

Sarika Mehta: Good morning. Thanks for listening to KBOO 90.7 FM in Portland. I'm Sarika Mehta. Cece Bell is an author and illustrator of children's books, including the Sock Monkey series. Her latest venture is a memoir of her childhood, *El Deafo*, told in the form of a graphic novel. This is the story of how she lost her hearing at the age of four and a half and was subsequently equipped with a Phonic Ear hearing aid. This clunky device did make her stand out in a crowd and made her acutely aware of her differences but even as a child she managed to turn this difference into a super power.

It's a delightful tale in which she copes with challenges by asking herself "What would Batman do?" Cece is deaf and doesn't communicate using sign language. She depends on lip reading and using her own voice. Cece joined me from her home in Virginia via Skype and a few recording devices. We started our conversation with understanding her Phonic Ear hearing aid and childhood super powers.

The book is called *El Deafo* and it's just this delightful memoir that is also a graphic novel. Before we talk about the book, first tell our listeners a little bit about yourself.

Cece Bell: Okay. I have been writing and illustrating books for children for about fifteen years. Until the graphic novel I have mostly done picture books and early readers. This was a new format for me. I live in Virginia and I'm married to another writer. His name is Tom Angleberger and he is known for the Origami Yoda series. We both work at home and we have a really great time, most of the time, working on books and having a great time doing that.

Sarika Mehta: The story of *El Deafo* begins with the Phonic Ear. It has the "ear molds of virtue", the "cords of intuition" and the "on/off switch of awesomeness".

Cece Bell: You better believe it!

Sarika Mehta: Tell us about the Phonic Ear contraption that resulted in your childhood super powers.

Cece Bell: Sure. Absolutely. I forgot to say, when I was talking about myself, because sometimes I do forget, is that I lost my hearing when I was about four and a half in 1975. I'm forty-four now, I will be forty-five in December. I have had many different kinds of hearing aid technologies or used them since 1975. The book focuses mostly on our little friend here, the Phonic Ear which was a very large hearing aid. It doesn't look all that big but I was a very small kid. I wore this and it was an amazing contraption that somehow worked really well. I don't even understand it because I never took the time to really

learn. Some kind of FM system, radio waves and it worked together with the teacher's microphone which is ugly, flesh colored but very powerful.

I wore my part. The teacher wore her part or his part and it magnified her voice really loud just for me. I could hear her anywhere she was. That included in the entire school. Not just in the classroom but where ever she was in the entire school. The great thing was that she could not hear me so I had a lot of power over her. As far as the on/off switch of awesomeness, I could turn my part on and off. I can still turn my hearing aids on and off. That's awesome because sometimes the world gives you too much sound and too much input. I am sure that there are hearing people who would love to be able to just 'click' and turn the world off, even for just five minutes.

The teacher's part had an on/off switch, too. I never, ever told my teacher that there was an on/off switch, hoping that she wouldn't notice. Every now and then there would be a teacher who didn't notice or just forgot to turn it off. Some were really good about remembering and some weren't. It was amazing. I think it actually gave me a huge advantage over my classmates because I could always hear my teacher. No matter what, her voice was always in my ear. All the other students, they didn't always hear everything but I did. I think that I actually made better grades simply because of that. It was a weird thing, to be the kid with this problem but it actually ended up being a real advantage.

Sarika Mehta: That's true. At the beginning of the story, after you talk about becoming deaf and having the Phonic Ear, the first story you tell is about hearing your teacher gabbing with other teachers in the teacher's lounge or smoking a cigarette or in the bathroom! Talk about how that became your super power.

Cece Bell: What was fun about that super power too was trying to be a sound detective. Because when people go to the bathroom they don't say "Hey! I think I'll go to the bathroom now! Hmmm. There is a door with a sign on it that says ladies" They just go. I had to take all this input I was getting, maybe I could hear the sound of a zipper or the toilet flushing or the sigh of relief. That's what really helped me know where she was. I don't know if your teachers smoked like mine did but being able to hear that big exhale, "aaah!" and all the gossip surrounding the teachers in the teacher's lounge. It was pretty neat. It was a lot of fun.

Sarika Mehta: I bet. That was one of my favorite stories. Do you have a favorite story from your book that you want to tell?

Cece Bell: Oh, sure! I think my favorite part to tell and to draw was the crush I had on the very cute neighborhood boy Mike Miller. That stuff was so much fun to draw. I love drawing hearts and I had hearts just busting out of my head. I think that was probably my favorite part. My favorite story in the book is probably the curly pencil incident. When the boy, a different boy, broke the curly pencil that my father gave me. Then Mike Miller, the boy that I love, he forced that kid to apologize to me. Made me feel really nice and special. That was probably my favorite story to tell in the book.

Sarika Mehta: What was it like - not writing - but developing your own memoir and drawing yourself as a rabbit, as a child and drawing your friends and this little boy crush you had. What was that experience like?

