

Pencil, Laptop, Cochlear Implant: Making Meaning of Late Deafness  
Edmund Lyon Memorial Lecture, NTID/RIT, December 8, 2011

I'm delighted to be here and proud to honor Edmund Lyon. The interesting, intelligent face in his portrait shows him to be a member of a generation in which the word "gentleman" still carried the overtones of "one who serves society." But few men of his inventive capacities had the breadth of vision to create *both* a system of manual symbols for speech training *and* an electric starter motor for automobiles. His was a wonderful, wide ranging intellect, accompanied by passion for educational justice; and a glance at the curriculum here shows that his dedication lives on in NTID's inventive programs.

So -- how does one make meaning of Late-Onset Deafness? Well, let's start by distinguishing between making *meaning* and making *sense*. By making meaning of Late Deafness, I mean presenting it in an artistic context that makes it meaningful to others by allowing them to experience it vicariously. It's a measure of the peculiar cultural phenomenon of Late Deafness that it is frequently no more meaningful to the birth deaf than it is to the hearing. Given an audience problem of this dimension, one way to find common ground is to construct a fictional Deaf character with whom readers can identify.

But in order to make meaning of Late Deafness – to any audience – it's first necessary to make sense of it. That's a different matter entirely, because one's initial reaction to the loss of hearing is that it's senseless. In my case, *why* should a 29 year old historian with a newly-minted PhD suddenly find that she is going deaf? Why should a semi-professional violinist suddenly find she can't play in tune? There is an answer, of course: "your condition is called sensori-neural deafness, and it means that the 100,000 nerves on which your hearing depends are gradually degenerating." Yes, but *why* are they degenerating? In the 36 years since my deafness was first officially diagnosed, nobody has ever been able to tell me. The answer I've had to settle for is the one given me by the prima donna of ENTs at the most distinguished hospital I visited: "it's just bad luck." It certainly *felt* like bad luck. But it was accompanied by a piece of good luck: I lost my hearing during the years between 1975 and 1994, not 1945 to 1964 or even 1955 to 1974. And that meant my professional life was saved by a combination of cultural change and technological advance.

My initial diagnosis showed that while I had only minor loss of hearing in the upper registers, I had very poor hearing in the lower registers and probably always had. The condition had gone undetected because I could play the violin and manage well in a hearing world – as long as I paid attention. It goes without saying, at least in this audience, that my attention was by no means guaranteed: I often dreamed off, especially in noisy places, like parties, or in situations where what was being said was beneath my notice – like school. "Pay attention!" was thus my middle name, but only in auditory matters. When it came to reading, I *did* pay attention, and one of the things I paid attention to was the enormous change in medical technology that occurred while I was in college and graduate school. My senior year in college, 1968, I attended a lecture by Christiaan Bernard a few months after he had performed the world's first heart transplant. I read with great interest the reports that chronicled the development of pacemakers, artificial hearts, artificial kidneys, artificial retinas. I was dimly aware that a man named William House was experimenting with

implanting electrodes in the human ear – but at the time I had no idea how much his experiments would affect me later.

On a more personal level, I was aware of another development. At about the time of my first diagnosis, I went to a party to which one guest brought a fascinating new toy. It was called a pocket calculator, and it knew lots more math than I did. Everybody passed it around, the humanists projecting the amazing change it would bring about in children's education, and the scientists predicting the demise of the slide rule. Of course, we all agreed that our predictions were hypothetical: at \$400 at a time \$400 actually bought something, a pocket calculator was a luxury few people could afford.

I look back at that party now as my first experience of the great paradigm shift brought about by the development and miniaturization of the computer chip. In 1977, even though computer technologists, scientists, and doctors were beginning to experiment with the possibilities raised by the development of Unis, very few people predicted the development of iPods, iPads, iPhones, Kindles, laptops, CDs, Wi-Fi, CIs – and fewer still had come to grips with the differences these technological advances would make not just in the way people communicated, but in the way they would think.

