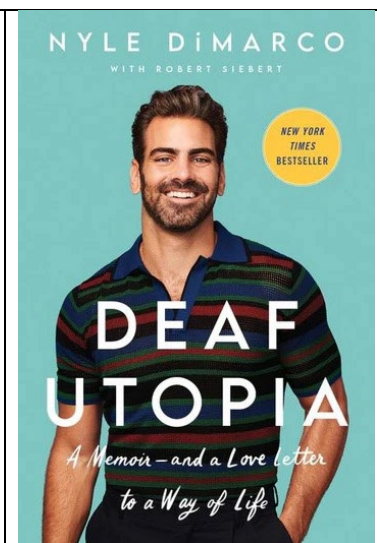




***Deaf Utopia: A Memoir—and a Love Letter to a Way of Life*  
(2022)**

Nyle DiMarco, Robert Siebert  
William Morrow  
Pages: 336  
ISBN: 978-0063062351  
Cost: \$13.59

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**Deaf Utopia: A Book Review focusing on Literacy, Culture, and Understanding**

Like many other teachers and university professors, some of my best lesson ideas happen on the drive to work. For one class, I challenged my graduate students to develop a list of celebrities and figures we could integrate into our respective school curriculums to promote representation of all students. Participating alongside them, I provided one contribution: Nyle DiMarco.

I first “met” Nyle on *America’s Next Top Model*. He used his platform on reality TV shows, like this and *Dancing with the Stars*, to bring awareness to Deaf culture and LGBTQ representation. As we learned about our celebrities, I discovered at the time DiMarco recently published his memoir, *Deaf Utopia: A memoir—and a love letter to a way of life*. Little did I know this memoir would become a staple text in my future Literacy courses. His memoir, *Deaf Utopia*, provides an intimate look of his life as he shares the joys, trials, and tribulations of growing up in a mult-generational Deaf family, and to a lesser extent his coming out. Although the text is intended for a public audience, a bulk of his memoir explores his educational journey, providing teachers, administrators, and scholars with valuable insights into Deaf culture.

One strength for the text is that from the onset, DiMarco et al. (2022) acknowledges that his experience is not a single story of deafness. In fact, DiMarco states, “I am one Deaf person out of many...Hundreds of millions of people in the world are Deaf, deaf, hard of hearing, or late deafened or cochlear implant users” (p. XII). In highlighting the different identities within Deaf culture, DiMarco protects the reader from turning his experience into a monolith, anticipating the danger of readers using his work as a single story (Adichie, 2009).

An additional strength, and the main reason I have integrated this book into graduate level coursework, is how DiMarco et al. describes literacy development and theories in a way that is easy for the reader to understand, unlike some traditional textbooks. The narrative structure is approachable while still providing many great connections to coursework, such as those identified in a class on the sociolinguistic applications of reading. Of all the courses I’ve taught, this is one of my favorites. At a small, urban, public university, I love guiding my students through the theoretical understandings of language, culture, and identity. However, it

can be a challenging course—especially when covered in a five-week summer semester—with abstract concepts, dense readings, and confronting tense topics such as racism and/or audism in schools. In this course, I have read excerpts of *Deaf Utopia* with graduate students seeking a reading specialist or principal certification and discussed the potential implications it could have on classroom practice. These excerpts, identified in the my supplemental Google Slides presentation [here](https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1dLp51ax0_nF8ox_i5mE5wMPtBd50Ll6jHzarRsiyoME/edit?usp=sharing) ([https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1dLp51ax0\\_nF8ox\\_i5mE5wMPtBd50Ll6jHzarRsiyoME/edit?usp=sharing](https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1dLp51ax0_nF8ox_i5mE5wMPtBd50Ll6jHzarRsiyoME/edit?usp=sharing)) are digestible case studies for graduate students to explore literacy development, language acquisition, and how stories shape communities. Additionally, other courses might use this text to map a timeline of how the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 was implemented and amended. Students could use DiMarco’s experiences as a lens to understand how accommodations help students achieve.

A third strength is DiMarco’s expertise in Deaf language, schooling, and culture. He provides a unique perspective of growing up in a proud multi-generational Deaf family and immerses readers in their rich conversations and lived experiences. One means of conveying this is through the use of ASL gloss. This is primarily used to write ASL dialogue, and as DiMarco notes, “is an occasional tap on the shoulder and whispered hint: remember, these very ordinary folks happen to be Deaf” (p. XII).

Throughout the book, DiMarco et al. (2022) confronts audism, which is described as a sense of superiority “based on one’s ability to hear or behave in the manner of one who hears” (p. 186). ASL gloss is one means of doing this, but so too are DiMarco’s stories, such as his subtle act of resistance in school to not charge his hearing aids. The way in which he claims his language and culture, both in the text but also his interview with Good Morning America (2022), helps readers approach Deaf language and culture from an asset-based mindset instead of a deficit perspective. DiMarco doesn’t just claim this for himself, but identifies the paradigm shifts that happened within the Deaf community and the language of ASL was legitimized over time (p. 104).

Throughout the book, Nyle offers vignettes that help us understand his own challenges and struggles in society. He offers his own motivations for overcoming these challenges and struggles. Through it all, he shows patience advocating for the inclusion of Deaf and queer people. He is very forthright that this is just one story, and readers should keep this in mind.

That being said, DiMarco et al. (2022) anticipated this book being a means to launch readers on their own exploration of Deaf culture and education. They provide resources for this at the end of the book (p. 309). Additionally, I have used it as a launch to explore other representations of Deaf culture in children’s and young adult literature, such as Walls (2023) *Brooms*, Gino (2018) *You Don’t Know Everything, Jilly P.*, and scholarly works, such as Stephens and Yenika-Agbaw’s (2022) *Children, Deafness, and Deaf Cultures in Popular Media*.

As a teacher, I was never in control of which students had a seat in my classroom. Now that I work with pre-service teachers, in-service teachers, literacy specialists, and principals, I try to help those in my class understand and celebrate the vibrant spectrum of humanity and embrace diversity in races, ethnicities, religions, genders, sexualities, abilities, and backgrounds. As Payne and Smith (2011) share, “It is essential for educators to understand that they do not get to choose which youth are deserving of an education or which youth are entitled to safety in walking down a school corridor. Their responsibility is to act” (p. 198). This understanding and call to action does not happen through textbooks; it happens through knowing people. What better way to learn than through the study of memoirs?

There is so much to be gained from Nyle DiMarco’s memoir. As educators, we can learn about language, culture, and self. As humans, we can learn of our commonalities and

celebrate the parts of our lives that are different. Ultimately, read it for your own personal education of Deaf culture if not as a means to bring inclusion into your classroom.

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