Secrets and Puzzles: Patricia Carlon's Interior World

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Hiding Deafness

Patricia Carlon (1927–2002) wrote for most of her life, supporting herself by publishing short romance stories in magazines and, later, crime thriller novels which were so successful that they invited comparisons to American novelist Patricia Highsmith (Brainard 433). However, very little information was known about her life, because at the heart of it was her own secret: deafness.[1] Carlon's close family knew of her hearing loss, but not her publishers, nor many of the people in her community. Carlon hid her deafness her whole life, passing as a hearing person. This essay provides a brief biographical outline of Carlon's life and engages with the writing of other deaf authors such as Judith Wright and Henry Lawson to consider how deafness and authorship are linked. It then examines the ways that deafness may have shaped Carlon's work. The essay does not consider or look for deaf characters or representations of deafness in Carlon's crime novels (only one character in her oeuvre is deaf, although *Danger in the Dark* features blind characters). Rather, it delves into three novels—*The Whispering Wall* (1969), *Hush! It's a Game* (1967), and *The Unquiet Night* (1965)—to consider Carlon's representations of entrapment, alternative forms of communication, and problem solving, and how these were likely influenced by her experiences of deafness. It concludes with a meditation on the audism (the belief that deaf people are inferior to hearing people) that compelled Carlon to hide her disability, and which led to the sense of isolation that pervades her novels and her life. Carlon did not have deaf mentors or friends to help her envisage another way of being in the world; like many of her characters caught in difficult situations, she cried out to be heard, but very few listened. In recent years, however, deaf writers such as Sofya Gollan have conversed with Carlon's work, highlighting the importance of the creative arts for facilitating connections between deaf writers and readers, and for expressing the nuances of deaf and disabled identities.

A Quiet Life

Carlon was born in 1927 on a farm near Wagga Wagga, owned by her grandfather. She grew up with her older sister, Phyl, and their parents in Homebush. Their father was a stock-and-station agent who travelled frequently to the country, while their mother Beatrice was born in England and emigrated to Wagga Wagga with her family at age 18. Carlon's nephew states that Carlon went deaf at age 11 "overnight" (Noonan, 2 May 2025). She was profoundly deaf, meaning she had very little or no hearing. By this stage she was literate and retained a memory of sound, and her novels often feature noise. However, profound and immediate deafness would have been a shock and likely made navigating puberty difficult, relying as it does on social abilities.

By the 1960s, Carlon and her parents had moved to Cremorne, where they lived above a delicatessen which her parents operated. In 1966 they moved to a duplex in Bexley. Carlon's parents owned and lived in one half, and Carlon owned and lived in the other half. Her father died around 1970, and her mother in 1978. When her parents passed on, their side of the duplex was sold and Carlon continued to live in the other half (Noonan, 2 May 2025).

Carlon published her first story at age 17 (Wyndham, "Ace Thriller"), and by her mid-20s she was publishing short romances in Australian magazines and making an income from writing. Carlon enjoyed cooking and entered her baked goods in competitions. In 1964 she won

first prize in the Family Dinner Section for her Glazed Loaf with Apricot Sauce. When the *Australian Women's Weekly* rang her home to let her know about her prize, her mother answered the phone and said Carlon was unavailable because she was "away on a two weeks' holiday motoring around New South Wales gathering material for her next book" (*Australian Women's Weekly* 70). She added that Carlon loved creating recipes, but "doesn't do the day-to-day cooking because she is too busy writing." Instead, she spent her evenings "thinking up new dishes" (*Australian Women's Weekly* 70). From her mother's description, Carlon was an independent, curious and creative woman who took writing seriously.

When she transitioned from short romances to longer thrillers, Carlon was unable to find a publisher in Australia, stating that this was because the local publishing industry was only interested in "police procedurals" at the time (Carlon, biographical note in *The Unquiet Night*, n.p.). These are a "sub-genre of detective fiction that examines how a team of professional policemen (and women) work together" (Scaggs 39). Carlon's novels, by contrast, feature everyday men, women and children caught up in a crime, usually trying to work out how to extricate themselves.

