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

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

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

A Loss for Words is Lou Ann Walker's autobiographical account of growing up with deaf parents. She describes generally happy early years, followed by a crisis of identity and emotional turmoil in her twenties, and Walker finally ends in a spirit of reconciliation and understanding.

Gale Walker, Lou Ann's father, becomes deaf at three months after a fever, and Doris Jean, Lou Ann's mother, becomes deaf after a bout with spinal meningitis in infancy. There is a lot of guilt and misunderstanding in both families about the deafness. At young ages, both parents are shipped off to the Indiana School for the Deaf. The school practices an "oralist" tradition of deaf education, in which vocalization and lipreading is encouraged and sign language discouraged, but the children learn sign language despite this challenge.

Gale and Doris Jean meet in 1950 after being set up on a date by friends. It is love at first sight, and soon Gale proposes at the Indianapolis 500 race. Gale works as a linotype operator at a local newspaper. Gale and Doris Jean settle down in Montpelier, Indiana, where there is extended family. In 1952 Lou Ann is born, followed by two other girls.

Being the eldest, Lou Ann finds herself being a go-between and intermediary between her deaf parents and the hearing world. She interprets, makes phone calls, negotiates with the mechanic, handles financial transactions, proofreads letters, and many other things. She deals with prejudice and unkindness because of the common stigma associated with deafness.

Lou Ann attends Ball State to become a teacher in deaf education, and eventually transfers to Harvard for comparative literature. She works for a magazine after graduation, and to earn extra money she becomes registered as a deaf interpreter, assisting the deaf in everything from court trials to medical matters. In this interpretation work she sees injustice and bigotry against the deaf.

During one interpreting session for a mental patient, Lou Ann has what could be described as a nervous breakdown. She realizes that she has been a pushover her whole life, an interpreter, a crutch for her parents, and she has given and given but has never taken care of herself or discovered her own personality. She quits interpreting and suffers through a period in which all her repressed childhood anger bubbles forth. Eventually, after visiting her parents, grieving in her grandfather's funeral, and enjoying her sister's marriage ceremony, she comes to a fuller and deeper understanding of herself and her parents, arriving at a sort of peace by the book's end.

Prologue, Chapter 1

Prologue, Chapter 1 Summary and Analysis

Prologue: The author is Lou Ann Walker. Walker's parents are deaf, and she is not. This has impacted her life in a profound manner. She has felt like an outsider. She has also had to grow up quickly, having to act as her parents' translator and go-between in everything from finances to dealing with car mechanics and doctors.

Walker's parents were initially very reluctant to have her write this book. They are very private. However, they saw the potential for the book to do some good for others, and so they slowly came around to the idea of having intimate details of their lives published.

Writing the book has been a process of discovery for Walker, and sometimes it has become very emotional as she realizes what her parents had to go through as deaf people. Walker describes her parents as two ordinary people - Midwest working-class people to be exact - in the extraordinary circumstance of having the "invisible handicap" of deafness.

Chapter 1: Walker is on a road trip from her home in Indiana to Harvard in Massachusetts. She spent the first two years of her college education at Muncie, and now Harvard has accepted her as a transfer. She is looking forward to getting away from home, from small-town boredom, and also from the exhaustion of having to constantly act as a go-between for her parents. Walker is afraid that Harvard students will think she is a redneck of hayseed.

She had prominently featured the fact that her parents were deaf on her Harvard application, and she feels guilty for "using" them in this manner. Her parents don't understand why Walker wants to move away from her family, but her father especially is proud of her accomplishment. Walker becomes mad when a gas station attendant wonders out loud about "mutes" (her parents) being able to drive cars.

They reach Cambridge and settle in to the dorm. They meet Howard, a "wonk" (nerdy student), and Walker feels the worlds of the deaf and the hearing collide. She feels embarrassed by her parents. The family says goodbye with hugs and kisses as they share last moments at a restaurant.

Walker meets her new roommate, Laura, and is shocked at how the California girl is casual about sleeping in the nude. When she's asleep, Walker, feeling very lonely, wanders the streets and discovers the street where her parents are staying at the Holiday Inn.

She finds their room and hears the TV on, but she cannot get their attention - knocking won't be heard. She tries to shove a piece of paper underneath the door, but to no avail. Sad, she returns to her dorm room. Later she discovers that the TV was turned on to

hide the sobs of her mother, sad at the prospect of her daughter no longer living with her.

Chapter 2, Chapter 3

Chapter 2, Chapter 3 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 2: Walker's mother, Doris Jean, became deaf after a high fever associated with spinal meningitis at thirteen months of age. Walker's father, Gale, became deaf at three months of age after a fever developed when he was taken outside during a bitterly cold day to attend a funeral. Both sets of parents, to varying degrees, spend the rest of their days blaming themselves for the deafness. Gale's parents were heavily involved in the church. Doris Jean's father was a factory foreman, and her mother was a librarian.

Walker's parents have many devices to assist them in everyday living. These devices include: a TTY, or teletype telephone, to print messages from the phone; a pulsing-light alarm clock; and a doorbell that lit up in addition to making a noise. They also have little tricks, such as turning a light switch on and off rapidly to get the attention of the other. Walker's parents vocalize, but because they cannot monitor their own voice, it is garbled and intelligible only to their children.

Deafness is more complicated than most realize. Because the "profoundly" deaf - those who become completely deaf from an early age - do not have the benefit of hearing speech in crucial stages of development, not only do they not hear, but the basics of language like writing and reading are very difficult to grasp. Lipreading is not a great "panacea" for deafness either. Many words can look the same coming out of a mouth, since many vowel sounds are made at the back of the throat and not the lips.

