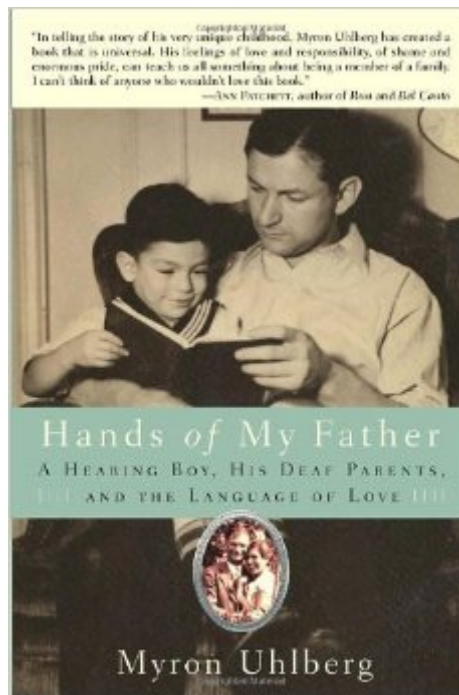


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Hands Of My Father: A Hearing Boy, His Deaf Parents, And The Language Of Love



Synopsis

By turns heart-tugging and hilarious, Myron Uhlberg's memoir tells the story of growing up as the hearing son of deaf parents and his life in a world that he found unaccountably beautiful, even as he longed to escape it. "Does sound have rhythm?" my father asked. "Does it rise and fall like the ocean? Does it come and go like the wind?" Such were the kinds of questions that Myron Uhlberg's deaf father asked him from earliest childhood, in his eternal quest to decipher, and to understand, the elusive nature of sound. Quite a challenge for a young boy, and one of many he would face. Uhlberg's first language was American Sign Language, the first sign he learned: "I love you." But his second language was spoken English and no sooner did he learn it than he was called upon to act as his father's ears and mouth in the stores and streets of the neighborhood beyond their silent apartment in Brooklyn. Resentful as he sometimes was of the heavy burdens heaped on his small shoulders, he nonetheless adored his parents, who passed on to him their own passionate engagement with life. These two remarkable people married and had children at the absolute bottom of the Great Depression—an expression of extraordinary optimism, and typical of the joy and resilience they were able to summon at even the darkest of times. From the beaches of Coney Island to Ebbets Field, where he watches his father's hero Jackie Robinson play ball, from the branch library above the local Chinese restaurant where the odor of chow mein rose from the pages of the books he devoured to the hospital ward where he visits his polio-afflicted friend, this is a memoir filled with stories about growing up not just as the child of two deaf people but as a book-loving, mischief-making, tree-climbing kid during the remarkably eventful period that spanned the Depression, the War, and the early fifties.

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Customer Reviews

I loved Hands of My Father! I devoured it. And I, the woman whose books *never* have so much as a cracked binding, highlighted passages of particular beauty. And there are quite a few passages like that...Born to two deaf parents, American Sign Language was Uhlberg's first language; then, English, spoken and written. As a very young child, he was forced to "translate" the hearing world for his parents. He learned early on that words are often painful but sometimes wonderful. Uhlberg endured a child's shame at seeing his father being treated like a child himself simply because he was deaf. (He translated slurs and hateful words exactly as they were said, because his father demanded it.)Even though his childhood was stunted by having to act as his parents' go-between with the hearing world as well as by having to be responsible for his epileptic younger brother, it's obvious Uhlberg was raised with love and concern. Afraid his precious new baby was born deaf, his father went to great lengths to make sure Myron could hear. During the Great Depression, Uhlberg slept with a radio always playing beside his bed -- first a "baby" table-top model and then a gigantic Philco aptly described as looking like a cathedral -- because his parents worried that his hearing might waste away if not used. This book is rich with love of all kinds: Mother Sarah's love-through-food and his father's love-through-touch, the boy's love for his father. There's old love and lost love and love of 1940's comic books. In Uhlberg's word, Love, like ASL, is varied and knee-deep in contextual meaning. And somewhere along the way -- after the cathedral radio and before his first library card -- it's obvious that Myron Uhlberg fell in love words.

Uhlberg does not romanticize growing up the oldest son of deaf parents, Sarah and Lou, at a time when little cultural effort was made to understand or accommodate the deaf. He speaks frankly and with some shame of the humiliation he felt when others mocked his family, of the resentment for having to do so much more than most little boys have to handle in helping them navigate through the world. But he doesn't cast himself as the hero of a tragedy. The picture he paints is a well-rounded one of parents whose needs were often a challenge, but who offered much in return. Uhlberg seems pretty clear that in spite of the burden of their deafness, his parents themselves were a gift--a gift I thank him for sharing. I read it. I loved it. I am confident others will, too. Uhlberg can indeed speak the language of love--not just the sign language he used to communicate with his deaf parents, but the written language he uses to communicate to his readers. I have not read many memoirs that speak as straight to the heart as this one does. It doesn't rely for emotional appeal on

overblown metaphors or flights of fancy, but on honesty and a willingness to share. At heart a love story between Uhlberg and his father Lou (though Sarah is not shirked), it is all the more moving because it is so real...and so very well written. With clear, fluid prose and well-chosen detail, Uhlberg evokes both imagination and emotion. I laughed; I cried; I hated to put it down. One of Lou's greatest fears was the loss of his ability to communicate. His parents, like Sarah's, had never really learned to sign; he never knew them. Gazing on a child in an iron lung, he could not help but think of the horror of being so cut off.

Myron Uhlberg tells the story of his childhood - he was born of two deaf parents in Brooklyn in the depression years through the early 50's. As a child he had to carry the responsibility of being the bridge to the hearing world for his parents and also keep a watchful eye on his epileptic younger brother. Uhlberg shares the unvarnished truth - brutal honesty on the shame and embarrassment he felt by these "burdens" - in addition to seeing, hearing and feeling the ignorance that his Father faced in all aspects of his life (work, shopping, riding train) - and enduring the cruel painful slights, slurs and the mocking directed at his Father. "I was never able to get used to the initial look of incomprehension that bloomed on the stranger's face when my father failed to answer, and the way that look turned to shock at the sound of his harsh voice announcing his deafness, then metastasized into revulsion, at which point the stranger would turn and flee as if my father's deafness were a contagious disease. Even now, seventy long years in the future, the memory of the shame I sometimes felt as a child is as corrosive as battery acid in my veins, and bile rises unbidden in my throat." What is clear from reading this book is that Uhlberg's Father was an exceptional man - a man who persevered with sheer determination and will power in a hearing world. "Hearing people think I'm stupid. I am not stupid." My father's hands fell silent. I found myself yearning for more details on how Uhlberg's Father and Mother coped in an unforgiving environment in the harsh depression era - more details on their struggle of being deaf in a hearing world - how they managed to raise two infants in a hearing world.

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