In 1956, answering an advertisement in the *Sydney Morning Herald* for "promising writers," Carlon sent some stories to John Johnson, a new London literary agent (Wyndham "Ace Thriller"). He sold these stories, and in 1961 sold her first novel, *Circle of Fear*, published by Ward Lock. In 1962 Ward Lock published another two novels, and Hodder and Stoughton published the remainder of her oeuvre—a further eleven novels between 1964 and 1970. In Australia, her crime novels were ignored until Adelaide academics Michael Tolley and co-editor Peter Moss, founders of the Wakefield Crime Series, arranged for republishing of *The Whispering Wall* (1992) and *The Souvenir* (1993). Copies of these found their way into a London bookshop that sold mysteries, where New York publisher Laura Hruska, co-founder of Soho Press, came across them. She subsequently republished nine of Carlon's novels in the United States (Wyndham, "Ace Thriller"). A number of editions were also printed in German and Swedish in the 1960s, and in French and Japanese in the late 1990s. Michael Heyward, publisher at Text Publishing, subsequently found Carlon's novels on Soho Press's lists in Hruska's office (Wyndham, "Enigma" 6) and republished two of them in Australia, *Crime of Silence* and *The Unquiet Night*, both in 2002—the year that Carlon died. Heyward noted to Susan Wyndham that "Patricia Carlon didn't really find a home in Australia at the time when she was at the peak of her creative power. I'm pleased to have brought her home" (Wyndham, "Ace Thriller").

Following Carlon's death, the knowledge of her deafness "came as a surprise to everyone else who knew 'Miss Carlon,' from her long-time London agent and her publishers in Melbourne and New York" (Wyndham, "Ace Thriller"). Carlon's nephew recounts how, when he visited Carlon's bank contact to resolve her finances following her death, the bank teller was taken aback to learn that Carlon was deaf. Carlon had only spoken to this particular employee, and her nephew said this did not surprise him, because she had a very "mobile mouth," and lipreading would have been easier with this employee than others. He also noted that Carlon died at 75, and did not look after herself, with his own mother dying at 91 (Noonan, 2 May 2025). The pervasive loneliness that Carlon likely experienced on account of her deafness would have impacted on her quality of life, yet she made hiding her disability a lifelong practice, perhaps because of the stigma she thought would arise from disclosure.

Secrecy and Passing

Where her sister Phyl Noonan joined the Commonwealth Bank to support herself, Carlon started writing (Wyndham, "Ace Thriller"). She published her romances under several pseudonyms, including Arlene Brown, Patricia Carstairs, Bernice Patrick, Pam Bernard, Phillipa Carstairs, Patricia Carlow, and Elaine Wells. Her reasons for doing so are unclear, but

may have been because she was publishing magazine stories so frequently that she wanted to make sure that readers and the publisher weren't overwhelmed, or she did not wish to be known as a romance writer, or it was another manifestation of her habit of secrecy.

Deafness is an invisible disability, particularly if deaf people have enough hearing to "pass" and look as if they can hear. The term "passing" was developed by sociologist Erving Goffman in *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (1963) to refer to a set of strategies that people may use to avoid being stigmatised. For deaf or hard-of-hearing people, passing can involve concentrating on lipreading or decoding body language, working out what is being said or what is happening, modulating one's voice in response, and generally appearing as if one can hear. As Lennard Davis observes, "Disability is a specular moment" (12), with the disabled body marked by a "normal" person's observance of a "missing limb, blind gaze, use of sign language, wheelchair or prosthesis" (12). However, it is not the disability itself that is an issue, but the set of assumptions that the perceiver brings to the disabled person. As Davis puts it, "The disabled object is produced or constructed by the strong feelings of repulsion" (12).