Deafness makes one a social outcast. People become nervous and unsure how to communicate when meeting a deaf person. They may become angry when a deaf person doesn't respond to a vocal command. Deafness also creates guilt. The deaf feel guilty for having to rely on parents or children too heavily to assist them. And while Walker was happy to assist her parents as a child, as it made her feel important, it also exposed her to prejudice and spite directed at her parents.

Deafness is like another culture. It has a whole other language, and distinct codes of behavior. The deaf have their own niche groups and own businesses and social functions.

Chapter 3: Doris Jean contracts meningitis. A doctor is fetched all the way from Indianapolis to treat her. Doris Jean's father has to hold her down as the doctor administered five painful injections into her spine. The doctor seems satisfied after five doses, discarding the syringe. Doris Jean's mother notices that the syringe indicates "Five to Seven Doses," and she has a feeling that something will go wrong. Doris Jean has a relapse of the meningitis, and this time the illness robs her of her hearing.

Doris Jean's mother uses a book about Helen Keller to help communicate with her daughter. But at age six, Doris Jean is shipped off to the Indiana State School for the

Deaf. Doris Jean does not understand why her parents are abandoning her, and she thinks she has misbehaved. Doris Jean spends the majority of the next fourteen years at this school, coming home only for summer breaks.

Like most deaf schools at the time, the school emphasizes oral skills, including writing and lipreading. This is the "oralist" tradition of teaching the deaf, a school that believes in speaking and lipreading without ever signing. This is opposed to the manualist tradition, which believes in signing. A compromise between the two camps is "total communication," in which signing is also spoken in full sentences. Walker believes oralists deprive the deaf of an important alternative language, and that underlying oralist philosophy is the idea that there is something "terribly wrong" with being deaf. On the other hand, Walker criticizes manualists for retreating to their own world and acting as if they don't need any contact with the hearing world. At the State School for the Deaf, sign language is not taught, existing only as a kind of guilty secret for those who can't master speech.

Doris Jean eventually adapts to school and thrives. Her classmates become like sisters, and she remains friends with them her entire life. She becomes an expert signer, and graduates in June of 1950. Her parents want her to move back in with them, but Doris Jean opts to go to Indianapolis and room with a fellow classmate, Alice. She gets a job as a keypunch operator, and adapts to life in the city.

Chapter 4, Chapter 5

Chapter 4, Chapter 5 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 4: In 1927 Montpelier, Indiana, people are struggling pre-Depression because the oil wells have dried up. Walker's Grandma Nellie is raising seven children and is a lively soul. Grandpa Walker (aka H.T.) is by contrast a stern and brooding man, who does various odd jobs including mortuary services and frame-making in an attempt to feed his family. The eldest boy in the family, Garnel, is deaf. No one else in the family history is deaf, and H.T. swears the boy acquired and was not born with deafness, as there is a stigma attached to genetic deafness. Garnel throws temper tantrums and is a hard boy to deal with. Much later, Gale (Walker's father) comes along, and has the opposite personality of Garnel.

Gale is nicknamed "Puff" for being a fat baby. Only gradually does the family realize the new baby is deaf. He is taken to the doctor many times, including the Mayo clinic at age five, but the answer is the same: his auditory nerves are destroyed and there is no cure. For his first years in school, Gale struggles in public school because H.T. had a falling out with the Deaf School during Garnel's schooling. But after a few years the superintendent at the school changes, and Gale attends the School for the Deaf.

Gale flourishes at school, having the same kind of individual attention and close friendships Doris Jean had. After graduation, he plans to operate a linotype machine.

Chapter 5: Gale, three years a printer at the Bluffton "News-Banner," is set up on a date with Doris Jean in the fall of 1950. It is love at first sight. They date every weekend, with Gale driving two-and-a-half hours each way to come to Doris Jean. In May of 1951, Gale asks Doris Jean to go on a picnic on Qualifications Day at the Indianapolis 500 race. In the middle of the infield, Gale asks Doris Jean to marry him, and she agrees.

The wedding takes place four months after. H.T. officiates. They are married in a tiny Methodist church. After the wedding reception, Gale and Doris Jean head to the Great Smoky Mountains for their honeymoon. They are true soul mates, and rarely spend a night apart for the next thirty years. They move into a home in Montpelier and within six months Doris Jean is pregnant.

Walker emphasizes to the reader that American Sign Language is an art just as any other language is. A great signer can be the equivalent of a great actor. Creativity is a key component. The face and body and not just the hands also play a role in signing. You can "stutter" in sign and other nuances we associated with spoken language. The way a person signs can also signal the region they are from, much like an accent in spoken language.

Chapter 6, Chapter 7

Chapter 6, Chapter 7 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 6: In December 1952, Lou Ann Walker (the author) is born. Everyone is relived that she is a "normal" baby and not deaf. They name her "Lou Ann" because those are easy syllables for the deaf parents to vocalize. They buy a "baby cry box" for Lou Ann, which converts a baby's cries into a sort of light show on a box so deaf parents know when a baby is crying.

Gale and Doris Jean want to ensure that Lou Ann (and her siblings) grow up speaking perfectly, and one resource for this plan is buying a TV. Lou Ann learns much spoken language from television.

Though Gale and Doris Jean pride themselves on being capable people and are reluctant to ask for help, it comes about naturally that Lou Ann begins to help her parents with things difficult for deaf people. She gives them summaries of the television news and makes phone calls. She also becomes the default communicator when people treat her parents like inanimate objects or as mentally deficient once they realize her parents are deaf. Lou Ann grows into a shy, quiet, responsible girl, though some don't think she is "tough" enough.

In 1955 the family buys a fixer-upper type house on Jefferson Street. One weekend Gale is laying linoleum tiles when some of the boiling fixative runs down his leg. He winds up in the hospital for months with third-degree burns and skin graft surgeries. The family's savings are depleted by the hospital bills.

