

## **Payton Prince Project 2 - *From Rejection to Love***

For project two, we were asked to read and summarize an autobiography by a Deaf author of our choosing. I chose to write about Avril Hertneky's *From Rejection to Love* published in 2019. I chose this particular autobiography because, while the details of abuse make it difficult to read at times, it addresses the lived experiences of possessing multiple identities and the relationship those identities have within the author's psyche. It illustrates the life of a young Iraqi-Canadian woman who also happens to be profoundly Deaf.

Jennifer A. Hertneky (pseudonym Avril Hertneky) was born on December 6th, 1992 in Toronto, Ontario, Canada. Her family is of Assyrian and Chaldean descent, and both of her parents were born and raised in Baghdad, Iraq. When the father of Jennifer's mother Huda (whom she refers to as Baba Jindo) heard that Jennifer's father Rizkalla was to move to Canada after having served in the Iraq-Iran war, he ordered Huda to marry Rizkalla. Jennifer states that Huda never wanted to marry Rizkalla, as "her intuition told her that he could not be trusted, and she didn't feel safe around him." (Hertneky, 2019, p.14) Rizkalla already had abuse allegations from a previous failed engagement, but Baba Jindo did not allow Huda to refuse him. His reasoning was because Rizkalla was intending to start a family in Canada, safe from the ravages of war. Thus, Huda was forced to go through with the marriage in September 1991 and became pregnant with Jennifer shortly after. Jennifer states that her mother tried terminating the pregnancy by taking various medications, but the pregnancy was carried out regardless.

Despite being born to a Middle Eastern family with darker complexions, Jennifer came into the world with fairer skin, freckles, and red hair - a look none of her family members shared. As if the physical differences marked her enough at birth, she shares that the "nurse said with a sorrowful tone, 'I am so sorry, she is deaf,' before she walked away." (Hertneky, 2019, p.14) By

the nurse's and her parents' standards, Jennifer was already a failure. This belief of failure manifested into a horrible cycle of abuse that Jennifer experienced the entirety of her adolescence and young adulthood. Her parents absolutely rejected her deafness and made no effort to learn American Sign Language or teach it to Jennifer in order to improve communication with their daughter; instead, they robbed her of communication altogether.

Jennifer writes about a time in school when her teacher asked her how old she was, to which Jennifer had no idea. She shares that because of the lack of communication and care in her own home, her birthdays were never celebrated and her age was never acknowledged. Even her cries for help went unacknowledged by those outside of the home. She describes a time at the age of eight when Child Protective Services came to her home; they neglected to provide interpreting services, so Jennifer could not communicate the abuse she had been experiencing. Her parents of course denied all the claims and manipulated the story to seem like Jennifer was merely a child acting out. Because of this, no help was granted. She had brothers and sisters who were all hearing, and their auditory status allowed them to escape the abuse Jennifer had endured. They had complete freedom to go out, meet people, drive, and ultimately live their lives. However, Jennifer did not possess this freedom for the entire twenty-two years that she lived with her parents, all because they believed being Deaf meant being completely incapable.

Religion and spirituality was a major aspect of Jennifer's upbringing, as she was forced to attend Catholic and Presbyterian church services and Sunday schools throughout her childhood. Even the Sunday school teachers in the church neglected to provide adequate communication access for Jennifer; because of this, she was unable to complete the work assigned by the teachers. Her teachers became so exasperated with her and with the fact that they had to teach a Deaf student - something they "didn't ask" for. (Hertneky, 2019, p. 18) At the

young age of seven, Jennifer was now experiencing neglect not only in her home, but in outside places as well. She often cursed God and wondered how he could allow her to be treated so poorly for no reason other than a physical difference.

There was an instance at age seven where Jennifer describes her and her brother watching TV in the living room. Her parents did not allow her to watch television with captions on, so she had to rely on her poor lip-reading skills (as she was born Deaf and had no prior language acquisition) and what tiny amount of hearing she had. She was so focused on trying to understand the events on the television that she did not hear her father shouting for her in another room. All of a sudden, her father bounded into the room and smacked her against the head. When asked through tears what she had done, he replied with, “You must hear me when I call you! You must hear me!” (Hertneky, 2019, p. 23) As a rule, she was forced to apologize every time she was punished for not hearing or understanding him.

The physical, verbal, and emotional abuse, she describes, was constant throughout her time living with her parents. Her father beat her on countless occasions, one of which was simply because she had ridden her bike to her cousin’s house down the street after watching her siblings ride their bikes. Her father found her, struck her to the ground, and dragged her to the car where he threw her in. There was also an instance in which her father sliced her face with a knife while she was watching TV. She attempted twice to run away, but was found by her parents and beaten senseless both times.