And speaking of changes in the way people think ... with this tremendous technological ferment came the “revolution” of the late 60's and 70's, with vociferous protests against the oppression of minorities that had traditionally accompanied standard American assumptions. The two revolutions that affected me here were feminism and Deaf Pride. I was an experienced protester, and I supported their quests for justice whole-heartedly. But I had trouble trying to steer a sensible, humane course through competing ideologies. As a single mom with two kids, I had cut my feminist teeth fighting the prejudice against mothers in academia. But working against me was not just the disapproval of the men who thought a mother's place was in the kitchen, but the horrified stares of feminist scholars during public school vacations when I brought my children to my office. To their minds, it was unprofessional even to *have* children – to *appear on campus* with them was to betray my academic sisters.

I was still working out my place as a female academic when I became the member of another minority. In 1983 – just after my first book had been accepted for publication by a major university press -- a great number of my auditory nerves gave way in the course of a month, and I was no longer hard of hearing but seriously deaf. Stunned by my sudden loss and exhausted by the effort teaching now demanded, I gave up my academic job, moved to my family's old farmhouse in Vermont, and spent the next two years struggling to redefine myself as a deaf person.

And I found myself confronted with an ideological situation just as complex as the one affecting feminism. When I came upon the Deaf scene, the long opposition between those who believed the Deaf should learn to speak and lip-read, and those who thought the Deaf should sign had been newly exacerbated by William Stokoe's proof that ASL was a genuine language with a syntax of its own. That discovery was only a decade and a half old, but it had already made ASL a centerpiece for Deaf Pride, and that pride was soon to be expressed in the Deaf President Now demonstrations at Gallaudet. On the other hand, oralists could point to the poet David Wright's eloquent biography to prove the efficacy of oralism; and

many teachers and parents of deaf children argued – and still argue – that ASL allowed one only to join a sub culture.

This split left me in an ideological limbo. Loss had taught me that language – understanding it, using it as an integral part of thinking, using it as a means of expression – was intimately connected to the social and cultural problems of the deaf. My own reaction was to use whatever means one could to improve communication – signing, speech reading, simultaneous communication, whatever shed light. But that turned out to be a reasonable position only in the abstract. In the concrete, I had to make a political choice. When I turned to Vermont’s social services, I was choosing oralism: the people who helped me assumed I was disabled, and assumed that they were there to help me stay in the hearing world, improve my lip-reading skills, and become more adept at handling the technological devices that would improve my job prospects.

Yet when I enrolled in an ASL class, the young teacher dismissed English an oppressive tool of the imperialistic hearing world. Now that I was a deaf person, she told me, my native language was ASL (NOT sign English.) My effort to argue that my native language was English, and that I was learning ASL as I would have learned Spanish if I had moved to Mexico, was greatly complicated by my limited ability to sign and her limited ability to speak – but I understood enough to realize that she was espousing an ideology without a real concept of what ideology was. That ideology eventually dissolved her class, all of whose members (except myself) were Hearing, and some of whom were taking it to enable them to communicate more easily with me. Her inability to explain that ASL had a different syntax from English baffled her students, her insistence that English was inferior to ASL irritated them, and they stopped coming.

The experience left me with my first understanding of the tremendous gap between the birth deaf and myself. Yes, it was a difference in ideology, but it was also a difference in education. Not having been severely deaf as a child, I’d enjoyed 22 years in the best schools America had to offer, I’d published one book, and I was working on others. Because she was birth deaf, she had endured years of poor teaching and low expectations, and she had emerged with limited English vocabulary and meager reading experience that had left her intellectually at fifth grade level. She had subsequently experienced a great burst of understanding as she learned ASL from an charismatic teacher – but her understanding had almost no intellectual foundation.

I was appalled. I went to a school for the deaf that used sign and offered to learn sign and help them teach. The (hearing) principal told me that my offer was appreciated, but that he couldn’t use me; I wasn’t certified to teach deaf children, and certification was almost impossible for the deaf to obtain. I went to an oral school, talked to the (hearing) sub-director, suggested that I could improve my lip-reading skills and become useful to them – and I was told (as a compliment), “You lip-read very well for a deaf person.”