In addition to working as a printer, Gale helps out with his family's funeral business, driving the car in the funeral procession and performing other duties. H.T. (Gale's father) is a looming presence in Gale's life. Gale turns down two job offers at newspapers in larger cities (Dallas and Fort Wayne) because H.T. insists he stay in Montpelier with the family.

When Lou Ann is four, her sister Kay is born. She is very responsible toward the baby, helping to raise her and especially helping her to speak normally. She feels pressure by her extended family to provide the type of rearing her deaf parents cannot.

Gale grows a backbone and, defying his father, takes a job in Indianapolis. The move to the larger city is difficult for the family, for they are used to the support of the small community and the extended family. People in Indianapolis are not accustomed to deaf people, and so the family becomes a curiosity and Lou Ann, perhaps for the first time, feels different and alienated.

Chapter 7: Walker, around eight years of age, becomes convinced that her parents are non-deaf spies, and are only feigning deafness in order to learn her and her sisters' secrets. She tries to catch them hearing, or set 'traps' for them to reveal they can hear,

but of course they never betray themselves as hearing people. This "spies" belief is a strange sort of wish fulfillment on Walker's part.

Signing, as Walker has mentioned before, is a creative and clever art. The author provides several common objects and their creative signs. The sign for "watermelon," for example, is thumping on the back of the hand like one is checking a melon for ripeness. For "ice cream," one pretends to lick an ice cream cone.

Walker realizes that she grew up different from her sisters, Jan and Kay. She is the eldest and thus the most responsible, and the least "wild." Kay as the middle child has been plagued by shyness and uncertainty, while Jan has been the "wild child."

Walker relates a series of nights during one summer when she hears a man walking and talking outside her bedroom wall. She fetches her father, who dutifully scours the backyard with a flashlight night after night looking for the man, never complaining, but never finding anyone. Finally, one night a shotgun blast rips the night air. It turns out that the next-door neighbor warned off the snooping man Walker was hearing with a shotgun blast into the air. Walker relates this to a larger characterization of her father as a very patient, very methodical man who never loses his temper.

As Walker has mentioned, reading and especially writing English is very hard for the deaf. When Walker begins to apply to colleges, forms pile up and Doris Jean and Gale regard them with hesitation and embarrassment. Walker also recalls the many times she proofread and corrected her mother's letters. Walker even writes a sick note for school for herself when Doris Jean struggles.

In grade school, Walker has trouble with her reputation (and innate personality) as a "nice" girl, which she equates which being too easily pushed around and manipulated. A schoolmate, Vicki, forced Walker to teach her sign language as a way to get around the strict teacher's rule of No Talking. Walker relents and teaches the language, and soon the whole class is signing. Walker feels she has betrayed her parents in a certain way by sharing their secret language.

Walker remembers when she makes Doris Jean buy her a piano. Doris Jean feels the piano for the best vibrations when Walker plays her crude tunes. Walker has no aptitude for piano playing and soon abandons it. Doris Jean sells the piano, and Walker feels angry and betrayed, even though the piano was just collecting dust. Later Walker takes up the violin. Hesitant, Walker nevertheless invites her parents to the music concert. Doris Jean reports liking watching the bow strings go up and down in unison, while Gale falls asleep. Doris Jean and Gale soon find ways to avoid future music concerts, because for the deaf it simply has no value or interest.

Indeed, Walker finds that the deaf and the hearing have different ways to unwind and have fun. Doris Jean loves to go for car rides, as there is so much to see, while Walker would rather curl up with a book. Doris Jean and Gale unwind every day by sitting on the back porch, staring out into the night. Walker realizes this is a kind of way to rest their eyes, by staring at nothing.

Chapter 8, Chapter 9

Chapter 8, Chapter 9 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 8: Walker recalls pleasant Christmas memories of the anticipation leading up to presents and the wonderful food and desserts made by her mother. In private, the family was very close and everything was great. Outside the immediate family, however, there was the potential for embarrassment and ambivalent feelings. Walker recalls one incident in which her mother's money is stolen at the supermarket - which was quite an emergency, as the family lives from week to week - and Doris Jean cannot properly communicate the emergency to the cashier or anyone else. Doris Jean hated to make a scene or call attention to her deafness in any way. This is also evident when Walker makes Doris Jean help her prepare for a spelling bee, and Doris Jean becomes angry and embarrassed because of her difficulties with English.

Walker spends many summer days with her Uncle Bill and Aunt Margaret. She comes to envy a "hearing" family, and believe something is wrong with her deaf family. She hates having such feelings and is conflicted.

At other times, being in a deaf family feels very special. Walker describes a sort of telepathy her parents have, a heightened sensitivity from being deaf. This telepathy allows them to disguise their deafness very well, being able to tell what is going on from visual clues alone. Her sisters and her also share an unspoken oneness with her parents that is difficult to explain. They may tell jokes that only deaf people might appreciate, for example.

Above all, Doris Jean and Gale want to be treated like normal people. They don't think deafness is a handicap, and they don't deserve handouts from the government for being "disabled." Walker remembers a Christmas sermon in which the pastor equates deafness with a sorrowful state, like poverty, and she feels conflicted again about her deaf family.

Chapter 9: Walker has a tremendous urge to fit in growing up. She hears about the Masons and how many "normal" people are in it, and compels her father to join. He applies, just to appease his daughter, but is rejected for being deaf, as he knew he would be. Walker feels selfish for her action, and sorry for her father. Gale and Doris Jean are in fact members of what Walker calls the "Frat," a collection of deaf-centric organizations and clubs. They even organize and preside over several of these clubs, from a deaf Miss Indiana pageant to nursing homes and scholarship foundations.