To avoid the discomfort of engaging with such strong feelings or reactions, it is generally easier to pass. For deaf people, this takes vast reserves of energy. Deaf rhetorician Brenda Jo Brueggemann describes how her fear of asking for an interpreter or captioner for academic job interviews was so great that she thought it better to pass and "bear my own exhaustion and (literally) blinding tension headaches at the end of the day" (338). In *The Shape of Sound*, Deaf writer Fiona Murphy describes the weightiness of hiding her disability to pass: "On the rare occasion when deafness or hearing loss was mentioned in school, I would seize up, as if holding my breath would somehow make me smaller and undetectable. With each passing school term, my fear of being found out intensified" (30). Her fear manifested in her body, with "sweat and spasms" whenever she imagined having to disclose her deafness (32).

Carlon, too, tried to pass, and it was likely exhausting. She routinely evaded interviews, as she could not hear on the phone and apparently did not wish to disclose her deafness. Yet even in written communication she was evasive. Pollak and MacNab note that they contacted Carlon by letter and "posed a number of questions about her books, her philosophy and about her background, but she replied sketchily to our queries or not at all" (38). Susan Wyndham, in trying to uncover more about Carlon's life, wrote asking for an interview. Carlon replied that "she had never been keen on interviews or photos" but she had "recently fallen for one enquirer, so I'm sorry to say you are too late" (Wyndham March 2002, 6). This turned out to be Michael Heyward who, Wyndham explains, "knew as little as I did about Carlon and was just as curious, so he wrote on my behalf asking her for an interview. She sent a chatty reply, completely sidestepping the request" (Wyndham, March 2002, 6).

When Wyndham decided to see Carlon in person at her home in Bexley, Carlon was obliged to disclose her deafness to ward off attempts at further communication. As Wyndham describes it:

> She stood, an old and old-fashioned woman in a blue floral dress, leaning on a walking stick and staring at me impassively. I blathered an explanation of why I was there and how much I'd enjoyed her books and that I'd leave if she wanted me to. She waited and then said, "I'm so deaf, I can't hear a word you say." (Wyndham, March 2002, 6)

Wyndham wrote a letter apologising for her intrusion, but received no response.

Given these associations between secrecy and deafness, and Carlon's obvious desire not to be "found out," it is not unexpected that she turned to writing. Brueggemann notes that her own writing and reading skills "served as my *passage* into the mainstream. Writing was

also my (sometimes secret, always wondrous) *passageway*; through writing I could immerse myself and communicate best" (336). Additionally, through writing, Carlon was no longer disabled. As Davis notes, when using email, "some disabilities disappear" (13), such as deafness or mobility issues. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Carlon joins a number of deaf Australian authors who used their pens to generate an income, even if she did not have the opportunity, or did not feel she had the opportunity, to seek out and access deaf history and culture, make deaf friends, or be open about her deafness.

Writing and Deafness

Carlon forms part of a lineage of deaf Australian writers such as Judith Wright, who began to lose her hearing from otosclerosis in her 20s. Wright was unable to follow her interest in anthropology and was not permitted to enlist in the women's forces in the Second World War because of her hearing loss (Brady 92). She also found her role as a statistician at the University of Queensland difficult because of a noisy environment (White, "Silence" 244). In her autobiography *Half a Lifetime*, Wright describes her realisation that her increasing hearing loss would continue to be an impediment, but that she could "perhaps hope to live by writing" (*Selected Writings* 240). Henry Lawson began to lose his hearing at a younger age than Wright, when he became ill with earache at age nine. In his autobiographical writings, he describes the loss of his hearing as "a thing which was to cloud my whole life, to drive me into myself, and to be, perhaps, in a great measure responsible for my writing" (185). Judith Wright wrote on Lawson:

> The deaf are forced into a kind of isolation, which often causes them to feel that the world is hostile or indifferent to them, and even to suspect that others are taking advantage of their misfortune to laugh at or criticise them in their own presence. They are cut off, too, from the ordinary occupations by the inability to share in conversations, and this drives them further into themselves. As Henry said, his deafness was probably a big factor in his writing; isolation spurs imagination. (71)

Like Wright and Lawson, I became a writer because communication was difficult. Reading was an escape from loneliness and boredom, and writing was a vehicle to express the frustrations of being deaf in a hearing world, as well as a means to occupy my restless mind. Like these writers, and like Carlon, I have a rich internal life which is a portal to creativity (White, *Hearing Maud*). Rather than being "trapped," as Wyndham suggests in the title of Carlon's obituary, Carlon's deafness was immensely generative. However, critics have scarcely commented on this influence on her work and choice of genre.