Well, by 1986, this is the sense I’d made of my deafness: to the Hearing, I was one of a group of deaf people who weren’t all the same but it didn’t matter. To the Deaf, no matter which ideology I espoused, I was an outsider, because my deafness was not just post-lingual, but (much more important) post-educational. I thought of Pooh Bear, hanging onto a

balloon pretending to be a cloud: “Christopher Robin, these are the wrong kind of bees.” I was the wrong kind of deaf. Culturally, I was on my own.

Technologically, however, I wasn’t on my own. Pressed by my background, my location, and my need for steady employment to choose oralism, I invested in a series of expensive devices that enabled me to function in the hearing world. The first (newly available in rural Vermont) was a TTY with a tie-line that enabled me to make daytime phone calls without imposing on my loyal teenaged daughter. The second was an FM transistor whose name somehow became Elmer. I can’t even remember who made it, but it projected an amazingly clear sound. Armed with Elmer, I interviewed for an adjunct position at Marlboro College – and to my enormous surprise, got the job.

And thus began a new challenge: how does a deaf professor teach in a hearing college? I had no idea. Marlboro College had no idea. But fortunately, at that time, Marlboro was run by Rod Gander, formerly the coordinator of international news at *Newsweek* – and the man who had hired *Newsweek*’s first Black reporter and had encouraged women reporters long before the days of feminism. His intelligent and supportive leadership set the tone of accommodation during the years that followed.

That leadership was all-important, because whatever my situation might have been at NTID, at a hearing college I was regarded as disabled, and in 1986, the disability rights movement was in its infancy. Small liberal arts colleges like Marlboro – pushed by the folks that accredited them – were beginning to realize that their admissions policies discriminated against the disabled (including the learning disabled), and beginning to improve disability rights on campus. But their efforts extended only to students. Nobody worked out a disabilities policy for faculty; it didn’t even occur to accreditation committees that a disabled person could teach.

As with policies, so with technology. The technology that existed to help with deaf education accommodated *students* but provided nothing for a deaf teacher. So my students, Elmer, and I conducted classroom experiments. Passing – more often tossing -- Elmer from student to student worked, but it put Elmer in constant danger. Putting Elmer in the middle of the table was safer, but the distance of the microphone from the speakers made the sound less reliable – and I went through the roof when students forgot and slammed down their books. We tried suspending Elmer from a sort of chandelier that rotated, so it could be swung to the student who was speaking. That worked best, but poor Elmer, which was constructed for conversations with Granny, eventually succumbed to the hazards of being spun at high speeds. I got a newer, fancier and more durable FM transmitter, but it never replaced Elmer in my affections.

It sounds cumbersome. It *was* cumbersome. But it had an unanticipated pedagogical effect: students gravitated toward me. This was partly a result of my job: I became a writing teacher, and my duty was to help the students pass Marlboro’s writing requirement – twenty pages of well-written, well-argued academic papers by the end of your third semester, or you can’t stay. Many students – and not just the learning disabled – found the requirement stressful, and when all my students passed it during my first year teaching, I gained a “She’ll get you through” reputation. But accompanying this sort of cupboard love was, I think, their sense that when they looked at me, they recognized themselves. I’d been told I lip-read well

for a deaf person; they'd been told that they wrote very well for a dyslexic/ADHD sufferer/psychological mess – check all that apply. I cringed in class when I answered a question the student hadn't asked: they cringed in class when they asked a question that showed they'd missed an essential point. I was visibly, publicly – often painfully -- *imperfect*. And yet, I was a professor, a scholar, a novelist – which implied that imperfection, however embarrassing, was different from stupidity or ignorance. That simple realization apparently opened intellectual vistas that many students had come to believe were closed to “people like them.”

Speaking of opening vistas, my first eight years at Marlboro, 1986-1994, were the years the personal computer took its place in the college. In 1986, all Marlboro students who had to pass the Writing Requirement submitted their portfolios typed. In 1987, a few brave souls submitted them on green and white computer tractor-feed paper. In 1989, I bought an early Mac, because so many of my freshmen were composing on computers that I realized I couldn't continue as a writing teacher without one. Nor could I continue as a novelist. I submitted my first novel to Houghton Mifflin in typescript. But I transcribed the typescript of the half-finished second onto the Mac, and I never submitted a typescript again. Meanwhile, like so many other colleges at the time, Marlboro went digital with dizzying speed; in 1995 the new young president insisted that we finally get fiber-optic cables, and every faculty member got a computer with access to high speed Internet – a real boon in rural Vermont, where many people still are dependent on dial-up.