Walker describes experiences with prejudice against deaf people. Her boyfriend, named Dave Gregson, becomes frustrated when he is forced to make small talk with Walker's father as Walker is readying for their date. Gregson claims that the deaf "don't have anything to say," as if they are mentally deficient. In another story, Walker's aunt Gathel dates a medical student who orders her to give up her deaf brothers and never see

them again as a condition of their marriage. When Gathel refuses, the medical student breaks up with her.

Walker takes long drives in the country back roads of Indiana, with the wind blowing and radio roaring, as a way to lose herself and get away from her frustration with her parents.

Chapter 10, Chapter 11

Chapter 10, Chapter 11 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 10: Walker chooses to go to college at Ball Street, because it's close to home and it has a program for training teachers of the deaf. While schoolwork is not a problem, Walker still deals with the stigma of deafness. She hides an awkwardly-worded letter written by her deaf Aunt Imogene in fears her roommate may insult Imogene's poor grasp of English. Uncle Garnel and Aunt Imogene are embarrassing for Walker; Garnel makes grunting noises when he signs, and Imogene always tries to get Walker to teach her crochet though Walker has little patience for it. When Garnel and Imogene visit her at college, she makes sure it's a quiet affair and that she doesn't introduce them to everyone. Unfortunately, the pair wake up her entire dorm building by using the Emergency Exit Only stairs, and of course not hearing the resultant alarm.

Walker relates a similar story of deaf helplessness. Her father takes her to a driving range to practice golf, and soon a "golf pro" is teaching Walker to swing, aggressively touching her body as he takes her through the mechanics of a swing. Father (Gale) is slow to understand what's going on, and it's up to Walker to yell "Get off me!" to the man. Walker guesses Gale feels humiliated for being helpless to protect his daughter.

Walker joins the deaf education program, and is the only student of deaf students. She learns the other deaf education students are idealists, hoping to "save" a deaf child much as Helen Keller's teacher did to her. She also encounters hostility because she is a signer, and the program's sole emphasis is on verbal communication (the oralist tradition). These oralists don't want to hear that there is another way to teach the deaf. Walker's oralist professors treat one deaf graduate student (Marion) who emphasizes sign language with particular cruelty, and Walker reacts by being more pro-signing than ever. She transfers to Harvard after two years, less worried about missing her family than about missing a boyfriend named Steve she had gotten cozy with.

Chapter 11: Walker describes her time at Harvard in the early 1970s. Culturally, everything from food to clothes to social customs are very different from Indiana. She is very intimidated and, as in previous schooling, tries desperately to fit in. She only speaks when she has prepared in her mind what to say, and even then she feels it comes out wrong.

For her senior honors thesis, she chooses the subject of the confessional novel, and why the characters in such novels feel compelled to share their stories and secrets in such a way. She begins to realize that she is like the characters in these novels - she has something to hide, something deep inside she wants to deny, and that is the reality of her having grown up with deaf parents. She develops a boyfriend, John, to whom she confesses her various conflicted feelings about her parents and her upbringing, crying as she does so because they had been hidden for so long.

Chapter 12, Chapter 13

Chapter 12, Chapter 13 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 12: After Harvard, Walker moves to New York and gets an editing job with first New York magazine and later Esquire. To supplement her income, she acts as sign language interpreter on nights and weekends. Deaf schools seem to be in the worst parts of town, a comment about how the deaf are neglected in general. She joins the National Registry of Interpreters, and interprets in a wide variety of situations, from court proceedings to hospital settings to classrooms. Walker sees more prejudice against the deaf in her job, particularly in the justice system.

One example of injustice is a boy named El Mudo, who was duped by other teenagers to drive the getaway car during a botched robbery. His own lawyer treats El Mudo with contempt, claiming he was "playing dumb" and wanting to immediately plea bargain because the lawyer didn't want to drive a jury crazy with a deaf person's antics. El Mudo is unfairly given seven years in prison. Among other examples, there is a boy named Ray who reached into a friend's gym bag and accidentally set off the gun inside, shooting someone on the subway. Various court psychiatrists and police representatives have no patience or understanding of the deaf. Ray is bewildered and frightened by their questions and seems to be acting with the mental capacity of a child. Walker realizes Ray thinks in a different way because of his deafness, but as an objective interpreter she cannot state any opinions.

To be specific, the deaf think in a very linear, rigid way, with no gray areas or imagination, because they lack the richness and nuance of the audio world from an early age. The deaf learn to read simple stories, even through high school, and are taught in a didactic, concrete way. Studies even show that deaf people don't have an interior monologue - they cannot hear themselves think, so to speak.

Walker visits Indiana for Christmas one year, and has a great time at Grandma's with family and a delicious feast. Stuffed with food, she, Doris Jean, Doris Jean's father, and sister Kay go on a ride. Doris Jean's father expresses a desire to learn signs - he had never signed in his life - and later he tells Doris Jean that he loves her. Walker becomes emotional at her grandpa's late-life attempt at reconciliation, realizing how much the relationship had been strained throughout the years.

Chapter 13: Walker decides to write about deafness, and she hears about a deaf street gang named the Nasty Homicides. For the next months she hangs out in the worst parts of the South Bronx trying to connect to this gang. She connects with their leader, Pedro Acevedo, who runs with the gang by night and advocates for the deaf in the prison system by day. Walker advances the idea of writing an article about the Nasty Homicides, and Pedro is hesitant, believing she will write a scathing article to get the gang in trouble.

Over the next months, Walker continues to make her argument to Pedro. Several time Pedro promises to get a meeting together with the other leaders of the gang, but it always falls through. Finally, after enough trust, Pedro takes her to a meeting in front of a filthy bodega with another leader, Big Willie. Slowly, Walker earns the gang's trust and is invited to hang out with them. She gets a photographer to accompany her for her article.