Analysis of Carlon's Work to Date

Peter Messen, in *The Crime Fiction Handbook*, writes that crime fiction "allows its reader—though sometimes indirectly and obliquely—to engage with their deepest social concerns, their most fundamental anxieties about themselves and their surrounding world" (7). Carlon, isolated by deafness, may have been sensitive to the ways that people could be ostracised, or made vulnerable. Susan Wyndham, Michael Heyward, and a handful of PhD candidates (Davies) have commented on the recurring themes of isolation, immobility and darkness that pervade Carlon's novels. Following Carlon's death, Wyndham contacted Laura Hruska, of Soho Press. Hruska noted that Carlon's deafness "made her an 'outsider,' an observer, which all good writers certainly are" (Wyndham, "Ace Thriller").

In *Gothic Matilda: The Amazing Visions of Australian Crime Fiction*, Michael Pollak and Margaret MacNabb note that many of Carlon's female protagonists are outsiders, reflecting

Carlon's experiences of being a deaf woman in a hearing world. They also observe that children are at the centre of her work and "are treated with great sympathy and sensitivity" (37). Her "empathy for unwanted children" (45) manifests in the way she represents the circumstances of children "thrust out into the world on their own, unloved, not respected" (42). Carlon, as someone who was also ostracised by a culture that did not understand or care for deafness, was likely highly sensitive to the experiences of neglected children.

Susan Wyndham reflects on the impact of Carlon's deafness when she writes, "Although Carlon didn't write explicitly about deafness, her books are often set in small, isolated towns or empty houses, and among their characters are a blind woman, another paralysed by a stroke and a child locked in a kitchen after her babysitter is murdered. In *The Unquiet Night*, a woman is imprisoned in a vault where she can hear nothing" (Wyndham, "Ace Thriller"). Text Publishing's Michael Heyward observed to Wyndham on learning of Carlon's deafness: "It's so astounding a fact about a writer that once you know it you can't read her fiction in the same way. She tells stories about children who are unable to make adults understand what's going on and her narratives create portraits of claustrophobic environments that pertain to what we now know about her" (Wyndham, "Ace Thriller").

Other critics have identified similar themes, but without considering how deafness may have informed them. Sydney Smith, reviewing *Crime of Silence* and *The Unquiet Night* in the *Australian Book Review*, writes: "These stories are intensely claustrophobic dramas. Although the outside world is physical enough, it's the interior world that is described page after page." As noted earlier, because communicating with the hearing world is difficult (although, for those who know Auslan, communicating with fellow Auslan users is not), deaf writers can turn inwards, into their rich interior lives.

A number of Carlon's novel titles also relate to sound, for example *The Unquiet Night*, *Hush! It's a Game*, and *Crime of Silence*, again revealing how, while deafness is not mentioned in Carlon's writing, it indisputably impacted how she thought about and represented the world. Pollak and MacNabb, the only literary critics to have commented at length on Carlon's work, do not contemplate how deafness impacted her writing. As is common in literary criticism on disabled writers (Tink and White), Carlon's deafness has been largely ignored.

Deaf Decoding

Operating as a deaf person frequently requires decoding of people's body language and lips. If one is not using Auslan but is lipreading and listening, this means decoding words (as many of them as one can hear) and piecing them together to create meaning. It is not dissimilar to literary criticism, which involves identifying motifs, patterns and themes in a piece of literature, and interpreting their meaning.

As a deaf reader decoding Carlon's work, I found myself identifying with numerous themes, particularly isolation, but also her characters' fears, such as dark rooms and unanswered calls for help. Wyndham correctly suggests that the theme of entrapment was related to Carlon's deafness, but she does not dwell on Australian culture's audist tendencies, which prompted this experience. Critics have also not commented on the resourcefulness of Carlon's characters as they extricate themselves from situations in which they are trapped, which point to problem-solving skills that many disabled people need to develop to survive in a world that is not designed for them.