Cece Bell: It was a lot of fun. It was also daunting. I still have mixed feelings about portraying some of those friendships that were maybe not as successful as the one that I had with my best friend. Because those are real people and if they read the book, hopefully they didn't but if they did, the ones that I was not fair to, I hope that they forgive me. I was really just trying to depict what everybody's friendships are like in a lot of ways. I know that I wasn't fair and part of the reason I wasn't fair to them was because I was trying really hard to remember what it felt like to be a kid.

When you are a kid you don't always realize that your friends have their own problems going on. Maybe their parents are splitting up. Maybe a parent has an addiction to something and you don't see that part of them. The when you grow up an you find out what the whole story was you think "Oh, gracious! Oh, that's terrible. I wish I had been a better friend." That wasn't the story I was telling. I was telling what it felt like for me. I wanted readers to be me when they read the book. That part was hard. I still wrestle with that.

Sarika Mehta: If you are just tuning in, you are listening to KBOO 90.7 FM in Portland. I'm Sarika Mehta chatting with author Cece Bell about her graphic novel memoir *El Deafo*. Cece was just describing the challenges behind some of the stories she tells in her book. Then she also describes the intent behind illustrating all characters with rabbit ears.

Cece Bell: On the whole, putting rabbit ears on everybody is loads of fun. Especially there's some TV scenes, I think you might remember,

CeceBell\_vox2

where there's Spock with rabbit ear and Barney Fife and Andy Griffith with rabbit ears. That was something. That was fun.

Sarika Mehta: Actually, I was curious, why rabbit ears?

Cece Bell: The rabbit ears are definitely there for a reason. The main reason, there's two things, rabbits have really big ears and really great hearing. I wanted to be that character who had the big ears but the ears didn't work. They were broken. The ears were just for show. Just like my actual ears. Then the other reason is in real life the cords of my hearing aids just went up to my ears to hear. Having rabbit ears meant that I could make the cords go all the way up over my head and that was more what it felt like.

I felt conspicuous even though probably my classmates didn't even notice it anymore. I felt like I was always conspicuous. Having the cords go over my head was a little bit more of a, let's get fancy, a visual metaphor. A good way to show the feeling so that's why. I think some people were a little put off by the rabbits but there really was a reason and they're cute. You might get more readers with rabbits.

Sarika Mehta: They were cute! That's a really good point that it drew more attention to the ears and how you felt having these hearing aids plugged in. Feeling like you are on show all the time. What you were saying about the more difficult friendships you had, that related to another question. A lot people don't even know but the deaf community here in the US and around the world have their own culture and their own language. Your mom even tried to get you to sign up for sign language classes at the local church which was... a less than positive experience for you as a kid (laughter). Why don't you talk about that story a little bit?

Cece Bell: About the sign language. Okay. That was also a extremely difficult chapter to write. Probably the hardest by far. I wanted to be very careful that somehow I put in that chapter how important sign language is and I wanted to somehow show that as an adult I totally respect that language. Because as a kid I was nothing but disrespectful, just awful. I'm ashamed to even say those things. I was able to use the teacher as this person who could talk about what sign language is and what it means and how important it is so those points get across. I had to be honest again and I didn't want to learn sign language because none of my friends used it.

I was being raised totally in a hearing world, a hearing community and I felt like if I learn sign language then everyone would be watching me and staring at me if they saw me use it. Which is funny because I talk with my hands a lot and I watch people who talk with their hands. I'm trying to learn it a little bit because I do talk to deaf children and who use sign language more than anything else. I'm trying but it is the most fascinating language that is just completely different from anything else out there. It's amazing.

The other thing about sign language that I wonder about is, for example, I don't like to dance in public. I'm not an exhibitionist at all. Sign language is almost like dance to me and I get very self-conscious when I'm trying to actually use these signs. I have often wondered if there are other people who have trouble hearing who also stay away from sign language because they are so self-conscious. It's an interesting thing because you have to be almost like an actor and your face has to do a lot of things and your hand, of course, has to do so many things. I hope that that chapter and the afterword that I wrote made it clear that I am not anti-sign language at all. I do think it's amazing. It was just a time in my life where I was simply not receptive to it.

Sarika Mehta: Thanks for tuning in to KBOO community radio in Portland. If you missed any of this program you can listen to the archive at [KBOO.fm/betweenthecovers](http://KBOO.fm/betweenthecovers). I'm Sarika Mehta chatting with author Cece Bell. We're talking about her memoir *El Deafo* depicted as a graphic novel. We had just been talking about why Cece, as a child, didn't want to learn sign language and how difficult it was for her to write that story in her book. We then shifted to the audience response to her book.

Cece Bell: Overall the response has been huge. It has been, I would have to say, unreal. I did not think that this book was going to go anywhere at all because all of my previous books have done moderately well. I have been under the radar for a long time. [inaudible 16:34] This is going to be under the radar, too. That has been a real shock, to be really noticed. I have gotten wonderful responses from teachers both hearing and teachers for the deaf, librarians and the kids themselves which is the most important thing. The kids are eating it up. I'm getting so many e-mails from kids, both hearing and deaf or using hearing aids who are really excited about it.