The revolution came just in time for me, because the coming of the computer coincided almost exactly with the final degeneration of my hearing. I turned up my hearing aids more and more – 80 decibels, 85, 90, 95 – until finally, during the summer of 1994, I put the wretched things in a drawer. Ten years earlier, total deafness would have ended my career. But the ADA had been passed, email had all but replaced the TTY tie-line – and my classroom needs could be accommodated by the something new and wondrous: a one-piece computer you could put on your lap. I hauled it around (it was portable in the sense it wasn't nailed down), and a succession of secretaries typed what my students said in class and what my colleagues said in committee meetings.

It was a godsend, so I graciously overlooked its technical faults. It went blank. It crashed. It had to be plugged in, so my standard teaching equipment included a 25-foot extension cord. But its biggest problem was that it lagged – sometimes there would be a hesitation of two or three lines, while the secretary typed furiously and the class waited. As one student put it, “Your words just hang there.” Not surprisingly, my classes exchanged the discussion format for what one of my colleagues calls the “interrupted lecture.” I felt badly about that, so I set up extra office hours in which students could come and type to me. There followed many long conversations in which students typed and I spoke. And one of the incidental results was an education in the difference between writing and speaking.

Spoken words, like signs, are invisible once they've been made. A written word, however, stays on the screen: you have to look at it. Again and again, students who were conversing with me typed away about their writing or other problems – and after perhaps 20 minutes, I could scroll back and show them that what they were saying at the end either contradicted what they'd been saying at the beginning or solved the problem that had been distressing them. There it was, in black and white – I didn't need to say a thing. Most students found

the experience therapeutic. But some typed, looked, then backed over it – again and again – and others anxiously deleted everything at the end of every paragraph, so there would be no record of what they said. This inability to come to terms with what was on the screen was rare, but it was so self-destructive that I eventually made rules about deleting, in return for which, I deleted the whole conversation before the student left the office.

Other things came up also: when students who wrote run-on sentences came to my office for help, we found that the sentences they typed to me in “conversation” were impeccably punctuated. Students who blocked so badly they couldn’t write a sentence of a paper found that they could type out their despair to me in eloquent prose. These interesting phenomena say less about writing vs. speaking than they do about the loss of confidence induced by educational conditioning. Outside of my office, I encountered a different version of the same fear when men came to fix the tractor or do repairs on the house. Confronted with the necessity of writing to me, they picked up the pencil with obvious panic, and apologetically wrote out their diagnoses in handwriting and spelling that revealed the reason for years of misery in school – then proceeded to perform mechanical miracles. These experiences proved, among other things, that low expectations and belittling teaching are by no means the exclusive educational provinces of the deaf.

So my dependence on the written word taught me a lot more than what people wrote -- and in the now unimaginable days before iPads, a lot of that writing was in pencil. I carried an 8 ½ x 11 pad everywhere I went, and over the years in which everybody wrote to me, it became particularly notable that *nobody* wrote sentences straight across the page from left to right. They wrote in corners, they wrote in poem-length lines, they wrote sideways, but never straight. The phenomenon extended to romance: I’ve sentimentally kept all the pages from the days my husband courted me – and not one of them contains a linear series of sentences. I should add that we had so much to say to each other that the situation wasn’t sustainable; he mastered the peculiar dialect that in our household passes for sign, and for the first eight years of our marriage, he signed to me, and (unless he really got after me), I spoke back.

For eight years I lived in this silent, literary world, helped by an improved series of laptops and – intermittently because of the expense – CART reporting for team teaching and important meetings. During these years, the cell phone, the digital camera and the iPod burst onto the market, and it became clear that the miniaturization of the computer chip made a cochlear implant a real possibility. In 1991, a kind surgeon at Tufts had said an implant could give me no better hearing than I had. Wait, he said. Wait as long as you can. And I’d waited, not only because of his advice, but because the other scientific marvel of those years was the mapping of the genome, and stem cell research had become a household word. Was it possible that if I were patient, work could be done to restore the degenerated nerves and give me real hearing? I asked my nephew, who was engaged in stem cell research. He replied that by the time what I wanted was possible, I’d be long gone. So in 2003 I got a cochlear implant, and became a technological marvel: a deaf woman who could hear.

