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A young man's quest to reconcile his deafness in an unforgiving world leads to a remarkable sojourn in a remote African village that pulsates with beauty and violence

These are hearing aids. They take the sounds of the world and amplify them." Josh Swiller recited this speech to himself on the day he arrived in Mununga, a dusty village on the shores of Lake Mweru. Deaf since a young age, Swiller spent his formative years in frustrated limbo on the sidelines of the hearing world, encouraged by his family to use lipreading and the strident approximations of hearing aids to blend in. It didn't work. So he decided to ditch the well-trodden path after college, setting out to find a place so far removed that his deafness would become irrelevant.

That place turned out to be Zambia, where Swiller worked as a Peace Corps volunteer for two years. There he would encounter a world where violence, disease, and poverty were the mundane facts of life. But despite the culture shock, Swiller finally commanded attention--everyone always listened carefully to the white man, even if they didn't always follow his instruction. Spending his days working in the health clinic with Augustine Jere, a chubby, world-weary chess aficionado and a steadfast friend, Swiller had finally found, he believed, a place where his deafness didn't interfere, a place he could call home. Until, that is, a nightmarish incident blasted away his newfound convictions.

At once a poignant account of friendship through adversity, a hilarious comedy of errors, and a gripping narrative of escalating violence, *The Unheard* is an unforgettable story from a noteworthy new talent.

The Unheard: A Memoir of Deafness and Africa Details

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Liralen says

Another Peace Corps memoir, this by a man who was born with severely impaired hearing and who lost most of the rest of his hearing before he was in school. His parents pushed him hard to fit in in the hearing world -- in the 70s, other options weren't great -- and after college (side note: just because college admissions are the first time you *overtly* 'play the deaf card' doesn't mean that's the first time you've ever played it) he joined the Peace Corps and was sent to Zambia. There, he says, he found a place where deafness didn't matter. 'For the first time in my life deafness...did not close off a single possibility,' he says (95).

It's an interesting concept, but as far as I can tell a deeply flawed one. During his in-country training, Swiller happened upon a school that had a couple of classrooms of deaf students. He spent some time volunteering there and found that those kids had effectively been given up on. They received almost no instruction, could barely read or write, and had really no hope of success later on in life. At least one boy had hearing aids, but the fit was bad (causing pain if he wore them very long), and anyway, he couldn't afford batteries. There just wasn't any belief in these kids, or understanding that deafness didn't mean incapability.

But in the village where Swiller was placed, he had a much easier time communicating than he usually had in the U.S.: There wasn't much background noise. People talked slower, and they looked directly at him when they talked (making it easier for him to read lips). If he couldn't understand people, they usually chalked it up to their English being poor. Because he didn't fit the model of deafness they knew in Zambia -- the model of those children in the deaf classrooms -- and because they'd never seen hearing aids before and didn't understand them, they generally just *didn't believe he was deaf*.

He was a white man, after all. And that, I think, is the crux of it: It's not that his deafness didn't matter. It's that **his whiteness trumped his deafness**.

It's an interesting book, and in many senses I think Swiller had a more difficult PC experience than the authors of other PC books I've read. He saw some really frightening instances of violence; he was in a terrible accident; he was one of the first Peace Corps volunteers in the region, which meant that people didn't know what to expect. It definitely doesn't sound easy.

But, but. Because Swiller was one of the first Peace Corps volunteers there, a large part of his role -- as a supervisor *explicitly told him* was basic cultural exchange. Learn about the culture. Teach the villagers something about where he comes from. Don't expect to get too much actually done. He *didn't* get much done, although I'm not sure how abnormal that is. But he also demonstrates a rather stunning inability to understand that he's in a different culture, with different expectations, different societal mores, different ways of doing things.

I'm reminded of a story in The Ponds of Kalambayi, in which the author asked someone to plant some lettuce seeds for him. The man planted all of the seeds, leaving him with a surfeit of lettuce -- so much that he'd never get through it before it rotted. The author wanted to pay the man only for the small portion of lettuce he'd expected; the man wanted to be paid for all the lettuce he'd planted. The case went to the village court, where it was decided that the author would pay the man in full -- but as a show of goodwill, the man would give the author a 'gift' of the same amount that the author was paying. In other words, it came out a wash, but a saving-face wash.