The protagonist of *The Whispering Wall* (1969), one of Carlon's late novels, keeps secrets because she is disabled. Sarah Oatland, a widow, has had a stroke, and although completely immobilised, she can still see and hear. She submits to the patronising comments of her nurse, including the observation to the doctor, "Do you think she hears? She's laid out like a fish on a slab, with as much life to her, poor dear" (13). Six weeks after Sarah's stroke, her mercenary niece Gwenyth announces that she is letting out parts of the house to tenants to

raise money for Sarah's care. Four couples subsequently move into different parts of the house: a mother with her eleven-year-old daughter, Rose, and Mr and Mrs Phipps, a married couple who want to stay only a few months before finding a place to live.

One of Sarah's secrets is that, with her bed against the chimney wall, she can hear voices travelling from the sitting room below. Prior to her immobilisation, she enjoyed listening to the voices, as they assuaged her boredom and loneliness following her husband's death; after she had the stroke, the wall "opened a lifeline of reality in the midst of confusion, because the doctors, though sure she couldn't hear, had nevertheless spoken in front of her guardedly, and she hadn't had the voice to question and demand intelligent, forthright answers to her questions" (44). What she hears also informs her about her new tenants. From arguments between Phipps and his wife, she discovers that they don't get along and are only staying together because Phipps' inheritance depends on it. Then she hears that Phipps intends to murder his father-in-law so that he can obtain this inheritance.

Meanwhile, Rose, a clever and inquisitive girl, prompts Sarah to start communicating with her by blinking once for yes and twice for no. Sarah had tried to talk to Braggs, her nurse, like this, but she was slow because of her stroke and Braggs never waited for a blink. Rose and Sarah's blinking becomes another secret. Other visitors arrive, including Mr Phipps's father-in-law. Through various communications, including the blinking and use of Scrabble letters, Sarah communicates the word "murder." Phipps comes to understand that Sarah knows about his intentions, and soon Sarah realises that not only is the father-in-law's life in danger, but so is her own. At the book's climax, Phipps sets Sarah's room on fire. To save her life, Sarah is forced to call out.

Pollak and McNabb comment that the events of *The Whispering Wall* create "a complex web of intrigue and terror, with everyone whispering and eavesdropping and drawing conclusions upon half-understood scraps of information" (44). As noted above, functioning as a deaf person involves piecing together fragments of information from sound, body language, and context. For a deaf person who does not rely on Auslan, it can be difficult to be fully confident that one has heard accurately. It also means that, if deaf people cannot find information or communicate one way, they may look for an alternative, as Sarah does with the Scrabble board.

The novel also conveys an overwhelming sense of entrapment, with the reader locked in with Sarah in a passive state, awaiting the direction of the author. It compels the reader to understand what it might be like to experience a stroke. On a metaphorical level, this sense speaks to the way deaf people have been trapped in a culture that can make us fearful of communicating our disability. In *The Shape of Sound*, Fiona Murphy draws on the language of human and architectural bodies to describe her experiences of deafness. She trained as a physiotherapist and learned the Latin and Greek terms for body parts. Once she learned the origin of the words, she realised that "the boundaries between our bodies and the world become permeable. Just as our bodies are named after commonplace items, our built world has taken on anatomical terms. A building can have good bones, there is the heart of a house, roads are the arteries of a city" (40). These observations on architecture and language stem not only from Fiona's training in physiotherapy, but also from her deafness. She can only hear well in certain spaces, as she writes: "[I]n these narrow spaces where walls meet, say in the corner booth of a café or backed up against the wall of a bar, that sound, at least for me, becomes articulate—the walls do the work of funnelling voices towards me, allowing speech to become distinct and clear. I am the space where I am: on the edges, cornered" (41). Fiona is referring not just to architecture, but to the way her life had been corralled by the longstanding cultural denigration of disability, forcing her to hide her deafness, as Carlon did.