I was incredibly lucky. I’d been told that my long years of silence would erase my verbal memory. The CI would give me background noise, a bit of bird song, but probably no words. But I got words. Right off the bat. And since words are so important to us both, I drilled with my husband – whose voice I could hear for the first time in our 8 years together

– on one-syllable killers: wreath, reef, thumb, fun. No lip-reading allowed. Gradually my brain learned to distinguish between them; and I learned to pay attention to what I heard. It looked good: my test scores said I got close to 90% of what was said to me.

But miraculous though its technology may be, a CI is not like glasses that restore 20-20 vision; it's more like a wheelchair that restores mobility to a paraplegic. Sixteen electrodes cannot replace 100,000 hair cells. I don't hear; I process electronic impulses. I run a little behind – perhaps a second. Outside the audiologist's testing room that lag means I get maybe 50 percent and lip-read or intuit the rest. In a classroom, I need an FM transmitter to hear student questions, and I still teach by interrupted lecture. Music is still beyond the realms of technology: I can recognize certain measures of certain pieces, but that's all. Being a technological miracle makes the negotiations of everyday life easier, and for that I am deeply grateful. But it's a good thing that over the years of silence and accommodation, I've somehow made sense of being deaf. Because I still am.

Now we come to making literary meaning of late-onset deafness – and it turns out to be a tough call. I didn't know this when I started *Return in Kind*, but I found out as the years went by and I consigned draft after draft to the closet and worked on easier projects. Most of it went fine, because in addition to being a book about deafness, it is – and this has been true since the earliest drafts – an elegy for the world I grew up in. As described by Eleanor, the deaf protagonist, that world was

The post-war world that created academia's Golden Age at the same time it destroyed hill-farming in Vermont. College professors from Massachusetts to Ohio who, like her father, could suddenly afford abandoned farms. The world of summer gentry. How certain, how natural, how wide-ranging it had seemed. And yet, how cloistered, how limited it had been. (4)

The world of summer gentry. It was a peculiar summer society, academic only in the sense that its members had genuine intellectual interests – and got three months off a year. This situation is reflected in *Return in Kind*: while it is deeply concerned with education in the larger sense, and several of its characters – including Joel and Eleanor, the central figures -- are scholars, it's not an academic novel.

Off stage, for the most part, there is Mather College (completely fictional) which under its signature president, Nathaniel Brantford, was one of the finest liberal arts colleges in the country in the 1940's and 50's. The story opens in 1991, when Nathaniel's ward, Letty Hendrickson, dies – and leaves a legacy that blows everybody out of the water. She'd been expected to give some investments to the college and life-time possession of Nathaniel's treasured first editions, early cubist paintings, and renaissance furniture to her husband, Joel. Instead, she leaves Nathaniel's collection to the college, which apologetically but immediately sells it at its enormous cash value in order to go digital and co-educational. To Joel, she leaves 150 acres in Vermont which he never knew she owned.

Joel comes to Vermont to sell the land – and finds he has inherited not ski-country investment but the Ward Place, an old hill farm and a house that is immaculately kept, though nobody has lived in it since 1959. There is clearly a mystery here, and one of the people who helps Joel solve it is Eleanor Randall Klimowski, the deaf widow from whom he

rents a room. Eleanor lives on what used to be her classicist father's summer estate, and her land is contiguous with the Ward Place – or used to be. Unfortunately, her father willed it to Eleanor and her brother, and her brother has recently sold his half to a developer. Here is Eleanor at the time Letty's death makes her reflect on her situation:

And if her income hovered just above the poverty line, that was her own fault. She'd inherited half a summer estate, after all. It had had nothing but sentimental value when she and baby Hattie had stayed here while Stanislaw went on tour, and no more in the stunned summer after his death. But now ... well, if she had any doubts about its worth, all she had to do was think of the eight hundred grand that the schized-out shade of her brother had netted last March from the deal he'd secretly closed with Hume and Rickerts for his share.

