



Visualizing Deafness: Graphic Narrative Techniques and Embodied Experience in Cece Bell's *El Deafo*

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Research Article

Keywords: Graphic memoir, deafness, disability studies, comics theory, embodiment, visual narrative, supercrip, anthropomorphism, life-writing

Article History

Received:
December 25, 2025

Revised:
December 30, 2025

Accepted:
January 1, 2026



ISSN 2583-1674 (SPLJLH)



Abstract

Aim: *The paper examines how Cece Bell's 2014 graphic memoir El Deafo represents deafness through visual rather than auditory means. It argues that Bell transforms the absence of sound into a meaningful graphic experience through visual storytelling techniques.*

Methodology and Approach: *The study adopts a qualitative textual and comics-theoretical approach, drawing on Scott McCloud, Gillian Whitlock, Rosemary Garland-Thomson, Talia Siebers, David T. Mitchell, Sharon L. Snyder, and recent scholarship on El Deafo. It analyses four major devices: blank and speech balloons, anthropomorphic rabbit figures, panel and gutter structures, and the superhero persona of El Deafo.*

Outcome: *The analysis demonstrates that Bell uses graphic form to represent silence, fragmented perception, and the experience of deafness. The rabbit-eared characters, visual gaps, and superhero identity collectively communicate Cece's negotiation of difference, identity, and social expectations.*

Conclusion and Suggestions: *The paper concludes that El Deafo represents deafness not merely as absence or limitation but as a distinctive and creative mode of perception. Its visual structure invites readers to construct meaning through inference, gaps, and attentive engagement, challenging conventional ableist representations of disability.*

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It is paradoxical to present the concept of hearing loss within a medium which is devoid of sound. Though prose can use words to suggest silence, comics don't have any auditory element to emit sound. Yet Cee Bell's autobiographical graphic novel *El Deafo* about her childhood deafness, leading to meningitis, turns this restraint into a key methodological approach. In place of avoiding the issue of depicting a world which cannot be heard, Bell presents it directly by means of visuals—step by step, speech balloon by speech balloon—adapting the visual tools of comics to express an experience for which those apparatuses were not originally intended.

The adaptation of the comic book format is the fundamental focus of this article. While *El Deafo* is regularly praised for its worth, humor, and its role in presenting deaf and hard-of-hearing children, the formal techniques employed warrant equal attention because analysis examines four such techniques: the use of blank or distorted speech balloons to present mishearing, the presentation of all the characters as rabbits – an animal generally associated with keen hearing – the fragmentation and compression of panels to simulate partial and challenging perception, and the superhero alter ego which ultimately serves more as a coping mechanism than as a triumphant fantasy. These thoughtful choices collectively demonstrate that comics, as a medium innately structured around gaps and omissions, are particularly well suited to representing experiences defined by absence and discontinuity. The gap between panels, which necessitates the reader to actively construct meaning, parallels the interpretive work undertaken by the protagonist.

Bell's place as the narrator of her own lived experience, rather than as an external observer depicting another individual's deafness, is significant. This autobiographical perspective confers a particular authority on the formal strategies (stratagems) analysed, distinguishing them from representations created by authors without direct experience of disability. Although this authority does not exempt the text from critique, it frames each narrative device as a deliberate act of self-translation, wherein a deaf author continually negotiates the extent to which her perceptual world is conveyed to readers unfamiliar with such experience.

Bell has clearly expressed her rationale for choosing the comic medium. She explained in interview with NPR that the use of speech balloons helped her communicate to a hearing audience an experience that prose could not: when she looks at someone wearing her hearing aids, “that speech balloon would be understandable to everybody,” but when she is not looking or her aids are removed, “your speech balloon would be empty” (Bell, Interview). This post-publication explanation offers readers with a valuable interpretative framework for understanding the narrative’s formal strategies.

