

9. Frowned upon by the Gods

Chapter 9 Summary: Frowned upon by the Gods, The Boys of Riverside

In "Frowned upon by the Gods," the narrative reflects on the historical struggles and tensions between educators regarding the pedagogy of deaf students, centered primarily around sign versus oral communication. Linda Adams' realization that her son craved language becomes emblematic of two centuries of neglect faced by the deaf community in these debates, often sidelining their voices in matters that directly affect their livelihoods.

The chapter draws on scholar H-Dirksen Bauman's analogy comparing the study of deaf history to chasing fireflies in the dark—occasional insights shrouded by periods of ignorance. Evidence of sign language predates formal documentation, with sign systems blossoming independently around the world, leading to a scholarly debate on whether they preceded spoken languages. Historical accounts, including references by Socrates and observations of deaf courtiers in the Ottoman Empire, showcase the varied perceptions of deaf individuals. However, it underscores a grim reality: in many societies, deaf people were often marginalized, facing social and legal discrimination.

European cultures expressed an ingrained belief that deaf individuals were incapable of faith, which aggravated their exclusion. Yet, a shift occurred with the revolutionary work of Charles-Michel de l'Épée, who established the first public school for the deaf in Paris in the eighteenth century. His efforts in teaching sign language not only laid groundwork for deaf education across Europe but also challenged prevailing beliefs about deafness as a disability.

However, progress suffered a severe setback at the 1880 International Congress of Educators of the Deaf in Milan, which resulted in a ban on sign language in schools. Alexander Graham Bell's participation in this conference significantly influenced its outcomes, leading to detrimental consequences for deaf communities, who were further detached from their linguistic heritage. This deep-rooted stigma surrounding sign language continued, even as deaf individuals like Ken Watson navigated oppressive environments at schools that penalized their use of American Sign Language (ASL).

The narrative illustrates how attitudes toward language and communication shifted over decades, particularly through the experiences of Keith Adams. Enrolling at the California School for the Deaf allowed him to thrive in an all-deaf environment, leading to significant personal growth and social connections. Ultimately, the chapter emphasizes the ongoing struggles and triumphs of the deaf community, encapsulated by Keith's journey and the impact of socioeconomic and cultural factors on deaf education and identity.