Reluctantly, she raised her eyes to the familiar, rock-strewn hillside across the road. It looked just as it always had, until -- her gaze dropped to the root-filled scar that cut through the grass. She followed its ugly line up the rise to the demolished hand-laid wall and the gate that leaned uselessly against it. Beyond the wall, three gnarled trees lay on their sides in piles of shredded blossoms; the others were heaped together in a bulldozed mass of dirt and branches, their roots stretched to the sky. The Cherry Orchard -- never mind that they were apple trees. The principle was the same. The world of summer estates was as antiquated as the world of Nathaniel Brantford. Only hopeless sentimentalists like herself and Letty Hendrickson tried to preserve it. (4-5)

The book thus puts Eleanor's loss of hearing in this larger context of loss -- loss of a landscape, loss of a rural way of life, loss of an educational ideal, and, as we gradually find out, loss of love. Its setting enabled me to write about what has happened to Vermont as hill-farms-turned-summer estates have been divided into impossibly expensive ten acre second homes.

What didn't work was Eleanor. I just couldn't write convincingly from her point of view. Part of my trouble was the real technical problem of writing the point of view of a deaf narrator. To be credibly deaf, she can't relay conversation – it's the very thing deafness deprives her of. Yet if you think of novels you've read lately, you'll realize how much information is conveyed in conversation. It almost always fills in back-story and it usually drives the plot. I was aware of the problem: in fact, it had already led me to scrap an outlined novel about deafness. But that novel had had one narrator; this one had four. That should have solved the problem, but it didn't.

Eventually, I figured it out. The novel, as you've already seen, has a lot of autobiography in it. It's set at my house (redesigned to fit the part); the Ward Place that Joel inherits is a real place (with a totally different history). Characters in it refer obliquely to people I know or knew – again, with totally fictional histories. People reading it now assume that Joel is a portrait of my husband – but that's not true; I began it long before I met him, and in fact he was the one who pointed out I was shrinking away from Eleanor instead of making the book hers.

What had kept me from making the book hers was this autobiographical situation. Knowing everybody would assume that Eleanor was me, I made sure to tell myself she wasn't – but



my stubborn identification of her with “not me” was the very thing that made her unconvincing. If she wasn’t me, who was she? Ah. Gradually, I made her her own person, with memories of a much older concert-pianist husband who died in his fifties, a brilliant pianist daughter whose talent she nurtured while going deaf – and a reason for being in Vermont. Here is that reason, as revealed by a feminist grad student who’s spending the summer in Vermont as the mistress of a Mather College trustee so she’ll have time to finish her dissertation. She’s just had a confrontation with his 17-year-old daughter, Charlie, whom the affair has driven out of the house.

“Look, I’m not trying to say I’m some sort of winner, Charlie. I just want you to know that I do care about what happens to your father -- ” Salome rubbed her eyes. “And I wish you’d come back to the house, because I don’t feel too good about the whole thing, if you need to know, and driving you out makes me feel even worse. Especially since I talked to your friend Eleanor. See, David introduced her as Eleanor Klimowski. It wasn’t until last night that I found she was also Eleanor Randall, the woman John Adams College fired because she went deaf.”

“*You* knew that? I mean, it was six years ago.”

“Every feminist in America knows that! The whole thing was discrimination made worse by dirty politics -- like, *unthinkable!* If she had been a man, they never could’ve gotten rid of her – never would have even *tried*. And not a single man in academia protested, including David. He has the good grace to be ashamed of that, but she -- she’s *cleaning houses* for Chrissake, and she’s brought up this brilliant new woman pianist without being able to hear, and been a second mother to you on the side – see, I made David tell me all this stuff, and I -- Well, hell, what can you say about somebody who’s somehow managed to stay true to herself through all that, when you’ve let yourself believe what you’ve done is the only way to get ahead?” 90-91