Three bodies of criticism converge usefully on El Deafo, and it helps to say at the outset how they pull against one another as much as they support one another. The first is comics theory. Scott McCloud’s *Understanding Comics* is the field’s most widely cited account of how the medium actually works, and two of his ideas are particularly relevant here. One is “closure”: his term for the psychological leap a reader makes across the gutter between panels, filling in action the artist never actually drew (McCloud 66). The other is his argument about iconic simplification: the plainer and more cartoonish a face, McCloud claims, the more easily a reader projects themselves onto it, so that a stripped-down cartoon face becomes, in his words, “a vacuum into which our identity is pulled” (McCloud 36). Both ideas turn out to describe exactly what Bell asks of her reader, though for reasons McCloud himself never anticipated.

A second area of criticism concerns disability studies, which provides both terminology and a certain level of skepticism. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson’s idea of the “normate”—that is, the unmarked, implicitly able body against the backdrop of which anyone who is visibly different is seen as deviant—enables us to comprehend why Cece’s new school seems considerably more hostile to her than her old one, even though her hearing has not changed (Garland-Thomson 8). David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, in their well-known discussion of “narrative prosthesis,” present a warning rather than offer a tool; they claim that literature has for a long time tended to use disability as a plot device to be resolved, cured, or simply left out of the story by the end, and therefore this question/practice should be questioned in relation to any individual text rather than taken for granted (Mitchell and Snyder 47). Likewise, Tobin Siebers’ work

on disability and “masquerade” is useful for a similar reason—it identifies the type of strategic self-presentation that Cece makes when she creates her superhero identity, a kind of performance which is neither complete denial nor full acceptance (Siebers 112).

The third aspect is about criticism of this book, a criticism that has augmented significantly since *El Deafo* received its Newbery Honour in 2015. Wendy Smith-D’Arezzo and Janine Holc, in *Girlhood Studies*, declare that the novel does not follow the pattern of the usual plot generally found in children’s literature in which a disabled character either overcomes her disability or is quietly cured of it; on the contrary, they point out that *El Deafo* “neither idealises disability nor presents it as something to be overcome” (Smith-D’Arezzo and Holc 73). They also advance a reasonable criticism, which has been selected again in this article, namely that although the book shows a certain level of nuance regarding disability and gender, it doesn’t pay enough attention to race and class (Smith-D’Arezzo and Holc 72). As for Sara Kersten’s study of the book based in the classroom, she says that it is actually the graphic format of *El Deafo*—not its content by itself—that allows readers to discuss issues of access and marginalization in a way that a prose memoir would not so easily encourage (Kersten, qtd. in “*Journal of Teaching Disability Studies*”). Finally, Gillian Whitlock’s wider theory of “autographics”—her term for the type of claim to authority that autobiographical comics make through the neatly hand-drawn and obviously authored image—provides a name for something that readers of *El Deafo* tend to sense intuitively: that Bell’s own hand on the page is carrying out a sort of testimonial function which photography or prose could not quite achieve (Whitlock 966).

These three critical perspectives do not always align. Comics theory often praises the medium’s efficiency without asking whom that competence serves, while disability studies are frequently skeptical of efficient and pleasant portrayals of disability. Life writing criticism occupies an intermediate position, maintaining that Bell, as the narrator of her own life, possesses the right to present her story as she deems/thinks appropriate. This article is not striving to resolve

these tensions, but rather to sustain the ongoing debate, reflecting the fact El Deafo ultimately abandons these questions open.

The first and the most significant problem that Bell has to tackle is determining how to show the readers—who can presumably hear quite well—an experience which is centered on the inability to hear. Rather than depending on any explanatory caption, her solution is the use of speech balloons chiefly carried through. For example, when Cece is wearing her hearing aid yet she can't quite get what people are saying, Bell presents their dialogue as a distorted version—Cece hears “goat” instead of “coke” or “shoes” instead of “juice”—a kind of near-miss which is both funny and confusing (Comic Book Legal Defence Fund). This joke actually achieves something: whenever a reader looks at that garbled text, they are carrying out the same kind of guessing game that Cece is doing, and just as often end up with the wrong answer.

