

Voyage to the Island Short Guide

Voyage to the Island by Raija Nieminen

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Overview

In *Voyage to the Island*, readers enter three unusual worlds. First and most important, Nieminen offers readers a graphic sense of what it means to be deaf. Through her accounts of her own increasing deafness as well as her work with hearing-impaired children on St.

Lucia, hearing readers will gain insight into what it means to rely on sight for communication. Second, Nieminen gives a vivid picture of the culture of a Caribbean island where the mostly African-descended inhabitants struggle to survive while North American and European tourists, business people, and consultants lead lives of luxury (and have the ever-present option of returning to their relatively prosperous homelands when they so choose). Finally, *Voyage to the Island* reveals much about the values and culture of a middle-class Finnish family, the members of which come to appreciate their own society through their experiences as expatriates.

About the Author

Anative of Finland, Raija Nieminen grew up during World War II. One grandfather was a distinguished member of the community, serving in Parliament and on the town council. An excellent student, Nieminen went to the University of Helsinki. However, her academic career was cut short because her increasing deafness made it impossible to take oral examinations.

Eventually, she completed a degree in library science, but this career was interrupted by her marriage to Jukka Nieminen, a sea captain, and the birth of their two sons, Keke and Joppe.

Nevertheless, she developed strong ties to the deaf community in Finland and became an advocate for the removal of barriers to full social participation by the deaf. She is currently director of the Cultural Centre of the Finnish Association for the Deaf in Helsinki. Her memoir *Voyage to the Island* recounts a period in the late 1970s during which her family lived on the Caribbean island of St. Lucia. During that time, her husband, by then a port management consultant, helped the newly independent country to develop modern facilities for exporting and importing products.

Setting

Transplanted in the mid-1970s from their northern European home, with its dramatic seasonal variations, the Nieminen family finds itself on a lush tropical Caribbean island with, except for hurricanes, only slight changes in weather. Nieminen's husband, Jukka, is charged with managing and developing the nation's port, Castries, which exports mainly bananas and imports consumer goods. The two sons, Keke and Joppe, attend local schools where they must learn their subjects in a foreign language, English, and make new friends among the black students.

Nieminen herself tries to hold their home together while contending with pests, strange foods, primitive appliances, erratic hired help, and her growing sense of social isolation. Despite problems in acclimating, the Nieminen family gradually learns to appreciate the gleaming beaches, the warm sea, the flourishing vegetation, the volcanic mountains, and the relaxed attitude of the island's inhabitants. However, what comes to dominate the lives of the Nieminen family is the plight of St.

Lucia's deaf children, who are just beginning to receive formal instruction in sign language and English in a primitive school building. Nieminen throws herself into these activities, especially after her two sons return to Finland to complete their education.

Social Sensitivity

Voyage to the Island focuses on two major social issues—the place of the deaf in the hearing world and the clash of European and Afro-Caribbean culture. Nieminen offers much insight into the obstacles faced by the deaf community in any culture as they attend social events, shop, and travel. Any hearing person who reads this book will become more aware in their dealings with deaf persons. Equally important, Nieminen portrays her increasing awareness of the problem of racism on St. Lucia. Whites tend to be well off and condescending or arrogant as compared with the poverty-stricken black islanders, and Nieminen's own prejudices become evident in her dealings with the various servants she employs as housekeepers and gardeners. Not until she sees first-hand the conditions in which the majority of the island's residents live does she come to comprehend the sources of these antagonisms—hunger, filth, hopelessness. She herself deals openly with the black islanders, but except for her work with the deaf children, her charity toward individuals, and her contacts with her husband's colleagues, she distances herself from other social problems.

Literary Qualities

Written chronologically in the first person with some flashbacks, *Voyage to the Island* uses a simple style that features short sentences and concrete imagery. Nieminen's visual imagery is remarkable. She alternates between passages of narration, in which she recounts her experiences as a homemaker and teacher and passages of reflection in which she meditates on her personal problems as a woman and a deaf person. She gives fascinating portraits of the children with whom she works, and although her frustrations often set the tone, she is hopeful that the deaf on St. Lucia and elsewhere can find meaningful places in any society through appropriate education. The most moving sections concern her dealings with Roger Alfonso, a proud and stubborn street child whom she takes into her home in the hope of improving his communication and social skills. However, her efforts fail, and he departs. The mood becomes almost tragic when she learns later that he has also become blind.

Themes and Characters

In this autobiography, Nieminen poignantly describes her own struggle as a deaf person to gain an education, to pursue a career, and to be a wife and mother. Fortunately, she had some hearing as a child and learned to read, speak, and write in Finnish and to read the lips of Finnish speakers before she became fully deaf. Unwilling to admit her impairment, she did not associate with deaf persons or learn sign language until she was a young woman.