Despite being a gang, the Nasty Homicides are strangely inept, and Walker comes to feel sorry for them. Communication is difficult and time-consuming, in absence of quick phone calls. Walker recalls a "rumble" in which hardly anyone shows up, and the rumble gets essentially canceled. Individual members of the gang had severe problems at home - oftentimes stemming from the stigma attached to their deafness.

Chapter 14, Chapter 15

Chapter 14, Chapter 15 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 14: Walker decides to write her deafness article, but has several false starts. Her friend suggests she's not dealing with the essence of deafness, only skirting around it. Even though Walker is very busy at her magazine, she continues to interpret for little pay and a lot of inconvenience and anger. She is overextending herself. She deals with a deaf man named Tyrone who, misunderstood by the world, only wishes to act out in anger and violence. Walker describes her own inner anger and compulsion as a "vanilla fire" raging out of control.

One day, Walker interprets for a mental patient's session with a psychiatrist. The mental patient signs that she is the Virgin Mary, and Walker as usual says exactly what the patient is signing. Walker realizes that her entire life has been a process of repeating, of being other people, of caretaking, of being a conduit for deafness, of allowing deafness to control her life. Who is the real Lou Ann Walker? Walker describes herself as a "black void" whose inside is "hollow." She feels like screaming. She also realizes that, in all her efforts to protect and shelter her parents, or any of the deaf people she signs for, she cannot protect anyone from the cruelty of the world.

Chapter 15: For a long time after her breakdown, Walker is very temperamental, snapping at everyone, cursing, slamming doors in anger, having fierce arguments with her boyfriend. All her repressed emotions are pouring out. After a few months, as if exhausted from a violent struggle, Walker calms down and reevaluates her life. She finds comfort and camaraderie in another daughter of deaf parents. Walker stops interpreting, calling it a "crazy addiction." She also decided to talk to her sister Kay about her feelings, and she discovers Kay also felt embarrassed and awkward growing up in a deaf household.

Walker's gang story is finally published in People magazine. Several of the gang members get in trouble with their parents or families after word of the article gets out, and Walker feels terrible, but gang leader Big Willie assures her they all knew the consequences of the article and that the article was truthful and therefore not anything to be ashamed of.

Walker also visits her parents, which she finds initially sad and painful, but finally enlightening, because for the first time she feels as if she is understanding them. In June of 1983, Walker's parents visit her in New York. Times have gradually changed; deaf people have gained more acceptance. It seems a happier time, with Walker understanding and respecting her parents. They drive back to Indianapolis, and Gale takes Walker to the Indiana School for the Deaf. They communicate with several teachers and staff who used to be schoolmates of Gale. Gale is the president of the alumni association for the school and has organized many improvements to the school. It is a bittersweet moment for both.

Chapter 16, Epilogue

Chapter 16, Epilogue Summary and Analysis

Chapter 16: In August 1983, Grandpa Wells (Doris Jean's father) dies from lung cancer, peacefully. Grandma Wells is devastated and deeply grieving. Walker and her sister Jan arrange funeral details.

The casket viewing takes place, and Doris Jean breaks out into soul-wrenching sobs. Never having the hearing to monitor her own sounds, she is sobbing very loudly, but Walker and everyone realize Doris Jean must do this to grieve, and the family does what they can to comfort her.

Walker interprets for the actual funeral service. She thinks about Grandpa Wells, and all of her relatives alive and dead. While once she was angry at Grandpa Wells for failing to express his love for Doris Jean and properly deal with her deafness, at the service she loses that anger and hurt

Epilogue: Walker's sister Jan's wedding takes place on the heels of the funeral. At the rehearsal dinner, Gale makes a humorous but loving speech (signed) to wish the new couple well. The wedding is beautiful, and Jan is wearing a vintage wedding gown. Walker feels sorry for Grandma Wells, who is struggling between her grief and wanting to remain cheerful for her granddaughter.

At the reception, the guests naturally divide into the deaf and the hearing. Gale and Doris Jean are perfect hosts. Gale dances with all his daughters, responding to vibrations instead of music. Most importantly, Gale and Doris Jean look happy and at peace, the perfect couple in true love.

Characters

Doris Jean Walker

Doris Jean is author Lou Ann's mother. She becomes deaf as an infant after a bout with spinal meningitis. Unable or unwilling to cope with a deaf daughter, Doris Jean's parents send her away to the Indiana School for the Deaf, which Doris Jean misinterprets as abandonment. However, after several years Doris Jean flourishes in school, learning excellent sign language despite the school's "oralist" tradition, which favors lipreading and vocalization over signs.

Doris Jean meets Gale on a blind date and instantly falls in love. They marry and have Lou Ann just a couple of years later, and settle in Montpelier.

Doris Jean does not feel that deafness is a handicap, and does not feel the deaf deserve any handouts or special treatment from the government. She is active in many deaf-oriented clubs and organizations, such as Miss Deaf Indiana. She has a fierce spirit of independence, and wants to do everything she can to appear normal and not need help due to her deafness. When she does experience moments where her deafness is a liability, such as a time when her wallet is stolen at the supermarket and she cannot properly communicate the fact to the cashier, she is humiliated and angry.

Doris Jean is warm and very loving, and unconditionally committed to her family. While initially bashful and embarrassed about her deafness, in later years she becomes a bit more confrontational and defiant, as if daring people to stare at her or treat her differently.

Gale Walker

Gale Walker is Lou Ann's father. He becomes deaf at three months of age after his mother takes him out into the bitter cold for a funeral service and he develops a fever which destroys his auditory nerves. Like Doris Jean, Gale's parents don't or can't understand Gale's condition, and he is sent at an early age to the Indiana School for the Deaf. He excels, especially in such tasks as carpentry, and when he graduates he travels to Indianapolis to become a linotype operator (a common job for the deaf, since the machines are so loud) for a local newspaper.