Bell's most radical choice is what she leaves out. When Cece is sans her hearing aid or flooded by noise, the speech balloons often stay empty—blank white ovals attached to characters who are clearly speaking. A novelist can only describe silence; a cartoonist can withhold the very thing readers had been taught to expect will hold meaning: the balloon itself. McCloud describes the gutter as the place where readers do interpretative work (McCloud 66). Bell moves that same demand inside the panel, into the empty balloon, so the usual contract between the artist and reader falters at the exact moment the hearing world's contract with Cece does.

The device changes shape as the book goes on, and the change is not accidental. The earliest chapters, set right after Cece's illness and her first fitting for the Phonic Ear, are dense with blank or scrambled balloons. In the later chapters, as Cece gets more confident in lip-reading and filling in context, the balloons clear up—not completely, never completely, but enough that the reader's own growing fluency in decoding tracks Cece's own hard-won fluency in the hearing world. It is a small formal choice easy to miss on first read, and it is also the clearest evidence that Bell is not simply illustrating a fixed condition but charting a change in it.

Ambient sound is treated the same way. Comics normally show non-speech noises with stylized lettering—a slammed door, a ringing bell, laughter. Bell often leaves this out in scenes where Cece has no hearing aid. The panel shows open mouths and scattered bodies, but no sound-effect text. A reader who expects that lettering instead meets a kind of visual silence. Refusing a familiar convention becomes a statement in itself.

Silence also creates the story's pun. The nickname "Deafo" is not invented as an insult for the memoir. Cece first meets it secondhand, watching a television character mocked while she can only follow by picture. She asks herself, half amused and half wary, "Am I Deafo too?" (Bell). The line is short. Because she cannot hear the mockery directly—only reconstructs it from her siblings' explanations and her own guesswork—the word reaches her already free of its sting. She can claim it and repurpose it rather than simply endure it. The same silence that shapes speech balloons also shape how language reaches Cece: secondhand and delayed. That delay lets her own the word, before it can be used against her.

The single choice readers remember the most about *El Deafo* is possibly the one that seems, at first glance, the most whimsical: every character in the book, without exception, is a rabbit. Bell herself explained the logic when asked about it by *The Horn Book Magazine*; she said that rabbits are known for "big ears, excellent hearing"—which makes a deaf rabbit protagonist a small quiet irony sitting on every single page (qtd. in *El Deafo*). This is not incidental cuteness. It is the book's central visual argument, and it is doing three different jobs at once.

The rabbit design turns Cece's deafness into a quiet visual joke that never needs explaining in words—it lives in the artwork of every panel. Each pair of large upright rabbit ears around her gently reminds us of the very capacity her own ears cannot easily provide. Smith-D'Arezzo and Holc observe that ability in the book "circulates" rather than belonging fixed to any one character: hearing adults often fumble social moments, while Cece often navigates them with greater skill. A body that looks ordinary is not, in this story, a guarantee of competence (Smith-D'Arezzo and Holc 73). Bell also allows the rabbit's body to carry light

physical comedy about the device strapped to it, instead of treating the Phonic Ear with more reverence. One page shows the harness worn under Cece's clothes and carries the playful caption, "Underpants! Avert your eyes" (Bell 39). This small, undignified aside does real work: the hearing aid is framed not as a sacred medical object demanding hushed respect, but simply one more slightly embarrassing thing attached to an ordinary child's body—alongside the underpants everyone has. The humour softens the stare that Garland-Thomson describes without pretending the stare is absent. The joke exists only because the reader has already been invited to look.

Third, and this is a subtler technique: the rabbit style gives Bell a way to include material that would otherwise be very hard to handle. As Gillian Whitlock explains in her discussion of autobiographical comics, a cartoonist's visible, hand-drawn style is not only decorative but plays a role in the way the memoir presents itself as truthful; the reader comes to trust the drawn figure exactly because it appears to have been made by hand, not because it has been photographed or staged (Whitlock 966). The round, soft, almost toy-like rabbits in *El Deafo* let Bell show scenes of real humiliation and loneliness without making them too harsh for the book's young readers, or too heavy for Bell herself to have drawn any other way. The cartoon style offers emotional support rather than just softening the material, because it makes it possible to include those scenes at all. The use of animal characters that act like humans is common in children's comics. It lets writers show childlike vulnerability without adding the race or class details that human characters would bring.