In the meantime, she married a hearing person and had two hearing sons.

When Nieminen arrives on St. Lucia, she discovers that she is even more isolated than she was in Finland. She cannot read the lips of English speakers, although she reads and writes the language, and she finds no organized deaf community. Also, she does not comprehend American sign language and has difficulty communicating with Clyde, a deaf American Peace Corps teacher who is trying to start a school for deaf children. Nevertheless, Nieminen gains a sense of purpose when she finds Clyde, who takes her on as an aide in the school.

Throughout much of *Voyage to the Island* Nieminen concentrates on her efforts to help several adolescents master the rudiments of English and American sign language so that they can gain employment. While the results are often agonizingly slow, especially in the case of Roger Alfonso (a poverty-stricken orphan whom the Nieminen's take into their home), Nieminen finds that her efforts help to make a difference because the school takes hold as part of the island's educational system, and many of the children find employment and develop a sense of community and self esteem. In addition, Nieminen's own family draws closer together even as her sons pursue their own educations and careers back in Finland.

Nieminen does not, however, gloss over the failures in her efforts. In perhaps the saddest episode in the book, Nieminen notes that the world closes in on Roger Alfonso as he becomes blind as well as deaf. For him, there is no "miracle worker."



Topics for Discussion

1. Why is hearing so important to language acquisition? How does the impact of a gradual loss of hearing differ from deafness from birth?
2. How does Nieminen show that she sees a patriarchal social order as a given, particularly in her dealings with her husband and sons?
3. What problems and benefits does Nieminen's deafness present to her husband and sons? Are they helpful or harmful to her?
4. In what ways do Nieminen's middle-class European values conflict with those of the islanders?
5. How does Nieminen's deafness affect her writing style?
6. Compare Clyde's and Nieminen's ways of dealing with the deaf children.

How do the adults' backgrounds help explain their approaches? Does either adopt a sentimental approach?

7. What factors lead to Nieminen's failure to aid Roger Alfonso as much as she had hoped? In what ways may her good intentions have helped or harmed him?
8. How do differences in climate affect people's lives? What are the positive and negative aspects of the climates of Finland and St. Lucia?
9. How might the deaf children view their teachers?
10. How might Nieminen's sons describe their experiences on St. Lucia?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. What is the current economic and social situation on St. Lucia? Has it made progress since the Nieminen's lived there?
2. How are hearing-impaired children educated in your community? To what school services are they legally entitled? Do they communicate by reading lips and speaking and writing or by using American sign language, or by a combination of both?
3. Interview hearing-impaired persons and compare their experiences with Nieminen's.
4. What protection do adult persons with hearing impairments have under American law and under St. Lucia law?
5. Interview a teacher of the hearing impaired (and if possible attend a class) to determine how they help deaf children master not only English and American sign language but other subjects as well. Communicate with the hearing-impaired students to discover what problems they have in school and compare them with those of hearing students.
6. What progress has modern medicine and technology made in improving communication within the deaf community and between hearing and hearing-impaired people?
7. Read plays that deal with deafness, such as *Children of a Lesser God* and *The Miracle Worker*, and compare their messages with that in *Voyage to the Island*.
8. What organizations in your community have programs aimed at helping the hearing-impaired person?

For Further Reference

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Grant, Brian, ed. *The Quiet Ear: Deafness in Literature*. London: Faber and Faber, 1988. Anthology that provides an overview of works and writers concerned with the deaf.

Lamson, Mary Swift. *Life and Education of Laura Dewey Bridgman*. New York: Arno, 1975. Reprint of a classic 1878 edition that recounts the efforts of nineteenth-century educators to develop the communication skills of a blind and deaf woman.

Lane, Harlan. *The Wild Boy of Aveyron*.

Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976. Recounts French efforts in the nineteenth century to educate a boy found roaming in the woods who exhibited no knowledge of human language or culture. The volume also reviews the philosophical, medical, and pedagogical debates that raged among experts trying to determine how to deal with such a person.

Lash, Joseph P. *Helen and Teacher*. New York: Delacorte, 1980. This massive biography reviews the lives of Annie Sullivan and Helen Keller.

Related Titles

William Gibson's play, *The Miracle Worker* (1957), is the classic stage version of the relationship between teacher Annie Sullivan and her deaf and blind student, Helen Keller. It has been adapted for the screen several times, as well.

Helen Keller's *The Story of My Life*, (1976) is Keller's autobiography of her early years.



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