This book reminds me of that because Swiller never understands the face-saving portion of things. He talks about, as a deaf man, developing an 'intuition based on physical observation' (133), of being especially attuned to people's body language and facial expression because he can't hear them. That may well be true, but apparently that didn't come with an increased understanding of what to *do* with that intuition. He wants everything to work the way he's used to it -- the American way -- and preferably on his schedule. I fully believe that it was, is, extremely frustrating to adapt to a very different way of doing things, of phrasing things, but, but. Damn. It sounds like a really enormous failure at the whole cultural-exchange end of things. By the end of the book he'd (view spoiler) and the Peace Corps (view spoiler) -- which seems just as well, because I'd hate to be the one to follow him.

This isn't meant to be a scathing indictment of the author; I understand that he was young and in a new-to-him environment full of challenges and that nobody's perfect; he went in with good intentions and not a lot of resources. He also went in with a perspective, and with hopes, that most people don't have. I just found myself disappointed by the non-discussion of things like the role race played in how Zambia locals viewed his deafness.

Heather says

What a powerful story. Josh Swiller relates his experience as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Zambia in the early 1990s, but he also happens to be deaf. I didn't know what to expect when I opened this book...but what I got was exceptional. Though our Peace Corps experiences have little in common - it is definitely hard to draw parallels between Swiller's African village life and mine in urban Eastern Europe - he really gets at the root of the volunteer experience. That no matter who you are, or who you were before you served, there is something profound to be learned from language misunderstandings, mistakes in judgment, and cultural differences...and that sometimes the lessons to be learned are necessary to put your experience in your own context - not in Peace Corps'.

I highly recommend this book to current and former PCVs, as well as anyone with an interest in the experiences of people with disabilities working and serving overseas. As Swiller shows, a disability can even be neutralized, ignored, overlooked, or disbelieved by all who know you - and that what matters in the end is who we are, and the intentions, however mistaken they may be, behind our actions that define our life experiences.

Amanda says

This book blew my mind and I can't say enough how everyone should read it, even though (or perhaps BECAUSE) parts of it are totally infuriating. I had perhaps the strongest reaction to this book as to any other I've ever read.

It is told in the first-person voice of Josh Swiller, a deaf Peace Corps volunteer who worked in rural Zambia in the early '90s. Due to the violent reputation of the village (Mununga) where he was stationed (he was the first PC worker to be placed there, and Administration told him they wouldn't place future workers there) and to his own belligerence, arrogance, and sometimes plain stupidity, it's a wonder he escaped alive. There were several times that he said things to the locals that made me cringe and think, "You IDIOT!" People, including his good friend Jere, tried to explain to him the way of things -- especially in regard to indirect

communication -- but he would plow ahead instead with his own idea of how things should happen, a dangerous mix of boldness and cultural insensitivity that ultimately led to disaster. I don't want to reveal too much, because a large part of the power of this book is the absolute shock it induces in its readers. It packs a punch, to be sure.

I read it in two days, and I emailed two people I know who have worked in Africa to see if they'll read it so we can discuss it. I also dragged my co-worker, who had recommended it to me, into a conversation about it. When you read this book, you MUST talk about it.

Jenny says

I saw Josh talk at the Manhattan League of Hard of Hearing, while the somewhat anti-deaf environment bothered me (there was a lady who complained about a deaf girl signing during the Q & A... boooo) something about Josh Swiller's personality, and his unwillingness to relate to me when I emailed him subsequently made me read his book.

Josh is a talented writer. His chronicle of his Peace Corps experience is told in an honest, open, sometimes humorous tone, and his anecdotes of his upbringing made me laugh out loud. There are several dark moments but in following the development of the author's friendships and made in Mununga we read a fascinating, and life-affirming story.

Susan White says

I wasn't sure what I was going to be reading about when I started. I thought it would be about a young man's journey to helping African children who were deaf. He does some, but his story is more about his time spent in one particular African village. It's kind of a coming of age story.