Bell uses this familiar approach in a new subtle way. Instead of mainly softening a fable, she uses the animal form to create a specific pun about hearing. The pun works only because the readers already know the usual convention she is changing. At the same time—as Smith-D'Arezzo and Holc clearly point out—this same softening lets Bell treat disability and gender with real sensitivity. But it also means that race and class are almost completely left out (72). A group of rabbits has no visible race. This is one reason anthropomorphic characters' work well as a metaphor for disability, and it is also, perhaps, a drawback.

Comics rely on selection and omission: each panel shows one moment, while the space between panels (the gutter) makes the reader fill in what happens next. The article asserts that Bell uses this basic feature of comics in *El Deafo* to recreate the experience of moving through a hearing world with only partial access. For hearing people, sound is continuous—they notice footsteps behind them, a name called from another room, or the emotional tone of a conversation before its exact words. Cece’s hearing works differently; sounds arrive late, only in part or not at all, so she must constantly build scenes from fragments. Bell’s panels force the reader to do the same work. Instead of one wide shot that gives the full picture, she breaks conversations Cece cannot fully hear into tight sequences of small panels—a mouth in one, a raised eyebrow in another, a hand gesture in the next. The reader must piece the scene together just as Cece pieces together half-heard words. This is what McCloud calls closure (66), but here it becomes a deliberate reenactment of the daily effort Cece’s body must make in every classroom.

Panel size and density also shift with Cece’s feelings rather than just the plot. When she is straining to tell whether the teacher has asked her a question, the page tightens into close-ups of her eyes and ears, showing hypervigilance. When she finds a friend who looks at her while speaking or helps her understand, the panels open up and become less crowded, giving both Cece and the reader room to breathe. Unlike continuous prose, a comics page can control pace in this precise way, and Bell uses that power not just to tell the story but to portray a sensory experience that is constantly and unpredictably changing.

The book’s title comes from a fantasy Cece invents halfway through. After discovering that her teacher’s microphone lets her hear the teacher’s voice anywhere in the building—“in the hallway—in the teacher’s lounge—in the bathroom!”—she treats the Phonic Ear as a secret superpower and imagines herself as a caped hero called El Deafo, Listener for All (Bell). The moment is told in the style of a classic comic-book origin story: “I can use my own crazy Technology—the Phonic Ear—to turn myself into a superhero, too!” (Bell 44). It includes the discovery and the costume, fitting the disability-studies idea of the “supercrip”—a figure whose disability is redeemed by some special ability, which

can suggest that disabled lives only matter if they achieve something remarkable (Siebers 112).

Read alone, the scenes look like a textbook example. But Bell undercuts it at once: “the funny thing about being a superhero,” the narration notes, “is that it’s just another way of being different—and lonely” (Bell). That single line stops the fantasy from becoming the book’s real message about deafness. The costume appears only inside Cece’s head; no one else in the realistic story ever sees it. So, the superhero idea is something she invents privately for herself, not a gift the story gives her.

Bell builds the supercrip fantasy and then takes it apart. This works against the pattern Mitchell and Snyder describe, in which disability is treated as a problem the story must solve or remove (47). Cece is never cured, and the Phonic Ear is never shown as making her better than her hearing classmates. Instead, the book ends with something quieter and harder: real friendship that begins when Cece finally tells her friends honestly what she can and cannot hear, instead of hiding behind shame or her cape. Smith-D’Arezzo and Holc call this the book’s main achievement—treating disability neither as triumph to display nor as a defect to overcome, but simply as one part of ordinary, complicated social life (73). The vivid supercrip fantasy at the midpoint turns out to be only a temporary stage Cece passes through, not her final destination.