Gale meets Doris Jean on a blind date, and proposes to her on Qualifications Day at the Indianapolis 500 race. In 1952 the couple have Lou Ann, followed by two other daughters in the proceeding years.

In addition to his linotype work, Gale helps out with his father's funeral home business, driving the hearse in the funeral procession among other thankless tasks. Gale is closely attached to his family, and especially his father, H.T. As such, he turns down

several better jobs in other cities to remain close to his family. However, Gale soon finds the strength to become his own man and do what's best for his family.

Gale is warm and loving with his children, and it is common for him to play little practical jokes and kid around with Lou Ann and her sisters. He feels guilt over having his daughters assist himself and his wife to the degree they do.

Lou Ann Walker

Lou Ann Walker is the author, and the daughter of deaf parents Gale and Doris Jean Walker. She is the eldest of three daughters, her sisters being Kay and Jan. As the eldest, the responsibility of assisting her parents in the hearing world falls upon Lou Ann's shoulders. She grows up quickly, and by seven or eight is answering phone calls, acting as her parents' interpreter, negotiating with the car mechanic, and generally acting as her parents' conduit to the world. As such, she sees prejudice and cruelty directed toward the deaf, and she does her best to protect her parents.

Lou Ann grows up with a "good girl" reputation, the responsible one who will always do good and take care of her parents. In essence, she sacrifices her own childhood and the development of her own personality for the sake of her parents.

Lou Ann attends Ball State for deaf education, and later transfers to Harvard. She goes to work for a magazine, and eventually spends months with a deaf street gang as part of an article. While doing interpreting work in New York City, Lou Ann suffers a nervous breakdown because of the sacrifices of her childhood. She essentially has a crisis of identity; a lifetime of interpreting has meant she has not expressed anything as herself but only as other people. After much anger, she begins a process of self-discovery. After visiting her parents, grieving over her grandfather's death, and witnessing her sister's marriage, Lou Ann comes to discover herself and rediscover her parents, developing a fuller understanding of why they acted as they did and how difficult their lives have been.

Grandma Wells

Grandma Wells is Lou Ann's grandmother on her mother's side. She experienced great guilt over her daughter Doris Jean's deafness, blaming herself. She uses a story on Helen Keller to try to teach and relate to Doris Jean, but ultimately she can't find it in her to relate in a profound way with her daughter, and so Grandpa and Grandma Wells send Doris Jean off to the Indiana School for the Deaf.

At the end of the book, Grandpa Wells dies, and Grandma Wells grieves deeply for her husband of over fifty years.

Grandpa Walker (H.T.)

Grandpa Walker, or H.T., is Lou Ann's grandfather on her father's side. A harsh and stern man, H.T. made little effort to understand or sympathize with his son Gale's deafness. Gale later works for H.T. in the family funeral business. H.T. is an intimidating man, and compels Gale to remain in Montpelier to be close to family even after Gale gets better job offers elsewhere.

Uncle Bill and Aunt Margaret

In her childhood, Lou Ann spends several weeks every summer with Uncle Bill and Aunt Margaret, hearing relatives. It is these vacations which cause Lou Ann to begin to envy a normal, "hearing" upbringing.

Marion

Marion is a deaf graduate student at Ball State. Marion emphasizes sign language in her deaf education techniques, and is thus shunned and ostracized by the professors who emphasize vocalizing and lipreading over signing. Lou Ann sees Marion treated badly, and it strengthens her own resolve to pursue sign language despite the prevailing oralist tradition.

El Mudo

El Mudo (Spanish for "The Deaf One) is a young man Lou Ann interprets for in the court system. She points to his case as more evidence that the justice system is poorly equipped to handle the deaf. El Mudo was duped by his friends into driving a getaway car during a robbery. Though El Mudo understands little, he is given several years in prison.

The Nasty Homicides

The Nasty Homicides are a street gang in New York comprised of deaf outcasts. Lou Ann spends several months traveling with the gang in order to write an article. Lou Ann eventually feels sorry for the boys, considering their very poor home lives, and the fact that deafness hinders their communication.

Kay

Kay is Lou Ann's younger sister. Lou Ann, ever the responsible one, cares for Kay and looks after her when they are growing up, and so they become quite close. When Lou Ann undergoes her identity crisis, she turns to Kay to talk to, and they are finally able to talk about the feelings they had growing up with deaf parents.

Objects/Places

Montpelier, Indiana

The small town of Montpelier is where Lou Ann grows up. Her extended family is always close at hand, who help assist her deaf parents. The community is accustomed to her parents' condition, and so she does not feel embarrassed or out of place.

Harvard University

After two years at Ball State in Indiana, Lou Ann transfers to Harvard to study comparative literature. She experiences culture shock by going east.

TTY

A TTY is a teletype machine which prints out phone messages for the deaf. The Walkers use this in their home.

Qualifications Day at the Indy-500, 1951

Qualifications Day at the Indianapolis-500, 1951, is a very significant day in the life of the Walkers, as this is the day Gale chooses to propose to Doris Jean while on a picnic.

Baby Cry Box

A baby cry box, which is bought at great cost by the Walkers, is a device designed for deaf parents which converts a baby's cries into light signals. This alerts the deaf to when the baby is crying, and the light signals are quite sophisticated as to demonstrating level and pitch of the baby cries.

The

The "Frat" is the informal name Lou Ann gives to the collection of deaf-focused community organizations and clubs that Gale and Doris Jean are involved in. Gale and Doris Jean become presidents and chairs of several significant deaf clubs in Indiana. While The Frat gives the deaf an excellent opportunity to meet and participate in a community, it also has the danger of isolating the deaf from the rest of society.

Ball State University

Lou Ann attends Ball State for two years in deaf education prior to transferring to Harvard. The faculty of Ball State practice the oralist tradition of deaf education, favoring speech and lipreading over sign language, and Lou Ann feels eventually stifled by this narrow focus.