Karen says

This book took me a long time to read. I think it is because I didn't love it. Josh Swiller joins the Peace Corps and is sent to Zambia to drill wells with the local villagers. Josh is completely deaf, but he can hear some with his hearing aids, and lip reads. Mununga is a remote village that has no running water electricity. Unfortunately he alienates the chief his first day in Mununga, and that is his first mistake. Josh is really unable to get any wells drilled because of his feud with the chief, but he becomes friendly with Augustine Jere who runs the clinic. Instead of drilling wells, Josh helps in the clinic.

Josh ends up falling in love with village life, although he sees some pretty horrific things, that eventually forces him to leave.

I really can't say what I didn't like about the book, except I found myself not liking Josh, he seemed a bit immature. I wanted to like this book because I have a physical disability as well as some hearing loss, so I

wanted to learn more about Josh's life. He did talk about growing up deaf, but it seems as though he didn't deal with it well.

Andy Plonka says

A memoir of a deaf young man's service for the Peace Corps in Africa in which he learns a disability in one culture may not be the same in another. Well worth reading.

Karen N. says

I am amazed with this book. It started out as a slow read and I didn't know where the story was going... there are many pieces and it all comes together at the end. There are many flashbacks or background stories that come up in order to understand Josh, where he came from, his deafness and why he chose the Peace Corps. I wouldn't say that this book is really about deafness--as it's a story about real life itself, not sheltered by a society or a culture, or even America at all. It's a story of a young man experiencing life in another world (Africa), and one of the nuance is that Josh is deaf. His deafness adds challenges to his everyday life, but it doesn't prevent him from living a life at all.

This book isn't for the light-hearted. There is a lot of violence and dying people, a lot of cruelty and sadness. Josh being from America (a place with an abundance of resources and innovations) couldn't help a lot of the sick and dying folks in Mununga, where Josh spent a lot of his time as a Peace Corp volunteer. Not much medical resources were available to that African village, and yet if there were, another challenge at hand would be to overcome the culture gap (some Africans were skeptical of the Westernized medicine and of the Westernized people).

The reason why Josh went to Africa was to find a world in which he belonged, and for a brief moment, Josh connected to Mununga and the villagers. Josh felt as though his deafness was overlooked and their communication pace was parallel to his, as the villagers didn't speak so fast, and it was easier to read lips. But the reality of this underdeveloped African village, the violence and sick people, and the lack of cooperation made it hard to stay and make real progress as a volunteer. The most beautiful thing, I felt is the silver lining in the whole experience... "feeling the rain on your face"... which comes down to being grateful for each waking moment. Simply for me, it makes this story so beautiful.

Barbara says

Interesting memoir of a Peace Corps assignment in Africa. The author is deaf, and it was startling to me how little difference that made in the Peace Corps experience (comparing it to my own experience as a PCV, and also by the author's own description). He really captures the feeling of being a stranger and how important it is to be accepted and befriended by the locals. But I couldn't believe he didn't contact the PC office for a change of placement after a violent event that happened in his town. The way his projects didn't come to pass and then shifted to new projects and then were blocked by local politics and graft was also reminiscent for me of my own experience in the Philippines. Interesting book.

Sue says

Deaf since childhood, Josh Swiller struggled to live in a hearing world. Having learned to lip read and with the help of hearing aids, he could get by. But not feeling truly a part of either the hearing or deaf communities, he took an opportunity to travel to Zambia and serve with the Peace Corps in a rural village in the north near the DRC border. Josh was among the first group of volunteers placed in Zambia, and the first in this particular village which had a reputation for violence. The book recounts his experiences - both good and bad.

Overall, I was disappointed. When I first happened across the book, I thought it sounded really good. I read it fairly quickly, chunks at a time and it did keep my interest. On the down side, there were a number of times when it seemed he was pushing the envelope of following rules and customs. How much of what happened was caused by his own decisions and how much of it was the nature of where he was? I don't know. I don't regret reading this but it is not an entirely positive experience.