Here Salome bursts into tears – she’s okay, actually. But as she realizes here, she has none of Eleanor’s dignity and ability to rise above the treatment of the deaf in the days before 1990. Giving Eleanor this kind of admiration from other people allowed me to portray the isolation and despair that accompany her slide into profound deafness without making her look weak. I solved the dialogue problem by allowing her to hear some words, but representing the garble of unintelligible speech with *mxxmx*. The reader has to join her struggle to understand what was being said – but just in case, I made sure that the information in the dialogue was either trivial or material already covered. Thus when Eleanor first meets Joel (who doesn’t know she’s deaf), this is what she hears when he explains that he has arrived several hours ahead of schedule:

"David's daughter *mxxmx* school her horse *mxxmx* left hours ago *mxxmx* but showed *mxxmx* room and introduced Derri. *Mxxmx mxxmx* read *mxxmx* wonderful library. But *mxxmx* beautiful evening *mxxmx* take a walk."

Eleanor can’t process this, but she fakes conversation in increasing panic as she realizes that her responses aren’t warranted by what he says. By the end of the scene, she realizes how much hearing she has lost in the past few months.

Joel stopped as they reached the yard and studied the house. "David told me *xxxx* your father *xxxx* Robert Randall *xxxx* classicist *xxxx* this place."

She put the statement together and answered cautiously. "Yes, he bought it in the Fifties; it was run down, but we fixed it up, planted the garden, and mowed the fields."

"*Mxxx* georgic preoccupation," he said, smiling. "I'm very fond of his book."

Fond. It was a peculiar word to apply to a scholarly treatise on the *Georgics*, but her father would have been delighted. As for herself, back in the days when conversation had been a pleasure (not to mention, a possibility), she would have enjoyed talking to this man. As it was -- "You'll want meals as well as the room, won't you?"

There was no mistaking the surprise in his face this time. And who could blame him? She'd responded to what she was thinking, not to what he'd said. She stooped down to tie her shoe so he wouldn't see her wince.

"Just breakfast and supper. *Mxxx* fend for myself. *Mxxx* pay you now?"

All the warmth had gone from his voice, and as if that weren't bad enough, she had to think before she understood what he'd said. God. Forget intellectual conversation; she could barely negotiate a contract with a tenant. And when she could no longer manage that, what would she do? 21-22

One result of her profound loss is to make her avoid other people, including her friends. She thus finds social gatherings a nightmare. Here she is, preparing to go the tea party that is the last remnant of old Vermont summers:

Eleanor slipped on her one decent dress, wishing that she had invented some reason to absent herself from the tea. The only reason she had not was pride: to the well-adjusted summer folk who graced Helena's teas, her excuse would have been instantly diagnosed as a symptom of withdrawal. 'Poor Eleanor,' they would say. 'If she'd only make an effort!' So she'd make the effort -- the effort to return brief, slightly apologetic hellos from couples with whom she'd once been friends; the effort to understand their small talk, most of which she would have to ask them to repeat; and subsequently, the effort to participate in conversations by smiling when others smiled and laughing when they did. Sociability now was a triumph of form over content, in which what had once been only background became the whole experience. Haircuts. Dresses. Shoes. Expressions, gestures -- and with them, the awareness of what people were thinking, so confusingly different from what they said. 138

But in spite of her occasional bouts of despair, Eleanor's first-hand knowledge of the Ward Place helps Joel unravel his mystery, and the two become friends. It takes him a while -- he is a wreck, exhausted from taking care of Letty for two years, and then forced by the legacy to come to grips with the unhappiness of the marriage. He's also product of all-male education (Exeter, Yale, then teaching at Mather College) and while he is no chauvinist, he doesn't really *see* women unless they are astonishingly beautiful -- which Eleanor isn't. And

she's tremendously defensive. For two months they live parallel lives, each aware of the other's unhappiness but feeling unable to help.

Then Joel discovers the power of a pad of paper, and the two of them begin conversing – not only about the Ward Place, but about their intellectual interests. And when Joel finally falls apart because he has found that Letty has lied to him all their marriage, and that Nathaniel has collaborated in the deception, it is Eleanor who finds him in tears, and Eleanor to whom he confesses. But there's a snag.

"Can you tell me what it is?" she said gently, after they had sat in silence awhile.

