

Deaf Characters in Adolescent Literature

A collection of adolescent books with Deaf Characters, interesting websites, and book reviews.

MONDAY, AUGUST 13, 2007 SHARON PAJKA-WEST, PHD

Adolescent Deaf Characters

Acquiring fictional books that include deaf characters can be time-consuming and challenging for teachers and librarians. The research examining deaf characters in fiction is extremely limited and most of the recent articles focus on children's literature-- specifically picture books. I hope this Blog assists teachers in recommending books with characters with whom our students can relate. I also hope this Blog assists in recommending books with multiple realities of the D/deaf human experience.

While my primary focus is adolescent and Young Adult chapter books, I will add information about children's literature and adult 'cross-over' texts from time to time.

Enjoy,

Sharon Pajka-West, Ph.D.

[Interview with Jodi Cutler Del Dottore, author of RALLY CAPS \(2007\)](#)



***RALLY CAPS* by Stephen J. Cutler and Jodi Cutler Del Dottore
Reading level: Ages 9-12
Paperback: 87 pages**

Publisher: Publish America (April 16, 2007)

I have often been told that I need to include more "boy" books and "sports-related" books in my reading repertoire. Guilty as charged! When the author of *RALLY CAPS* contacted me to review her book, I thought, "Perfect... a book with boy main characters, centered around baseball, and that includes a deaf character!" What I didn't realize is how much I *didn't* know about baseball.... and boys. Thankfully I'm married to a man who is a boy at heart and who is able to give me basic baseball terminology definitions and other "boy" vocabulary such as *bugjuice*. Nevertheless, I made it through the book in one sitting.

RALLY CAPS is the story of Jordan, a ten-year-old who gets injured while trying out for Little League. When the doctor places him on the "disabled list" (i.e. no physical activity for six to eight weeks), Jordan mopes around spending much of his time playing PlayStation and watching the Cartoon Network. When he finally goes off to baseball summer camp he has to overcome his anxiety of another baseball injury and swimming with the possibility of meeting the lake monster who steals swimming trunks.

Jordan shows off his extensive vocabulary (using words such as 'formidable' to describe a pitcher) when he meets and befriends Luca, a deaf character who wears a cochlear implant and Luca's sister Niki (who is known at camp as Nick but *no spoilers* here!!!). Jordan learns a great deal from Luca's 'nothing is impossible' attitude, and his hero Cal Ripken Jr. Luca also teaches readers a bit about his home in Italy including such delicacies as Nutella, a hazelnut chocolate spread.



RALLY CAPS was released just in time for Cal Ripken Jr.'s historical induction into the National Baseball Hall of Fame. Co-author Stephen Cutler traveled to Cooperstown for a book signing at Augurs Bookstore, next door to the National Baseball Hall of Fame Museum. The author was able to watch his hero, Cal Ripken Jr. being inducted into the Hall of Fame. Read my interview below with co-author Jodi Cutler Del Dottore (daughter of co-author Stephen Cutler) to learn about how they collaborated writing the book from the United States and Italy.



(Pictured Right: co-authors Jodi Cutler Del Dottore and Stephen Cutler. Jodi's son and RALLY CAPS inspiration, JORDAN in the middle at a book signing)

*******Interview with author Jodi Cutler Del Dottore-- Read below*******

SPW: From the back of the book and from your website, much of the book appears to be based on real events, not just fiction. I'm so curious if your father was actually like the character Jordan (a prankster at camp). AND while your son Jordan was your inspiration for the book, is he more like the character Jordan or the deaf character Luca?

JCDD: The book is a combination of real-life events and fiction. Yes, the character of Jordan is a mixture of what happened to my father (when he was 10) following a flying bat incident and the anxiety he experienced at camp that summer – and his idol Cal Ripken Jr. It also represents anxiety I went through after my son's cochlear implant surgery. Anxiety and panic attacks are becoming too common in children today, and I wanted these individuals to find support in a character able to overcome anxiety. The pranks were various jokes from my Dad's camp experience and my own experience in day camp, living in a sorority house during college and April fool's jokes my sister and I played on my mom and dad during our childhood. My dad added the camp setting (the actual camp he attended as a child for 12 summers) and traditional camp cheers. His baseball camp experience was an integral part in forming the person he is today, and believe it or not, he broke his nose and had surgery again during an Oriole game while diving for a foul ball hit by Eddie Murray! Niki and I were with him that time at Memorial Stadium. Quite a night that was!

My son JORDAN is more like the deaf character Luca but with some of the insecurities of Jordan. JORDAN is fearless, always has been, however has some of the insecurities that living with a disability brings, despite his significant progress made in overcoming language and social difficulties.

SPW: You've included several names of your family members in the book as characters. On your website I saw the picture of you with Niki. Is she a family member too?

JCDD: Niki is my sister and the character Nick represents not only the opportunity to depict a strong female character, but a window for the reader providing insight as to Luca's history and challenges he's faced in his oral approach to deafness. Like me, Niki is an athlete. There is no doubt she would have made that catch described in the book – she was that good!

