

Preface

My friend Erin and I attended the same “special” class for hearing-impaired children and became friends when we were in grade six. We lost touch and drifted apart some time at the end of our high school years, partly because we were at different schools and partly because our lives were heading down different paths. For most of our lives, Erin and I were told we were “hard-of-hearing” though we were both audilogically classified as profoundly deaf. As such, we grew up experiencing struggles of identity formation. Erin found a sense of belonging in Deaf culture. I struggled to “pass” as hearing and finally asserted my deafness in my thirties after continuous difficulties transitioning from analog to digital hearing aids.

Perhaps it was serendipity, but not long after my assertion, Erin and I realized we had both settled in the same city, a few blocks from each other. We had kept in touch over the years, but it was in this city where our friendship blossomed. Because I was working on this book, many of our conversations centered on the meanings of deafness and identity through history—on hereditary deafness and the impact it has on families, on cochlear implants, on community and belonging, and on historical definitions of deafness.

Erin reminded me that discussions about hearing being “restored” after being “lost” do not fit with the discourse of deafness and Deaf culture, because most Deaf people were born deaf and thus, never had any hearing to “lose.” I should clarify then, that this is a book about oralist experiences of deafness, hardness of hearing, and hear-

ing impairment, not cultural Deafness, though that is not to say that the Deaf do not figure in the story. My aim is not to deny the richness of Deaf culture, but to enrich our understanding of a nuanced and considerably underrepresented aspect of deaf history: that of the medical and technological avenues for “curing” hearing loss. Most of the actors in this book are those we would classify as “hard of hearing” and largely relied on oral communication. That is not to say that these actors themselves may have, or have not, considered themselves as deaf or Deaf. I’ve adhered to the historical record as faithfully as possible, so I use terms such as “deaf and dumb,” “deaf-mutes,” “hearing impaired,” or “deafened” as people at the time used them.

The contents of this book should not be construed as medical advice. I am a historian of medicine, not a physician. My object is to contextualize and deepen your experiences of medicine, health, and disability. If you are concerned about your hearing, visit a qualified specialist for an assessment.