New York City

After graduating from Harvard, Lou Ann moves to New York City to work for several magazines. To earn extra money, she also takes interpreting jobs all around the city. Through these interpreting jobs, Lou Ann witnesses the magnitude of prejudice against the deaf.

Vanilla Fire

A Nasty Homicides gang member named Ortiz writes this phrase on a napkin in his attempt to order a vanilla shake and fries from McDonald's. Lou Ann later uses the phrase "vanilla fire" to describe her crisis of identity.

Rigid Thinking

Some research has shown that deaf people are rigid thinkers. They think in terms of black and white and yes or no, and cannot appreciate situations where there are gray areas or may not be one correct answer. They may react in anger or frustration when there is not a clear-cut solution to a problem.

Themes

The Stigma of Deafness

Walker is very concerned with the stigma attached to deafness, especially in the time she grew up in, the 1950s and 1960s. As many other medical conditions, deafness was poorly understood and ignorance led to bigotry and prejudice. Thus, part of the reason for Walker's book is to debunk the myths of deafness and provide commonsense explanations for the otherwise strange behavior of deaf people.

The deaf are usually rigid thinkers, meaning that they think in terms of yes or no, right or wrong, without nuance or gray areas. Researchers have linked this rigid thinking to the lack of hearing during crucial years of infant development. Walker urges society to appreciate this difference when dealing with deaf people. Deaf people may become frustrated when there isn't an easy answer or a definite set of steps to follow to accomplish something.

The deaf, for similar reasons, also have difficulty with the basics of English reading and writing. What may appear to be "stupidity" to the ignorant outsider is the result of a genuine inability to grasp spoken language. For older deaf people, difficulty with language is also the result of an educational system which stressed mimicry of spoken English and lipreading rather than the development of sign language.

There are also several behaviors that can be explained by a simple lack of hearing, but which may not be obvious. The deaf may walk with heavy footsteps, grunt when signing, or vocalize (sob or laugh) louder than what is societally acceptable, all because they cannot hear themselves in order to modify their behavior. Walker pleads for patience and understanding in these instances.

The Qualities of American Sign Language

Author Lou Ann Walker writes at length about American Sign Language (ASL), in an effort to inform her reader and challenge the reader about conventional ideas about language. First, Walker makes it clear that ASL is not simply a substitute or approximation of the English language. Finger-spelling - that is, spelling out English words with the fingers on an open palm - is a tedious process in ASL and is only occasionally used when regular signing fails. ASL is instead an entirely different mode of communication based upon the visual. The fact that ASL is entirely different from English is observed in the fact that many deaf people have severe problems reading and writing English. So much of spoken and even written language is dependent on the first two years of a child's life when they are able to hear themselves speak and change their speech patterns based on that aural feedback.

Additionally, Walker stresses that ASL is not necessarily a lesser or simpler version of any given spoken language. Great nuance is possible in signing; one can "stutter" and

communicate hesitations akin to "uh"s and "uhm"s, for one example. Just as an English speaker may repeat certain words like "like" or "you know," signers can repeat the same signs. ASL has the equivalent of accents; the way a person signs can give away the region they grew up in. Signing can be elegant or clumsy, and quiet or bombastic. It can also be a very clever language, in that certain objects or ideas can be communicated very succinctly. ASL also has its own puns and jokes that would not be well understood as translated into a spoken language.

Vanilla Fires

Walker, in talking about her repressed feelings erupting to the surface, describes the event as a "vanilla fire." This is a reference to her time with the deaf street gang known as the Nasty Homicides. She had gained the trust of the gang and spent much time with members of the gang for a magazine article. Once, she was with a gang member named Ortiz at McDonald's. He wrote the words "Vanila Fires" on a napkin and went to the counter. Walker writes often about the trouble deaf people have with writing and reading English, and this was Ortiz's way of asking for a vanilla shake and order of fries.

The image sticks with Walker and becomes the way she describes her bubbling emotional turmoil. At the core of it, this turmoil stems from the great burden put upon her in childhood as the eldest child of deaf parents. Growing up, she was a constant go-between, negotiator, and interpreter for her parents, and as such developed a "doormat" sort of personality, easily bossed around and always serving others while ignoring her own needs. She continues this trend into her twenties, in what she calls an "addiction" for interpreting for deaf people around New York City. With interpreting, Walker finds herself always speaking for others and never speaking for herself, calling her own personality or essence a "black void."

She clings to the image of the "Vanilla Fire" for a couple of reasons. Its origin as the pained communication of a deaf person trying to interact with the hearing world mirrors her own childhood experience of interacting with the hearing world on behalf of her deaf parents. The "Fire" is an obvious metaphor for the anger, frustration, and other intense emotions that exploded after her breakdown. And "Vanilla" is connected to her reputation as a "good" girl that never does anything out of the ordinary and always does what she's told - a bland, "vanilla" sort of personality. So while everyone saw her "vanilla" exterior, inside a fire was raging that could not be contained.

Style

Perspective

As a sometimes intensely personal autobiography, A Loss for Words certainly depends upon the first-hand perspective of author Lou Ann Walker. Her ability to speak about deafness, both as a culture and in regards to the effect it has on hearing children, cannot really be questioned for several reasons. She grew up in a household with two deaf parents, and was exposed to deaf culture and sign language not only in the home but within the Indiana deaf community her parents were very active in. In college, Walker initially studied to be a deaf teacher, and as a magazine editor, she spent several months embedded with a deaf street gang. She also spent many hours as an interpreter for the deaf in various social situations, from therapy sessions to court hearings to hospital settings, and as such she became exposed to a large segment of the deaf population, and how they relate to the hearing world.

