



## BOOK REVIEW

Donna Jo Napoli

*Introducing Sign Language Literature: Folklore and Creativity*,  
by Rachel Sutton-Spence and Michiko Kaneko (London:  
Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, paperback, 280 pages, \$45, ISBN:  
9781137363817)

WHEN PEOPLE talk of literature, they typically mean printed literature. Literary critics typically do not analyze oral literature and sign language literature. That is their loss. This book, *Introducing Sign Language Literature: Folklore and Creativity*, presents background information, examples, and analysis that illustrate the richness of sign language literature. Studying it can teach us much about cultures, linguistics, and the nature of literature itself.

The chapters suggest further readings and class and individual activities, making the book a perfect vehicle around which to build a course. A YouTube channel goes with the book, as does an extensive list of sign poems, stories, and interviews from Brazil, Britain, South Africa, and the United States, along with information on how to access these materials.

The book outlines the following sociolinguistic facts and discusses their repercussions. Sign language literature historically includes face-to-face performances in places such as deaf clubs and events such as weddings and funerals. However, it now also includes videos; thus individuals and small groups can experience these performances without living in or having access to a deaf community. Sign language literature includes folklore (which reflects the culture of a community), fiction, and poetry, as well as oratory, autobiographies, chronicles, and religious literature. In some regions (e.g., Brazil and Britain) it puts a high priority on deafness, but in other locales (e.g., South Africa) it prioritizes matters of pressing interest to the larger community (e.g., racial and political issues). The fact that sign language literature is

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signed is as important as its content, or perhaps even more so; that is, the act of creating and performing sign language literature is political inasmuch as it supports community identity.

Given these facts, the context for sign language literature is crucial: when and where it occurs, who the performer is, who the audience is, why the event is occurring, and whether the material reflects cultural heritage or is created solely by the performer. Importantly, sign language literature belongs to everyone. Indeed, signing a joke or a story can be an act of declaring membership in the deaf community. Hearing people who grew up in a family with deaf members can also perform sign language literature for deaf audiences. Still, there are recognized masters—and many of the greats are introduced in this book.

Many functions of sign language literature are common to all literature, particularly that found in oppressed communities. Thus it teaches people about the world and their culture; it helps them make sense of the world; it creates and maintains community identity; and it allows performers to demonstrate their skills and artistry. It can put deaf characters in a position of privilege. In all of this, it is particularly helpful to deaf children, the great majority of whom are born into hearing families and may feel that the complications they experience are unique to them. They are in need of being welcomed into deaf culture and experiencing a community in which they are ordinary and normal.

But one function of sign language literature is particular to deafness: the linguistic function. For the vast majority of hearing people, access to language is a given. Exceedingly few struggle to participate in language; they acquire it naturally and without explicit instruction. For the vast majority of deaf people, on the other hand, access to language is earned through hard work and often against forces that would prevent them from accessing sign language. Thus sign language literature exposes the community to skilled signers. And those signers revel in exploring the boundaries of their language. Sign language literature performers highlight linguistic play as they search for new ways to manipulate classifiers, timing, and embodiment. They exploit all of the phonological parameters—handshape, location, orientation, movement—to convey their message and to delight their audience.

By doing so, they give their audience (i.e., the community) license to do likewise.

Sign language literature abounds in techniques allowed by the visual modality. It is highly cinematic, with close-up, midrange, and long-distance shots. In South Africa this literature is speckled with translations of songs from the ambient spoken language, and in many countries it has developed rhythms that themselves carry cultural import. Signers can embody characters of any type, from animals whose parts are easy to map onto the human body (e.g., horses) to animals that require more imaginative mapping skills (e.g., owls, goldfish) to plants and inanimate objects (e.g., kettles, mountains) and even viruses. The techniques are vivid, like mime, but, unlike mime, they use a more limited range of articulators, and the signer remains in a fixed spot in a vertical position. These limitations arguably demand the strongest creative skills; artists must bring the audience to the floor without actually landing on the floor themselves.

Sign language literature has beginnings and closure, just as other types of literature do. It has plots and themes and protagonists. But across the board it challenges traditional ideas and standards. Length, purpose, topic, and lines, as well as vocabulary and flexibility, distinguish poems from stories. Sign language literature is riddled with neologisms, which may consist of modifying an existing sign, borrowing from the ambient spoken language, blending, or even producing a new sign entirely. Often these neologisms allow for multiple meanings that enrich the whole not just by surprising the audience but also by deepening its understanding of the complexity of the work.

We thus have multiple reasons for studying sign language literature, and this book makes the case eloquently; in addition, it hands the reader a ready-made course. Further, by exemplifying all of the techniques utilized by performers of sign language literature, this book will be an excellent addition to any linguistics course on sign language structure. To my mind, though, the most important reason appears on page 8: “Sign language literature can change people’s attitudes about deaf people and sign language.” Right now many deaf children around the world are being denied the right to use sign language. When we recognize the wide range of cognitive values that learning more than one language gives people, and when we understand that hear-

ing babies benefit from using signs, we must realize that preventing deaf children from learning and using sign language is evidence of nothing more—or less—than prejudice against deaf people and their languages. When we study sign language literature, then, we become activists for human rights.