about deafness. But you see, to me, those two things were one and the same. Lots of things bugged me about deafness. A lot of things still do.

Before I go on, though, I'd like to qualify those last two statements. When I was growing up, my mother's response to every problem I had was: “Well, he just needs to adjust to his deafness.” Believe me, I do mean *every* problem. Bloody nose? “Chris, you need to adjust to your deafness.” Homework not done? “I know it's hard adjusting to your deafness, honey, but. . . .” Acne scarring? “Lots of teenagers get zits, Chris. I know it's hard for you, dealing with this while trying to adjust to your. . . .”

On and on this went—for years. One day, I got sick of it. I don't really know how the argument got started, but I ended up banging my fist on the table and shouting, "Ma, stop!" Stop, because it's not your deafness that spits in your ear and slaps you upside the back of your head as it runs past you in the hallways of mainstream schools. It doesn't talk down to you, treat you like a Retard, or leave you sitting at the family dinner table, neglected and alone, in the presence of oblivious, yapping multitudes.

Other people do that.

Thus my intention was to kick a little ass in my column. I was mad, and Hearing America has had it coming for years. It's not easy, trying to tell them off. The problem isn't the argument. It's the audience. The ability to hear is not the same thing as the ability to listen. Brutal truths are painful and therefore threatening. Avoidance is easier. Denial is easier. "Stop feeling sorry for yourself" is easier. Their only alternative is acknowledging their part in the problem.

On the other hand, Deaf culture isn't exactly a shining beacon of hope either. Although not all Deaf people adhere to the same values, more than a few subscribe to some pretty exclusionary ones. Amongst them seem to be these: If . . .

1. you weren't born to Deaf parents
2. you didn't attend a Deaf institution (bonus points if you were actually born in one of the dorms)
3. your ASL is not as crisp as a freshly sliced apple

. . . then you are not worth the saliva required to spit in your face.

Meanwhile literacy rates among huge numbers of deaf high school graduates—orally or manually educated—remain at fourth-grade levels, as they have for decades. Relatively few Deaf education teachers can sign at expert or even adequate levels. Cochlear implants are a hair away from being programmed to raise deaf children with no parental involvement whatsoever (from a marketing viewpoint, why mess with historical trends?). In the midst of all of that, is there anything poignant an overwhelmed columnist can write?

For what it's worth, I tried. "The Man on the Street" ran in *TTMW* for around two years. You'll soon be reading the best of those columns right here in this book (*I* thought they were pretty good, anyway . . . decide for yourself!)

Before you do, though, a couple more things:

One, only 60 percent of *Bug* is composed of what used to be "Man on the Street" columns (all revised, polished, and converted into essays). Another 10 percent of the essays come from an entirely different column, a monthly one that I wrote for the National Association of the Deaf's online Members Only Area (NAD-MOA). That one was called "Mind over Matter." I wrote for the NAD for about as long as I wrote for *TTMW*, meaning that, for a while, I was writing both columns simultaneously (and very nearly burned myself out doing so). That's where the variation in the length of the essays comes from. I was sharing *TTMW* space with anywhere from five to nine or more writers, depending on the issue. We generally liked to keep things shorter over there. NAD-MOA, on the other hand, had fewer columnists and a lot more room to ramble.

Two, many of the poems in *Bug* come from an earlier book of poetry that I wrote for The Tactile Mind Press entitled *All Your Parts Intact*. Trust me; this isn't a sneaky attempt on my part to get you to buy two books' worth of identical material. I make it a practice to reprint a couple of poems from my older books in my newer books. That way if I ever become a Banned Writer (keep your fingers crossed), no singular book burning will wipe out all of my stuff.

Three, the remainder of the material in *Bug* is all new. This is why you're paying for the book. It's called capitalism. I like capitalism. It will help me retire, after which point I'll probably stop writing books. Therefore if you don't like my new stuff, by paying to read it, you're ironically enough helping me to the endpoint of my literary career, where you'll never have to hear from me again. It's a win-win situation.

Four, the intended audience for this book changes from essay to essay and from poem to poem. Deal with this. I tried to group things together loosely based on themes, but I'm a weird person who writes about weird things, so this wasn't easy. Furthermore, you're also going to have to make sense of the following system: A capital "D" in these essays usually denotes membership in the Deaf culture, while a lower-case "d" denotes those who are biologically deaf, yet have chosen not to join the Deaf culture. At times, the line between these two groups of D/deaf people will blur, and at times, that's as deliberate on my part as it is unintentional. If it seems that the various essays overlap, and even become contradictory, I ask for your patience. You, too, are full of overlapping and contradictory messages. If you doubt this, get your closest friends drunk and ask them what they really think of you.

And finally, five: Where does the title of this book come from? About a year into my writing “Man on the Street,” people began nodding at me as we passed each other in the hallowed halls of Gallaudet. My fame never quite reached the point where people started buying me beers at Deaf Professional Happy Hour (nudge to audience), but that’s okay. I’ll settle for the nods. At heart, at least, I’m a man of the street. I know exactly what I look like from the scholarly heights of the ivory tower: a bug (synonym for pest; synonym for a small thing easily squished). So be it. I resign myself to my destiny.

Understand something, though. Most people no doubt believe that the destiny of a bug is to become a dime-sized bloodstain on the palm of somebody’s hand. But the bug himself?

He believes it’s his destiny to start an infestation.