In her position as both a child of deafness and as someone who has intensely studied deafness at the scientific level, Walker has the authority to both portray the psychological and emotional effects of deafness with her own story and to inform the reader by sharing more objective generalizations about deafness that have been determined by study and research.

Tone

Author Lou Ann Walker's A Loss for Words is an interesting mix of nostalgia, confession, and objective information about deaf people, sign language, and growing up in a deaf family. As such, Walker's tone may change chapter to chapter and even paragraph to paragraph, depending on what she is trying to accomplish. She demonstrates great fondness for her family's history, and especially her own childhood growing up in Montpelier, Indiana. She casts Montpelier and her extended family during these times in a very idyllic light; it was a time when she was happy and did not at all realize the societal stigma associated with deafness or the difficulty her parents had in everyday life. This type of tone dominates the first part of the book, labeled "Watching."

Interwoven through most chapters of the book is the switch to a more academic, detached tone, reserved for when Walker is explaining why deaf people might behave the way they do, or when she is explaining the elegance and intricacies of American Sign Language, for two examples. Often, Walker "steps back" from her personal narrative in order to make general statements on the topic of deafness. While rarely scientific or statistic-citing, Walker nevertheless adopts the tone of a teacher or expert in order to lend credibility to her assertions about deafness.

The last part of the book has a more emotional, confessional tone. In the last half of the book, Walker describes her increasing anxiety and unhappiness with her current

situation. Walker must reach deep within to dredge up old, painful memories in order to trace the cause of her unhappiness to her childhood and the fact she was the eldest child in a family with deaf parents.

Structure

A Loss for Words is divided into sixteen chapters, plus a prologue and epilogue. The chapters are further divided into three subsections: "Watching," "Listening," and "Learning." These subsections function similar to a classic beginning, middle, and end. "Watching" deals with primarily biographical details of both sides of Walker's family, including her mother and father's upbringing and childhood, how her parents met, and Walker's early years growing up in the household. It establishes necessary expository information, and sets the scene for "Listening," which describes the beginning of Walker's conflicting feelings of embarrassment, shame, and anger associated with growing up with her deaf parents. Lastly, "Learning" details Walker's breakdown caused by the feelings she had repressed since an early age, and her subsequent recovery and final understanding and reconciliation with her parents.

While the book proceeds in roughly chronological order, there are many exceptions. Walker may jump backward or forward in time to relate a story similar or related to the current story. To maintain interest, Walker may also relate a brief story or enigmatic experience which will not make complete sense until it is returned to and thoroughly explained later in the chapter. Chapter titles also commonly have cryptic titles - "Spies," "Vanilla Fires," "Quicksand," which are explained somewhere in the chapter.

Quotes

"The best that can be said for deafness is that it's an invisible handicap. The worst, that it puts adults at the mercy of their hearing children, at the mercy of parents, at almost anyone's mercy. It is one of the cruelest and most deceptive of afflictions." Prologue, p. 2

"To the hearing world the deaf community must seem like a secret society. Indeed, deafness is a culture every bit as distinctive as any an anthropologist might study." Chap. 2, p. 22

"For centuries there have been two distinct attitudes about how deaf people should be taught: The oralists believe in speaking and lipreading without ever signing; and the manualists are pro-signing in American Sign Language (ASL)." Chap. 3, pp. 28-29

"In some hands, signing is an art equal to an actor's rendering of Shakespeare. It is not just swoops and swirls but an enormous variety of expression, just as a great actor's delivery is completely different from some ham's idea of haughty speeches." Chap. 5, p. 47

"If I'm alone with [my parents], I sign and don't use my voice at all. If a hearing stranger is with us and I'm translating, my English is clear. But if I'm with my sisters or an old friend, I use a strange hum-like voice as I sign and as I interpret what Mom and Dad are saying." Chap. 6, p. 54

"Never once have I failed to feel a pang when asked to show some signs. It seems like too public a display. Somehow it trivialized us, me and my family, making the way we talked into a party game." Chap. 7, p. 85

"[A]lthough signs aren't a dramatization, there is such a close relationship between certain signs and what they represent that it can feel as if you're acting out much of what you say. You can't escape the emotion of a story. It reverberates through you." Chap. 9, p. 120

"But thinking back on all those times, I had this odd, inescapable feeling that society thought it was some kind of sin to be deaf. After all, something was making me feel terribly guilty. I had the urge to confess. But I didn't know what I'd done wrong." Chap. 12, p. 145

"It is a curious societal comment that the major agencies in New York serving the blind were on the genteel upper East Side or on tree-lined streets in Chelsea. The Society for the Deaf was in a place the police had forsaken." Chap. 12, p. 149

"Deafness seemed like quicksand. The more I did, the more I found there was to do. The more I did for one person, the more someone else wanted me to do. The more I found out, the more there was to learn." Chap. 14, p. 179

"Sometimes when you hold yourself up to the light and scrutinize yourself mercilessly, there comes a release. I wish I could say mine was an overnight purge. But it couldn't have been. The wounds had festered too long. I had to learn I wasn't deaf. I had to start speaking out." Chap. 15, p. 184

"For me, the past had finally emerged from being a horrible, dark secret to being an unusual family's history." Epilogue, p. 208

Topics for Discussion

What are some of the "tricks" Walker describes that her parents have developed to adapt to the hearing world?

What is the significance of the "Vanilla Fires" reference, and how does Walker apply it to her own life?

What reason does Walker give for deaf people's difficulty with the English language?

Why does Walker admire sign language? What does Walker think is remarkable about signers and sign language?

What are the two opposing schools of deaf education? What are the disadvantages of either school?

Explain two examples of deaf prejudice that lead to injustice that Walker provides when she is interpreting in New York City?

What is the nature of the mental/emotional breakdown Walker experiences? What was the root cause?