The themes of entrapment, problem solving and alternative communication also feature in *Hush, It's a Game*. The novel opens with Frank Aldan released from prison after serving

time for assaulting his criminal accomplice, Isobel Tarks. They had worked as a team in department stores, stealing electrical goods and reselling them, until Isobel absconded with their money. On Christmas Eve, when she has been left to babysit Virginia, a neighbour's child, Aldan reappears. Isobel locks Virginia, age 6, in the kitchen, and tells her to be quiet with the words, "Hush, it's a game! Quiet" (27). Isobel returns to Aldan in the kitchen, and he shoots her, then leaves and tries to make his getaway to New Zealand. Virginia tries to escape from the room in which she has been locked. She tries numerous strategies to communicate that she is trapped: banging on the neighbour's wall, sending notes down the garbage chute, leaning out the window and waving at residents and visitors in the grounds below, and writing "help" on the window by cutting up red sticky tape and placing it on the glass. One of the people who thinks Virginia's waving is a "game" sees the sign in the window and realises that, even if the child has been naughty and has been locked up by Isobel Tarks, it is not right for this to happen on Christmas Day; however, she is unable to get into the apartment to reach the girl. Eventually Aldan returns to the flat after being unable to catch a flight to New Zealand. He realises Viriginia is locked inside and intends to kill her. However, Virginia escapes and in turn locks him in the room, despite his attempt to reassure her that his attempted abduction is "only a game" (189).

The novel, written in third person, is presented through the points of view of several characters. When the action is focalised through Virginia, the reader can identify with her overwhelming frustration that no-one believes she is trapped. Her desperate attempts at communication are simply unheard. Partly this is due to prejudice. The apartment block's caretaker, a cantankerous man, refers to Virginia as a "little wretch" (44) and "holy terror" (86). Her father calls Isobel Tarks's phone, as does the caretaker, but when Virginia explains she has accidentally broken one of Isobel's glass bowls, they scold her and hang up. On Christmas Day, the visitors and residents who had waved to Virginia also call her on Isobel's line to wish her a happy Christmas. Viriginia cries, "'Please come and let me out. Let me *out*! I'm locked in here, I wasn't waving for fun. I wanted you to come and let me out. Didn't you *know*? Please come and let me out ...' They *had* to understand, she thought frantically" (130). As in *The Whispering Wall*, the character conveys her desperation to be understood. She also tries to communicate in alternative ways, notably through writing "help" on the window.

Virginia's cry that she is locked in mirrors Sarah's experience in *The Whispering Wall* of immobilisation due to her stroke. The theme of entrapment is also reflected in *The Unquiet Night*. In this novel, the protagonist Rachel Penghill, babysitting her niece, inadvertently witnesses an attempted murder. The perpetrator, Mart, tracks Rachel down by phoning to find out her address, and in doing so spreads fear among the local community and children. When he discovers where she lives, he traps her in the vault where she keeps the jewellery that she makes and sells. Rachel is in the vault for almost half the novel, losing air until she manages to loosen a brick in the wall. Like Virginia banging on her neighbours' wall, Rachel finds a tray, empties it of jewellery and bangs it against the locked door. She realises that there is no one who misses her, "no-one who would fret and worry over her. Somehow that was the worst thing about the whole situation—that in the world there was no-one to whom she was vitally necessary" (157). Eventually her love interest, Stephen, works out that she is missing, and gets to the vault in time.

Susan Wyndham suggests that the experience in the vault mirrors Carlon's deafness because "she can hear nothing" ("Ace Thriller"). However, silence is not frightening for deaf people. Rather, it is the terror that, on calling for help, we will not be able to hear a reply, or detect where the sound is coming from. To be locked in a dark room, for deaf people, is also disconcerting because we rely on sight to orient ourselves in the world. In *The Unquiet Night*, Carlon draws on a fear specific to many deaf people to charge the novel's suspensefulness, indicating the ways that disability generates creative possibilities.