Sherrie says

My son is currently in the PC, in Zambia, in the same area, and we are going to visit in a couple of months. I found the book somewhat frustrating - things I wanted to know more about were glossed over and much of the book seemed to be about how the author wanted to be seen rather than about what was going on. I kept thinking that it was other people in the book who really had stories to tell. My son told me about the book saying that it was one of the few things available to read about the area but that it was poorly written. It was as though Swiller did not know whether he wanted to write about his PC experience or his deaf experience and could never really integrate the two things because he was so self absorbed.

Alli says

Couldn't stand the narrator along with many of the main characters. The title was deceiving in making me think that I was going to read an off-beat memoir about a young deaf man coping with life in Africa. While he certainly did this, the book rarely focused on his Deafness (whether or not this was intentional is beside the point; the book marketed itself to grab your attention as a memoir about a deaf American man...IN AFRICA.)

I try my hardest to avoid doing this...but sadly, I was unable to finish this book after multiple renewals from the library. Got about 3/4 of the way through, so at least I got a decent amount of the story read.

Lisa says

I heard Swiller read an excerpt of his memoir on NPR, and being partially deaf, as is Swiller, I became interested in the story line of his experience in Mununga, Africa. I was also curious about using this book for my Freshman Composition class. While the book revealed a lot to me about African politics and Peace Corps work, it wasn't literate enough for me to use for class. The plot line was riveting, and Swiller has a strong

journalistic style, but I wasn't drawn into his prose -- it read too much like a superficial, surface report while I wanted more psychological analysis of his experiences.

Natasha says

This book is short and easy to read, but it took me a month to finish. I wanted to like it and towards the very end I started to, but I just couldn't enjoy it very much.

There was a superficial quality to the whole work. It often seemed like Josh was just glossing over details, periodically making a "realization" about deafness, culture, and the miracle of every day of life, which would last for a paragraph or two and then subsequently never be mentioned again. Likewise, there was little to no personal growth. Others have remarked on his arrogant and often culturally insensitive demeanor, but I tried hard the entire book to suspend my judgment because a) he is human and has flaws and that is what make literature interesting and b) he grew up deaf and I did not, and I can't begin to understand how much that can affect one's personality and coping mechanisms and entire worldview.

But he is the protagonist and with such a heady style of narration I expected more insight into his motivations and fundamental self, probably coupled with the dynamism that accompanies a character's self-reflection and "coming of age" (this was, after all, heralded as a coming-of-age story by many reviewers). I didn't get either of those. Instead, the author goes through the motions of telling a story that is clearly a one-sided, personal account of an interesting story, which is fine if done well (after all that's what a memoir essentially is), but all while not revealing himself in any meaningful way to the reader.

About 30 pages from the end, I actually started getting really interested in the story. Why could this not come sooner? Why did the first two-thirds of the book seem unnecessarily long? And why did the significant events and turning points of the book read the same as the meandering, non-crucial points of the story? An interesting story, but bad pacing and lack of depth really brought it down.

Christy says

I read this for my book club. It's a memoir in a sea of memoirs, and there is not a whole lot that makes it stand out. The author is deaf and relies on hearing aids, lip reading, and years of speech therapy to communicate with others. The book tells the story of the author's Peace Corps trip to Zambia in the mid-nineties. He was one of the first group to go to Zambia, and, as a result, the support Josh receives is very limited. He is placed in a rather dangerous area of the country and struggles to make any headway on his assignment to organize the construction of community wells. He does, however, form a close friendship with Augustine Jere, the Zambian man who runs the village's health clinic.

A unique story, to be sure, but the author's immature, self-centered, spoiled, and generally unlikeable persona keep the book from being very enjoyable. He does express regret that he lost touch with Jere, but that fails to register as personal development. He often seems to use his deafness as an opportunity to feel sorry for himself or to justify his alienation from others. His primary escape when a situation gets overwhelming? Switch off his hearing aids.

I was really waiting for him to do something redeeming; that moment never really materialized. I was

excited when he decided to go ahead with the clinic project and empathized with his frustration at Boniface's meddling and sabotage. Even so, he just persisted in his same coping mechanisms--drinking, turning off his aids, and driving off on his motorcycle.
