

Video Transcription

“Song for a Whale” by Lynne Kelly is a middle-grade book about a young deaf girl named Iris that learns about a hybrid whale, named Blue 55, with a lonely song and no pod. Iris feels a strong connection to this whale and his isolation, despite being surrounded by others that he “should” be able to communicate with.

The value this book provides is in its messages for all readers. It encourages able-bodied children to notice the struggle and imbalance in life for deaf and disabled people. It also encourages all children to learn about deaf cultures, inspires the drive to make everyday life more deaf-friendly, fair treatment, and motivates deaf children to follow their dreams no matter what they’re told they can or cannot do.

The effectiveness of these messages is emphasized on several occasions throughout the text. One example would be the numerous times Iris gets fed up with her father for not knowing enough sign language to hold a proper conversation with her without a translator. Another example is when Iris finally meets Blue 55 and feels an unexplainable connection to him, despite the frigid water and lack of communication between the two of them, because she felt as though she was finally able to make him feel like he was not completely alone due to his “disability.”

The key concepts in “Song for a Whale” deal with parent-child relationships, relationships to systems and power, and the representation of diversity and disabilities.

- The parent-child relationships are displayed between not only Iris and her parents, but her mother and grandmother, as well. Strain and tension is present in both relationships due to Iris and her grandmother’s deafness, where the representation of disabilities is presented.

- The concept of disabilities is further highlighted by the fact that Iris’s best friend Wendell will “sign a different way” (as he says on page 100) around her because she is not as fluent in proper ASL. This is due to the fact that she does not have the opportunity sign with deaf people outside of her grandmother, her in-school translator, Wendell, and his family.

- The relationships to systems and power are exposed through Iris’s interactions with her teachers, principal, and even her fellow classmates. They are also exposed through her parent’s, namely her mom’s, refusal to allow Iris to attend a school with a higher deaf population. When her mom admits that she hasn’t sent Iris to the deaf school because she feels as though she would lose the connection she has with her daughter, it epitomizes the power Iris’s mother has over her happiness, education, and even her functionality in the world as a deaf person.

- As with many disabled people, deafness can be a major factor in a person’s mental health. One study by Oliver Turner and 2 others found that the “rates of attempted suicide in deaf school and college students [in 2006] ranged from 1.7% to 18%, with lifetime rates as high as 30%.”

These key concepts of power, relationships, and disabilities in “Song for a Whale” inspire the target audience of middle-grade readers (typically 8–12-year-olds) to broaden their views and shift their perspectives on the world. They push the readers to construct more friendly environments for and learn about the deaf community, as well as create fairness and equal opportunities for them. Most of all, this book gives deaf and hearing-impaired readers a sense of being seen, understood, cared for, and overall hope.

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Can You Hear It Now?

The book “Song for a Whale” by Lynne Kelly was written for a target audience of 8- to 12-year-old children. Despite its seemingly innocent age group target, the novel has some heavy themes, such as disability, inclusion, isolation, and unfairness in life. The video I created in regard to this novel addresses many of these topics, but not why I chose this novel in particular. I will explain in this paper why the inclusion of deaf and disabled people in media directed for children is imperative for everyone.

The audience I chose to address in my video is educators, librarians, and parents for the novel’s intended age group of 8- to 12-year-olds. I chose this audience because I feel as though explaining the messages of the novel will persuade them to encourage the children in their lives to read the novel. I also feel as though my audience will help these children to not only understand these messages, but also to inspire future change in their community for people like the characters in “Song for a Whale.” Children are the future, as the saying goes, therefore children that grasp these important messages early on in life can help affect positive change in their peers and elders as they grow.

It is so important for children to be taught the seriousness behind the messages Kelly wrote into this novel for multiple reasons. One of the biggest reasons is the main character’s disability: deafness. According to the International Congress of Phonetic Sciences, “The United States [had] approximately 11,000,000 deaf or hard of hearing individuals aged 5 and older (4.1% of the population, or 41 per 1,000 people)” in 2019

alone. That number is higher than the amount of people that lived in New York City in 2020 (U.S. Census Bureau).

Deaf adults have a difficult time navigating the world without an interpreter or other tools to aid them in noticing their surroundings that non-deaf people would use their hearing to notice. Things can be even more difficult for deaf children, as they have to learn the same navigation techniques on top of learning what all other children have to learn. These difficulties are only amplified by having to learn verbal, slang, without being able to hear, and having to learn deaf slang, which can be entirely different. While there are many day and residential schools for the deaf in the United States, there are only 2 higher-education institutions specifically tailored for deaf students. Wikipedia has a list of schools for deaf students, both for children and adults, all over the world.

One of the biggest struggles deaf people, especially deaf teenagers, face is that of mental illnesses. The studies for mental illness in correlation to deaf people are more than 15 years old, but they still show that there is a reason to be concerned for the mental health of the deaf. There is no evidence that links being deaf with a higher risk of suicide, but “studies did report higher levels of depression and higher levels of perceived risk among deaf individuals than hearing control groups” (Turner). Deaf teenagers are likely to have higher suicidal ideologies than hearing teenagers due to the increased pressure their disability puts on them.

As I was growing up, I did not feel very comfortable around my grandfather because I thought he was gruff and quiet. I had assumed he didn't like talking to kids much, but it was actually because he was very hard-of-hearing and did not hear me many of the times I attempted to talk to him. This resulted in me not being able to form a relationship with him until later in life when I learned to accommodate his disability

and when he eventually got hearing aids. Many years later, before my firstborn could say more than 7 words, I taught her how to sign basic needs to me and it lessened misunderstandings and frustration for both of us. My grandfather was my original motivator to learn sign language, but the birth of my first child really showed me how important it could be for many people, including hearing, to learn to sign and communicate with those that cannot verbally do so.

Although Kelly does not outright address the topic of the mental health of deaf people, it is indirectly suggested with the tension in association with the main character's deafness. My video addresses this tension created by disability in the novel, in turn engaging with a few key themes: parent-child relationships, representation of disabilities, and relationships to systems/powers. I created my video to be an informative one that could easily be shared with others in order to make the importance of the novel clear and concise for my target audience. This paper aides in emphasizing the importance that understanding deaf people and sign language can be for those that are hearing, as well as deaf.

Works Cited

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