Ria Cheyne observes in *Disability, Literature, Genre: Representation and Affect in Contemporary Fiction* that "the exceptional investigating abilities of the disabled detective" are "often bound up with their disability, with disability positioned less as an obstacle than as a generative force which encourages or enables alternative (and productive) ways of thinking and working" (56). In *The Whispering Wall*, Sarah is not a detective in the conventional sense, but she is puzzling out an impending crime, and her immobilisation compels her to think laterally to communicate (not unlike the quadriplegic detective in Jeffrey Deaver's *The Bone Collector* to which Cheyne refers in their chapter on disability in crime). In this way, Sarah also rejects associations between disability, passivity and vulnerability. In crime fiction, "the more vulnerable the victim, the more abhorrent the crime—and the stronger the anticipatory effects" (Cheyne 67), and while Sarah does seem defenceless for much of the novel, her use of problem-solving and alternative methods of communication indicate that she does have agency. While the protagonists of many of Carlon's other novels are not disabled, they are vulnerable, such as the child in *Hush! It's a Game*. Carlon imbues these characters with similar characteristics to Sarah in *The Whispering Walls*: using problem solving skills to extract themselves from dangerous situations.

Calling Out

Hush, It's a Game is not only striking for the inventiveness of its child protagonist, but also the loneliness of its characters. Megan, who responds to Virginia's call for help, has left her country town when her mother dies and moved to the city to "plunge into a new life" (51). She finds herself isolated, however, particularly at Christmas, which is "a cruel time to the lonely" (50). Another character, Leigh, who lives in the same apartment block as Virginia and Isobel Tarks, waves to Virginia at the window and thinks she is playing a game. He wishes he had a Christmas tree for the courtyard when she looks out, and resolves to get one the next day. He adds to himself, "[I]t was something to do. Something to kill the deadly loneliness of a night when it simply wasn't right, or bearable, to be alone" (46). Leigh and Megan meet and connect with one another, as do Rose and Sarah, and Stephen and Rachel. Meanwhile *The Whispering Wall* expresses the difficulty of being heard and understood. In an attempted conversation with Rose, Sarah "knew again the frustration of not being able to make any real contact with anyone" (121). Her sense of being cornered evokes Carlon's representation of Sarah trapped in her bed, unable to participate in conversations, of Virginia and Rachel locked in rooms, and of calling out repeatedly for help, only to find dismissal or misunderstanding. These attempts to communicate might suggest that, perhaps because of her fear of stigma (denoted by her repeated attempts to hide her deafness), Carlon longed for someone to connect with, but could not always find it.

Carlon's nephew commented that she was "fiercely independent," which mirrors a number of her female characters who work to support themselves, such as Rachel in *The Unquiet Night* who makes and sells jewellery, or leave unhappy marriages because they want to work (as in *Crime of Silence*, where the female protagonist purportedly leaves her husband to return to the theatre). After the death of her parents, Carlon's brother-in-law made several efforts to persuade her to move to Melbourne, where he, Phyl, and several of the extended family lived, but Carlon refused (Noonan, 12 Oct 2025). From my perspective as a deaf person, this may have been because she had arranged her life in a way that meant she could function with her disability, and to learn a new pattern, and new methods of hiding her deafness, may have felt threatening.

Pollak and MacNab observe that "Carlon's novels are full of rage, full of a sense of the unfairness of life, and it's hard not to think that this is not her own sense of anger and disappointment about her own lot in life seeping through into her work" (59). They point to her "narrow life with her parents and her cats and her garden" and the lack of recognition of her

work, and her secrecy about her life and ideas. They do not connect Carlon's anger with her deafness, even though they were aware of her disability, nor do they comment on the numerous characters who call out for help in her writing. Their observation on rage is striking, particularly given Deaf sound artist Christine Sun Kim's representation of deaf rage—*Degrees of My Deaf Rage in the Art World*—which uses mathematical angles to chart the frustration that deaf people feel at not being able to access the world, and of non-deaf people's lack of interest in and care for deaf people.

