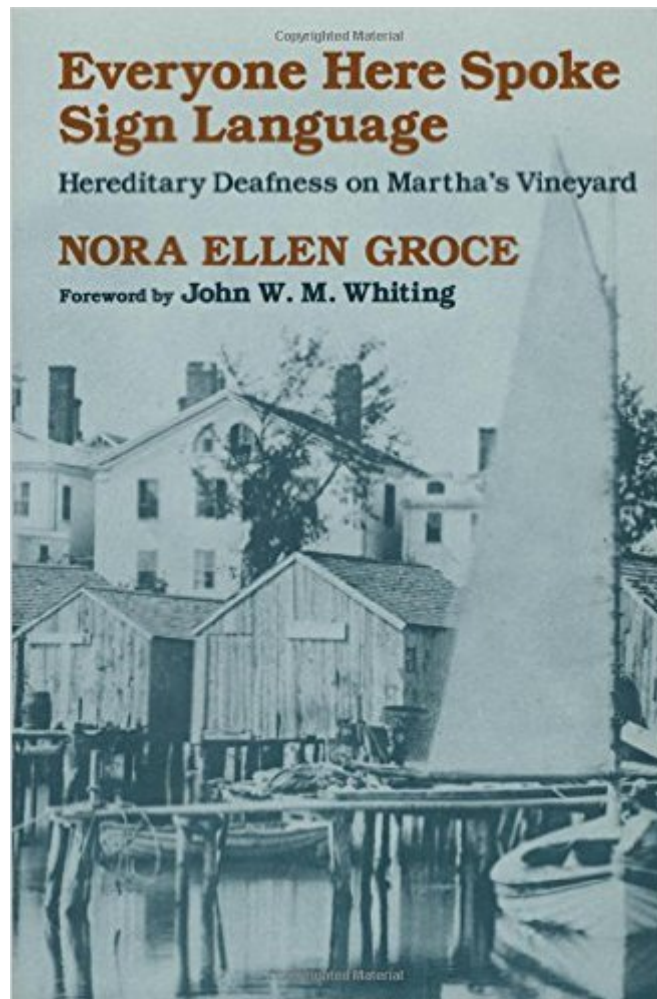


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# Everyone Here Spoke Sign Language: Hereditary Deafness On Martha's Vineyard



## Synopsis

From the seventeenth century to the early years of the twentieth, the population of Martha's Vineyard manifested an extremely high rate of profound hereditary deafness. In stark contrast to the experience of most deaf people in our own society, the Vineyarders who were born deaf were so thoroughly integrated into the daily life of the community that they were not seen--and did not see themselves--as handicapped or as a group apart. Deaf people were included in all aspects of life, such as town politics, jobs, church affairs, and social life. How was this possible? On the Vineyard, hearing and deaf islanders alike grew up speaking sign language. This unique sociolinguistic adaptation meant that the usual barriers to communication between the hearing and the deaf, which so isolate many deaf people today, did not exist.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This is one of my favorite books of all time. Originally written as an ethnographic study, it is also completely readable for a non-professional popular audience. Basically, it is the story of the islanders of Martha's Vineyard, a large island off the coast of Massachusetts. The islanders originally came from the same 2 or 3 boatloads of colonists from England, by way of Boston and Scituate, from a region in Kent which already seems to have had a high incidence of hereditary deafness. Due to the geographic isolation of the island, recessive genes for deafness, which were already prominent in the original Kentish colonists, came increasingly to the fore. As the proportions

of islanders who happened to be deaf gradually increased, what was the islanders' answer? Not shunning the deaf. Far from it. Rather, a tradition arose that EVERYONE on the island, deaf or hearing, simply learned sign language as children! This book is full of fascinating little anecdotes, about how island society worked to include its deaf members. For example, we learn about families and friends, some deaf and some hearing, who would regularly sit next to each other in church. The hearing members would sign the sermons to their deaf friends. Or, sometimes groups of people who could hear perfectly well might be together, for whatever reason, and they might happen to converse by signing just as much as in spoken English. Everyone spoke both languages. Some of my favorite parts of the book focus on the benefits of signing. For example, perhaps two neighbors wanted to converse, while being separated by 200 yards of noisy space, made vocally impenetrable by sounds of surf and sea. Whether they were deaf or hearing, they could get out their spyglasses (this was a 19th century whaling community, where spyglasses were in every household) and sign to each other across the distance while viewing each other through the magnification afforded by the spyglasses. One entertaining anecdote tells of two young men, who could hear perfectly well, who would use their signing ability to pick up girls off-island. They would pique the girls' interest in them by signing amongst themselves, and would claim that one of them was deaf. After they had secured the girls' interest, they would put on a lengthy, well-practiced charade of deafness to keep the girls curious about them. Do they ever let on that they can really hear? You'll have to read the book to find out! Bwa ha ha haaaa ( that's the sound of an evil laugh). Those are a few minor anecdotes. The whole book is packed with stories like that, and it's endlessly amazing. The last couple of chapters make excellent, general points about the human issues raised in the book, and about how we as a society think about the "handicapped" -- perhaps, as Dr. Groce points out, we should not use the term in the first place. Anyway, I'm really pleased to call attention to this book. I wish it were more widely known. If you're reading this because you linked to my reviewer's page from my review of "Jeepers Creepers," or something at a similar level, then, well, I'm just happy you're reading about this valuable story as well as "Jeepers Creepers." Two thumbs up.

Everyone Here Spoke Sign Language is a wonderful look at the Deaf population on Martha's Vineyard and the extent to which it was integrated with the Hearing community. Groce's research is superb and she draws interesting and relevant conclusions. I highly recommend this book to anyone studying ASL/Deaf Studies or someone who is just interested in the topic.

"Everyone Here Spoke Sign Language" is a look at the effect of a large deaf population on Martha's

Vineyard. Though a dry read at times, this book gives an interesting look at how for once in the history of deaf culture the \*hearing\* adapted for the deaf instead of vice versa. While most people might assume that the large deaf population would force a hefty amount of deaf people to adapt to hearing life, the opposite was actually true; the brilliance of Martha's Vineyard was that nearly all hearing people knew sign language to some degree. The book analyses cultural impact of the large deaf population within the Vineyard's communities, which was biologically caused by the genetic predisposition for deafness. The book, largely written like an anthropological study, focuses on both physical and cultural aspect of the deafness in the communities. However, the most interesting implications within the book are those discussing deaf and hearing interrelations.

I initially read this book 20 odd years ago for a class and found it very interesting. It really isn't just a book about sign language, but a combination of early history of Martha's Vineyard, seafaring, societal norms, social perceptions, deafness, sign language, with a sampling of population genetics theory presented in such a manner that no genetics background is necessary to understand. One of the lessons I came away with from the book is that the concept of being handicapped is really a cultural perception. At one point, Groce is interviewing one of the old timers from the island who was recounting individuals who had lived in various houses. Groce noted that it might have taken two or three interviews before the person remember that a given individual had been deaf. Deafness was not perceived as a handicap as it was fairly common place in the early Martha Vineyard's society. Instead, it was simply seen as a trait, like being tall or short or speaking a different language. As a result, everyone learned sign language and Martha's Vineyard society was notably different from other societies on the other islands or on the mainland as a result, with different communication dynamics. This is a very interesting read. Over the years I have shared this book with several individuals.

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