He poured himself a mug of tea and sipped it -- more, she suspected, to give himself time than anything else -- then slowly, hesitantly, began to speak.

And she couldn't hear him.

It wasn't the light; that was just the way it always was when they talked. Nor was it his voice, though it was certainly subdued. It must be that whatever he was saying distressed him so much that he couldn't bring himself to look directly at her. But the reason hardly mattered. She *had* to hear him; she couldn't let him pour out his soul to a blank wall. Turning up her aids until his voice pounded at her ears, she moved closer to him. That helped a little; she caught a few words ..., but beyond that, she could ascertain nothing. And yet, to stop him, to beg him to look up, was impossible.

He finished, and she could feel him waiting for a response. Desperately, she studied his face, hoping for some clue that would enable her to say the appropriate thing, but all she could see was self-loathing -- and some indefinable aura that suggested he had kept a great deal back. She hesitated, then, praying that she was doing the right thing, laid her hand on his knee. "Things like that are always upsetting," she said. "But it's not really what's bothering you, is it?"

205

At this point, she asks him to write – and because he's writing (presumably sideways or from the corners) she can page back and show him that he's contradicting himself. She manages to persuade him that his fears are groundless, but though she has comforted him, she has a harder time comforting herself.

He followed her to the kitchen and sat down at the table, his forehead in his hands. She fetched him four aspirins and a glass of ice water, then watched with sympathy and a vague sense of superiority as he downed them.

To her surprise, when she reached out for the glass, he took her hand. "Thank you," he said. "I --" He stopped and lifted her fingers to his lips.

She looked into his eyes as he raised them -- and saw nothing but exhaustion, a headache, and deep gratitude. Well, gratitude was something. And what more could she ask for? Gently, she brushed the graying curls off his hot forehead, then left him and went up to her room.

*And what more could she ask for?* She slipped off her clothes, watched only by the reproachful eyes of her banished animals, and pulled her nightgown over her head, looking out the window. Outside, the rain had stopped, and the moon lit up the side of a fast-blowing cloud, then, suddenly, the whole range of mountains. She watched the harrowed pasture across the road turn silver

through the faint reflection of herself, still beautiful in the inconstant light. *And what more could she ask for?* What she could offer him now was as unlike the self she'd once been as the bulldozed field was unlike the wall, the orchard, the trees that once had been. The world of music silenced, the world of learning limited to a computer screen, the love of a kind and difficult man long in the past, the child of that love grown and gone --. The clouds covered the moon, and in the darkened window, she saw the pig-tailed phantoms of Charlie and Hattie, then one of Joel, sitting in Helena's garden, a little boy asleep in his lap.

No. She couldn't even offer him that.

Sorrowfully, she pulled the shade, glancing across the hall at the nearly completed stack of pages on her desk. Boccaccio. Love melancholy. How much the man had known, had understood. How little the tragedies and absurdities of the heart had changed in the six hundred years since his death. How comforting, finally, that was to know. 216

Here we see Eleanor's sad recognition of the depth of her solitude -- but also her strength of character. In a book that portrays the sorrows of intelligent people trapped in the past, she has just saved the man she has come to love from the same fate, thus revealing herself -- for all her deafness -- as being *less* disabled than the others. Nor is her solitude the scary aloneness that made her run away from Joel at the beginning of the book: it's acceptance of age, time, and change. What Eleanor achieves, as she sees her reflection against the ruined past across the street, is a perspective that allows her to look forward into a changing world with intelligence and dignity.

And there we will leave her. What she becomes at the end of the book is a lot more than someone who makes the hearing understand more about deafness, someone the late-deafened can identify with, or someone who makes the birth deaf better understand the sense of loss that accompanies late deafness. She has become in every sense her own person -- a woman who has accepted and risen above her frailties.

As such, she shows the reader that what finally makes meaning of late deafness is the same thing that makes meaning of everything else: recognizing the destructiveness of mourning a past that can't be changed; understanding that the value of natural and artistic beauty can't be measured in terms of money, and sharing -- even at some emotional cost -- the inestimable gifts of human love and friendship. It took me fourteen years and thousands of pages to figure that out, but I'm glad I did.