The ugliness of Carlon's characters reflects Australian culture's brutality towards disabled people, which has continued into the 21st century, as signified by the twelve volumes of 222 recommendations made by the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability. More than nine thousand people with disability, their families, friends, advocates and supporters shared their experiences and recommendations with the Royal Commission (Royal Commission, 1). A lack of access to Auslan interpreters is a barrier for many Deaf people. One Deaf person explained how it was difficult to access interpreters at hospitals, or how sometimes unqualified interpreters are used, meaning that medications were mixed up and the incorrect information was conveyed for a serious medical procedure (Royal Commission, 286–87). A Deaf woman described how she was pulled over by police, but her cochlear had gone flat and she was unable to hear why she had been pulled over. Despite her friend explaining that she was deaf, the police did not believe that she could not hear, and did not allow her to video call a lawyer, nor offer her interpreting services. She and her friend were fingerprinted, strip searched, photographed and had their DNA taken (Royal Commission, 752–53). A young woman, who went to a Deaf primary school and learned Auslan, was inspired by one of her Auslan teachers and wanted to help disadvantaged children. When she finished school, she undertook a tertiary course in community education, but on graduating, an agency could not find her work. It offered her manual work at a disability enterprise (882). These organisations tend to be not-for-profit and pay disabled people significantly less than the minimum wage for work such as food services, cleaning, packaging, recycling and landscaping. They also facilitate segregation of and discrimination towards people with disability (Steele).

As Carlon was intensely private, it is difficult to know if she experienced similar bullying or discrimination as she grew up. However her obvious compassion for young or disenfranchised characters, and the space she made in her writing for people who experienced neglect, signals that she recognised what it was like to exist in a world that was hostile to deafness.

Conclusion

In 2006, Deaf playwright Sofya Gollan and the Australian National Theatre of the Deaf produced "The Cat Lady of Bexley," a play about Carlon's life, at Sidetrack Studio in Marrickville (Dunn). The director, Caroline Conlon, was also Deaf (AusStage). Gollan wrote and acted in the play as Carlon, who emerged from a coffin to reveal what it was like to grow up deaf in the 1940s. She shared her insights with another character, Billie (played by Catherine Moore), who was learning to navigate her own encroaching deafness. The two women's interactions were played against a radio-style adaptation of one of Carlon's crime novels (Blake), while Auslan interpreters shadowed and interacted with the characters. The Auslan interpreters point to the presence of Deaf culture, which Carlon perhaps felt she could not access, while the generational knowledge shared between Carlon and Billie highlights the importance of connecting with deaf forbears to build a sense of connection and community. For deaf writers this is particularly important, for it shows that it is possible for our work to be published. The adaptation, playing in the background, signals the transmission of deaf writing

and this, together with the deaf director, writer, and actor, underscores the importance of the creative arts for dispelling stereotypes of deafness and disability more widely.

Initially, I thought that the reference to "cat lady" in the play's title was an ironic reference to the stereotype of a quiet woman living alone, but Carlon's nephew mentioned that his aunt had several "run-ins" with the then Rockdale Council and with her neighbours over the excessive number of cats she kept, which they thought were feral, but she did not (Noonan, 12 Oct 2025). This is, perhaps, another example of Carlon's intransigence which, although it may have been frustrating for her neighbours, the council, and some of her family, also provided her with the resilience she needed to persist as a deaf writer. Carlon's oeuvre demonstrates that, while deafness can provoke feelings of entrapment, fear, and loneliness, it also generates creativity, problem-solving skills and compassion. Perhaps readers of Carlon's work, in understanding the generative power of deafness, will be more understanding towards deaf people, and enter their culture and language, instead of deaf people forever finding their footing in a foreign and frequently unkind world.

NOTES

[1] It is customary to use upper case "Deaf" to refer to those who use sign language and identify culturally with Deaf communities, and lower case "deaf" to describe deafness as a medical condition. Kusters, O'Brien and De Meulder in *Innovations in Deaf Studies* challenge this late twentieth-century convention as it simplifies what is an increasingly complex set of deaf identities and language practices. I use the term "deaf" to describe myself. However, in keeping with the preferences of the deaf people and culture I reference, in this essay I sometimes use "Deaf."

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