SPW: Your family clearly has a passion for baseball. Can you explain what it was like to see your father after he met his hero for the first time?

JCDD: I'll let my dad answer this one! I will say that he has been my coach my entire life and has taught me everything I know about baseball. The history and drills and chats on the “CB Rock” were from my father’s vast knowledge of the game he loves. He attended 5 Fantasy Baseball Camps including two of Cal Ripken’s. He tells me that they all were unbelievable but the best memory is the 7 inning game he pitched and warming up with Cal on the sidelines. He met his other hero, Brooks Robinson, at the Oriole Fantasy Camp in 1996. Brooks labeled him “Mr. Scoop” because my father played first base and always scooped up the short throws from the infielders. My father will always have that “little boy” in him from his love of sports. Now he umpires softball down in Florida 4 nights a week. But what I got most out of my father’s love of the game was his role model, Cal Ripken and what he represented – playing through injury, criticism/media, and persevering through it all – and the importance Cal placed on family. Cal was the perfect inspiration for our book (along with the positive confident deaf child) of persevering through difficult times – the two represented a perfect compliment for our story.

SPW: Will you describe how your father and you collaborated on the book from two different countries?

JCDD: We began working on "the book" when he told me he was thinking of writing a short story for a baseball magazine based on his Travel Team Tryout accident and he wanted to incorporate Cal Ripken Jr. I told him that it could be the basis for a book if we incorporated his camp experience following his frightening flying bat incident and make it into a baseball camp story. He said go with that, so we began corresponding back and forth over a six year period. I added the character of Luca (based on my son). During this period, Jordan went from using hearing aids to our ultimate decision of cochlear implant surgery. The book took off after the results Jordan obtained from his cochlear implant. Whenever I lulled in writing, my father would add a piece and I would take it from there. It was a team effort! All correspondence was done by sending Word attachments to emails from Italy to Baltimore and then West Palm Beach where my father currently resides.

SPW: You've worked as an English teacher and a translator. Had you met any deaf children or adults prior to having a son who is deaf?

JCDD: I was 24 years old when Jordan was born. I had had no prior experience with working with deaf children nor had I ever even held a baby before him. I remember working at a fast food place in the mall when I was sixteen years old and a really good-looking guy my age walked up to the counter to order. He was wearing hearing aids. He said, "Hello" and placed his order. As soon as he left, my eyes started tearing up and I asked to take my break. I cried, sobbed for the entire thirty minute break, seeing that guy wearing hearing aids and talking majorly affected me and I could not understand why. I tried to take a sign language course each one of my four years of college and there was always a schedule conflict that prohibited me from taking the course.

SPW: Can you explain a bit about your family's decision for Jordan to get a cochlear implant?

JCDD: When my son was six months old, I showed his picture to a psychic and the first thing she said was, "Your son has music in his ears." This was the phrase I remembered most when I was given the news that my son was deaf and it helped me to perceive deafness in a different way. Jordan wore hearing aids for eight years and had speech therapy three times a week for every one of those years. When he was eight years old, he was doing well in school but he was suffering with his peers. In Tuscany we are famous for using bad words and while his peers were moving along in language even this type of language, he was falling further and further behind socially. I saw him suffering. I decided that if we had chosen the oral approach and the cochlear implant was an option- years earlier it hadn't been because he had quality gain from his hearing aids despite his profound deafness - then we should go ahead with the surgery to offer him every possibility to hear as well as possible. The cochlear implant would provide sound more similar to the way we hear as opposed to the hearing aids that were like "two bombs in his ears" as described by my audiologist. My husband and I made the decision together and three months after this decision, Jordan had his surgery in Pisa. The cochlear implant has changed our lives. My son's world literally opened before him, his emotions, his perspective on relationships, his schoolwork, and his self-esteem. He is proud of himself and is the first to describe the changes in him before and after the implant. A few months after the implant surgery, my father asked Jordan how much was his hearing had improved. Jordan responded "One-thousand percent."

SPW: What advice would you give to young people who are reading your books for the first time?

JCDD: I would like every child reading this book to see themselves as I see my own son, as a strong, sensitive, extraordinary individual. We each have a quality or ability that makes us unique, whether it's in sports, art, music, dance, etc. Focus on what makes you special and you will find the strength with the support of the unconditional love family (Mom and Dad - as annoying as we may be) and your

siblings (a sister in this case) - to persevere and overcome all difficulties and obstacles – and realize that nothing is impossible.

Baseball imitates life and life imitates baseball. In either case you go through a roll-a-coaster of highs and lows, trials and tribulations, celebrations and setbacks, but with patience we get another chance to show our true colors – to overcome obstacles or difficult times. Hopefully, RALLY CAPS sends that message. And what better than a “Rally Cap” to be waved and to represent that little extra mojo late in the game to help spur your team to a come-from-behind victory.

SPW: Do you have plans for writing another book with these characters?

JCDD: The RALLY CAPS sequel is in the works, what my son doesn't know is that he will be writing a Note to the Reader! Hopefully, this one won't take another six years to write!

For more information about the book and to read an article written about Jordan in *Volta Voices*, visit <http://www.rallycaps.net/>