McCloud’s idea of cartoon abstraction is useful here. Cece and her classmates are drawn in a simple style—round faces, large eyes and little detail. This lets many readers, both deaf and hearing, feel close to her experience. A more realistic, photo-like style could actually get in the way (McCloud 36). This simplicity is probably one reason *El Deafo* has been popular beyond its first audience. It is used in the classroom to help hearing children understand what it feels like to join a conversation that they can only half hear (*Comic Book Legal Defence Fund*). Kersten’s classroom research supports this: she says the graphic format itself—not just the story—makes it easier for students to talk about access and exclusion than a written story would. But the same simplicity has a cost that should be named. It can turn Cece’s specific experience—late-acquired deafness after meningitis, using 1970s hearing technology—into a general metaphor for

“feeling different.” Any reader can relate to it, even if they have never had hearing loss.

Smith-D’Arezzo and Holc’s point about race and class fits here too. A book that uses rabbits to make disability feel universal also makes race invisible. That is not a neutral trade (72). Bell seems partly aware of this problem. In her author’s note she steps outside the rabbit story and speaks in her own voice. She grounds the cartoon in real facts about real life, deafness and hearing technology. This shows that the drawings alone, however well they work, cannot carry the whole weight of the story.

Reviewers noticed the same formal features the article discusses. Kirkus praised Bell’s “whimsical colour illustrations” and “clear explanations,” saying they made the memoir accessible and entertaining. Publishers Weekly called it “a standout autobiography” (qtd. in “El Deafo”). That they kept pointing to the drawings, the clarity, and the mix of humour and honesty suggests those devices worked for ordinary readers, not only for close scholarly reading.

The book’s classroom use shows the same thing. Teaching guides focus on the speech-balloon technique, which helps hearing students feel how a hearing aid can distort speech instead of just making it louder (Comic Book Legal Defence Fund). That lesson comes mainly from the form itself—garbled lettering, a blank balloon, a missing sound effect—rather than from extra explanation. This suggests graphic narrative can teach embodied difference by letting readers briefly experience it while they read. None of this fully settles the tension between wide accessibility and personal specificity. A hearing child in class gets only an approximation, inside the book’s covers, of what Cece lived with for years and still lives with. Bell’s author’s note seems to accept this. That may be the book’s most honest move: it lets the cartoon do most of the work, then steps outside it to say the cartoon was never quite the whole story.

El Deafo shows, with real formal care, that a graphic novel need not only picture disability from the outside. It can build disability into the way the page works, so form and subject become one. The blank and garbled speech balloons that show mishearing, the rabbit-eared characters whose look depends on the sense Cece lacks, the broken-up panels that force the reader to piece scenes

together the way Cece pieces together half-heard talk, and the superhero fantasy the story builds and then gently takes apart — none of these are decoration. Each one is an argument. Comics are often thought to work *despite* their gaps and silences. In Bell’s hands they prove unusually well suited to a life that is largely made of those same gaps and silences. That is the memoir’s main achievement, and it is not a small one: sequential art can give readers a structural, felt sense of sensory difference that ordinary prose would find hard to produce.

The tension between simple cartoon shapes and personal detail is best seen not as a problem the book fails to fix, but as a sign of Bell’s judgment. She does not pick one over the other. She holds both: the cartoon’s easy visual style invites a wide audience into sympathy, while the author’s note and other concrete details keep the story rooted in her own life. This is a mature and generous choice. It lets the book work as both private testimony and public teaching without weakening either. Bell’s closing line — that “our differences are our superpowers” — belongs at the end because two hundred pages of formal work have made it true, not merely stated it. Read this way, *El Deafo* offers a larger, hopeful lesson for disability studies in comics: the medium’s silences, fragments, and stylised bodies are not extra wrapping for ideas that prose could carry just as well. They *are* the meaning. Bell’s memoir shows that comics, far from being limited by their reliance on pictures, are in fact unusually good at giving embodied, non-typical experience a clear, moving shape on the page — one worth celebrating.

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