They've read it many, many times. What's been really wonderful for me is hearing from adults who are, pretty much, exactly like me. The same kind of hearing loss, used the same technology, had the

same experience and they're writing me saying "You got my story." It's been so wonderful to hear that. Also, a lot of deaf adults are using the book as a manual to share with hearing people. "Read this. This might help you understand me better." There have been many things like that that I didn't anticipate because I was writing this book for purely selfish reasons. I was just ready to get this off my chest.

Sarika Mehta: Why did you decide to write this memoir at this point?

Cece Bell: I had read Raina Telgemeier's *Smile* and that's another graphic novel memoir. It was just amazing how she was able to show this thing in her childhood so perfectly and that got me thinking about it and also, I was just oddly ready. I think that I had been going through a lot of frustration with hearing people. Being in these situations where I couldn't explain to them what I needed from them and, once again, I'm very non-confrontational, not an exhibitionist, all that stuff so I was finding it hard to vocally say "I need you to do things differently." The book really started out more as a manual "Here's what I need from you. Here's how you should speak to a lip reader. Here's how not to speak to a lip reader." It started that way but then it became a lot more than that. I was just ready. I was, basically, no longer ashamed. Ready to ask the world for help when I needed it. I went ahead and put it out there.

Sarika Mehta: Wonderful. Wonderful. My last question is a little bit... it's not about your book, it's just about disability. I talk to a lot of disability rights advocates and they are very frustrated with how disability is portrayed in media and pop culture.

For example, Eddie Redmayne - who is an able bodied actor. He won the Oscar for best actor for portraying Stephen Hawking in the film *The Theory of Everything*. That's just one example. This is a formula. When an able bodied actor portrays somebody with a severe disability or something along those lines they tend to win the highest achievement. I was wondering if you had any thoughts or comments about these kinds of issues.

Cece Bell: I have actually been talking or thinking about this issue for years. Ever since I started watching TV and the movies. I think there is a really fine line in all of this and I'll say that comedy ... Well, back up a little bit. The depictions of people with a disability, that's really I think a tricky, tricky thing. I think there are some actors who overdo it. When they overdo it, it just makes me want to throw up. It's no, no, no, no. When they underplay it or don't overdo it, it's so much better. Sometimes it's just the movie itself. If the movie decides to

focus on the disability with all of this violin music and maudlin stuff, that's just wrong. When the movie focuses more ... I'll talk about the ones I like. My Left Foot with Daniel Day Lewis is excellent. He's angry. He's funny. He's a real person. You never lose sight of that.

Where some depictions of people with disabilities, it is all about the disability and somehow manages to be about all of the people around that person instead of that person. Isn't that wonderful, the way Buddy helped his little deaf friend? That stuff really uh. Then in comedy there's a really fine line. It's almost never funny to single out somebody with a disability and make fun of that. That doesn't work very well. My favorite, favorite depiction of a person with a disability in any movie was, this is strange but it was in Four Weddings and a Funeral. Hugh Grant's character has a brother and the brother is deaf. Everybody communicates with him using sign language. He's not the main character which is one of the things I love about it.

He's not the main character but he's part of their group. He's part of their lives. When they communicate with him it's all completely natural and wonderful. That's what I want to see more of in movies where it's just these side characters, who maybe aren't the main character or connected to the main character but that's what real life is. We all have relatives and friends that are different from us in one way or another. You're the main character in your life but it's really cool to see that in a movie. I don't know that I've seen that very often. That's my favorite because there were no violins because there didn't need to be. It wasn't about him. It was about Hugh Grant but he added so much to Hugh Grant's story. I thought that was really cool. It's not even my favorite movie in the world but that was awesome. I got very excited when I saw that.

Sarika Mehta: I really appreciate your perspective and I remember in that movie that they do communicate with him in sign language without making a big deal or a drama about it. Do you have any last remarks or things you want to talk about that we didn't talk about?

Cece Bell: I don't think so. I'm just really, really pleased at how the book has resonated with people. It's just been a real bonus to a really neat thing for my life. I guess I do have one thing to add is that in talking to adults and kids who are like me. I've gotten a lot of new information about new technology that's very exciting. That I don't think I would have gotten on my own. Just from e-mail communications and meeting people at book events that has actually opened me up to being brave and possibly looking for new

technology for myself. My current hearing aids are eleven years old and I'm forty-four years old and I've been having a lot of trouble, lately, more and more with understanding. I'm excited to be pursuing some new things that I probably wouldn't have done without the help of other people. That's been another really neat thing to come out of the book for me, personally.

Sarika Mehta: That's really cool - that's great! Well, Cece Bell, thank you so much for taking the time and technology to chat with me!

Cece Bell: Thank you. Thank you very much for setting all of this up. I appreciate it.

Sarika Mehta: That was Cece Bell author of *El Deafo*, her graphic novel memoir. We met up on Skype from my home in Oregon to her home in Virginia. You can learn more about her at her website [cecebell.wordpress.com](http://cecebell.wordpress.com). I'm Sarika Mehta, thanks for listening.