It was also around age seven when Jennifer’s older cousin Thamer (Rizkalla’s nephew) flew in from Baghdad. He lived in her home for a short amount of time but moved to her Aunt Maggie’s house eventually. Thamer quickly became attached to young Jennifer, picking her up from her house frequently and also suggesting Jennifer wear red lipstick. Jennifer, being so

young and naive, did not know what was happening one day when Thamer, being home alone with her and her brothers, got her isolated from her brothers and sexually assaulted her. She screamed and cried but kept the information to herself, as she knew already that her family could not be trusted. Eventually she disclosed the events to her Aunt Mona who then told her mother, and they both believed her. However, when her mother told Rizkalla, he immediately disregarded her story and accused her of being a liar.

Jennifer attempted to reach out for help from officials at her public school, but due to improper communication access and the lies from her parents, she was never believed. They dismissed her over and over because it was easier than attempting to bridge the gap of communication. This gap bled into Jennifer's studies, as she was never fully told what her homework was and thus, never completed it. Eventually, the teachers at the public school grew tired of dealing with Jennifer and sent her to E.C. Drury School for the Deaf in Milton, Ontario.

Attending the Deaf school improved her ASL knowledge, although she had learned it much later than most of her Deaf peers and her signing skills suffered because of this. Her classmates, most of them white, often rejected her due to her ethnicity and the fact that she used her voice more than signing, and she describes her lack of friendships during her time at E.C. Drury. It was also during this time that her parents had divorced and battled over custody of her. Her mother eventually won the case, and Jennifer then moved in with her mother and her mother's extended family. This only lasted a few months, however, as she was then forced to move with her mother into a townhouse with her mother's boyfriend Rob. She describes Rob as hating her, abusing her, and mistreating her, something he did not extend to her hearing siblings. The abuse and rejection she consistently experienced began to take a massive toll on her when she started engaging in harmful behaviors. She describes an instance where she "jumped into the

middle of the road in front of an oncoming truck.” (Hertneky, 2019, p. 53) She was thankfully not harmed but was forced to attend psychiatric counseling.

She graduated from E.C. Drury in 2012 and was accepted to George Brown College in order to pursue cosmetology. During her first year, she was invited to a Deaf club where she was able to meet more Deaf people and engage within the community. She met various Deaf men whom she thought could each be her soulmate, but they all eventually rejected her for minute reasons. Jennifer continued attending Deaf events and meeting new Deaf people, and she finally was able to obtain a job at Target in 2014 despite the discrimination against Deaf people in the workplace. Even though her mother refused to allow her to have a driver’s license or a car, Jennifer managed to keep working and build an independent life for herself.

The abuse from her family never ceased, with them going so far as to admit her to a psychiatric hospital after she had gone to the police with abusive claims against her brother Daniel, and proper ASL interpreting services were not granted in order to get her side of the story. Because of this, she finally moved away from her family and began moving from place to place, eventually settling in Wasaga Beach with a childhood friend Tasha whom she loved.

She continued visiting new places, including Brickfest at Rochester Institute of Technology. It was at this event where she met her future husband, Brian Hertneky. After some time and several chance encounters, they began dating and got engaged in April of 2016. They eventually moved to the United States, and Jennifer obtained her green card. Together they had a daughter and a son, Esther and Misha. Her first birth in the Canadian hospital was fine, but her second birth was traumatic due to the absolute audism displayed by medical professionals. They did not believe Jennifer was a capable mother due to her Deafness, and the experience took a

massive mental toll on her. Not only was she capable, she was an astounding mother who showed her children the love that she was never given.

The book ends with Jennifer surrounded by friends at a Super Bowl watch party, where she decides to finally let go of the hurt and trauma she had been carrying her entire life and forgive those that continuously hurt her. From an early time in her childhood, she had struggled with accepting her various identities because they had been used against her in many ways. Her family and hearing society did not accept her because she was Deaf, Deaf people often did not accept her because of her “hearing” tendencies, and both Deaf and hearing people alike often rejected her because of her race/ethnicity. Forgiving all of this monstrosity was not described as an easy process, but she was able to overcome the burden, allow the happiness that she deserved surge through her, and finally accept herself for who she is.

## References

Hertneky, J. A. (2019). *From Rejection to Love: The True Story of a Deaf Woman who Overcame Abuse and Neglect*. Independently Published.