Language Learning

For Her Own Good

THE IMPRISONED GUEST
Samuel Howe and Laura Bridgman, The Original Deaf-Blind Girl
By Elisabeth Gitter
Farrar Straus Giroux. 341 pp. $26

THE EDUCATION OF LAURA BRIDGMAN
First Deaf and Blind Person To Learn Language
By Ernest Freeberg
Harvard Univ. 264 pp. $27.95

Reviewed by Deborah Tannen

When we think of a deaf and blind child who miraculously learned language, we think of Helen Keller and her teacher Annie Sullivan. But two new books remind us that the first such child was Laura Bridgman. Born in 1829, Laura was 2 when scarlet fever destroyed her sight, hearing, and most of her sense of taste and smell. It was an adult Laura Bridgman who taught the manual alphabet to Sullivan, a teacher at Boston's Perkins Institution for the Blind, where Laura spent most of her life. And it was while reading about Laura Bridgman in an essay by Charles Dickens that the Kellers realized there might be hope for their daughter Helen.

Charles Dickens? How did the most famous British writer of his time come to write about an American child? According to a Boston newspaper in 1851, the name Laura Bridgman was known "to a larger number of persons than that of any female person in the world, unless we except the Queen of England." And along with Bridgman came Samuel Gridley Howe, the man credited with teaching her to communicate by means of words spelled into her hand.

Howe, a doctor and swashbuckling adventurer who had followed in Lord Byron's footsteps to fight for Greek independence, was chosen to establish the first American school for the blind in Boston. Against the backdrop of the rise of P.T. Barnum and the freak show, Howe transformed Laura Bridgman into the original poster child: an appealing, pitiful but inspiring little girl (it had to be a girl) who could raise awareness as well as funds for his fledgling school. Visitors came from far and wide to watch Laura communicate by finger-spelling. They crowded around to touch her and clamored for samples of her handwriting and expert needlework. The American public eagerly awaited Howe's annual reports to read the latest installments of the child's progress. And the many followers of the Bridgman saga hailed Howe as a hero and savior for having rescued the condemned child from her dark, silent prison.

FROM THE BOOK

In fact, Howe was both Laura's savior and her tormentor, her liberator and her jailer, by turns compassionate and cruel. His compassion resided not only in teaching Laura to communicate but also in an apparently sincere affection for the child he took from her parents' home when she was 8 and even invited for a time to live with him and his sister. The cruelty flowed mostly from his use of Laura as a human experiment, the results of which he believed would bolster his side in a public feud with Calvinist orthodoxy. Motivated by a laudable revulsion against the orthodox obsession with original sin and its consequent reliance on rote learning and corporal punishment, Howe believed that children were born innately good.

Howe saw Laura as the means to prove that he was right. He was convinced that if shielded from the pernicious outside influence of orthodox dogma, she would naturally exhibit Howe's preferred religious conviction: an animist appreciation of God in nature, together with a self-motivated desire to do right and avoid doing wrong.

How much harm has been done in the name of science, fueled by our obsession with separating nature from nurture and then devising ghastly human experiments (and extended public debates) to assign behaviors to these fundamentally inseparable categories. The education Howe designed for Laura was founded on two disastrous tenets concerning wrongdoing and religion.

First, to encourage her innate desire to do good, he insisted that she be corrected for every small lapse. In place of the tap of disapproval that her parents had used, Laura's teachers substituted lectures on the evil of doing wrong—and backed up their disapproval by withdrawing, leaving the child in utter isolation.

Gitter effectively exposes the contradiction inherent in this method as enforced by Laura's teachers. In hopes of instilling a sense of self-control, they demanded absolute obedience. No glimmer of autonomy or expression of will was tolerated. One such scene is described in the daily journal kept by Sarah Wight, Laura's last and most beloved teacher. Laura liked to keep her handkerchief in her lap, but Wight wanted her to keep it inside her desk. On one occasion, when Laura politely declined to hide her handkerchief, Wight refused to continue her lesson until Laura complied. Laura did as she was told—but slammed the desk lid. Wight then demanded she repeat the process properly. The child, now crying, said she would take the handkerchief out, but to wipe her eyes. So Wight held her arms to prevent her drying her eyes. In the end, Laura was forced to spend two days in solitary confinement until her remorse seemed sufficiently sincere. (She came to her teacher in

abject misery and begged forgiveness.)

Laura became obsessed with avoiding doing "bad things." As Gitter shows, this goal was impossible, not only because of the spontaneous eruptions of her will but also because "so many different things she did were called 'bad'—keeping secrets from Wight, disobeying orders, making disagreeable noises, hitting and pinching, bragging, thinking angry thoughts." Most heartbreaking is the injunction to stop making "bad" noises—the sometimes involuntary vocalizations that her teachers said made her sound like a wolf. Laura tried to defend her voice: "Some of my noises are not bad, some are pretty noises. I must make noises to call someone." When it became clear that Laura could not stop vocalizing altogether, Howe reluctantly permitted her to utter sounds—at set times while shut in a closet.

The second tenet of Howe's system intensified the destructiveness of the first. In order to prove that Laura would embrace his version of Christianity spontaneously, Howe ruled that no one should discuss any religious subject with her; only he could answer religious questions—when he deemed her old enough to comprehend his answers. So in addition to being constantly told that she was wrong, Laura was left no way to understand the consequences of her lapses, which were framed as moral, not behavioral. Her desperation emerges in a letter she wrote to Howe (who, during the most critical phase of her adolescence, was away on an 18-month honeymoon): "What can I first say to God when I am wrong? Would he send me good thoughts & forgive me when I am very sad for doing wrong? Why does he not love wrong people, if they love Him? . . . Why cannot He let wrong people to go live with Him & be happy?"

The repercussions of her teacher's disapproval were nearly a matter of life and death for Laura because her teacher was her constant, and for the most part her only, companion. For the purposes of his experiment, Howe severely limited Laura's exposure to anyone except her teachers—first the stern Mary Swift and then the gentle Sarah Wight. This bizarre situation prevailed from when, at age 11, Laura was evicted from Howe's home because he married, until she was 20, when Sarah Wight quit.

Howe seems not to have foreseen the anguish Laura was certain to suffer when Wight, who had been by Laura's side day and night for five years, suddenly left to marry (but also, as Gitter suggests, because Howe had humiliated her in one of his annual reports). Laura pleaded to go with Wight, promising to keep house for her. "I wish so much to live with you always," she wrote to her teacher. "I love you as much as myself."

Howe generously gave Laura a lifelong home at Perkins, but reneged on a promise to provide her a permanent companion. After a decade of desperate loneliness and purposeless shuttling back and forth between Perkins and her family home, Bridgman found a modicum of peace by joining her mother's evangelical Baptist church—just the fate Howe's experiment was designed to avoid.

By any standards, Gitter shows, Howe's attempt to teach Laura Bridgman was a stunning success. The drama of her breakthrough into language is as momentous and moving as the more familiar accounts of Helen Keller's. But Howe considered his experiment a failure because Laura did not spontaneously blossom into a liberal Christian of his own stripe. Disappointed, he blamed everyone else: orthodox interlopers who clandestinely told her of religious doctrine; the hard-working and dedicated young women who rarely left Laura's side while Howe spent most of his time away from Perkins; and Laura herself. Ignoring his own spectacular proof that a blind-deaf person was not an imbecile but a full human being, he decided that "When Laura lost her eyes and ears, she also lost any hope of developing a fully balanced, harmonious character." Rather than rethinking the methods he had used to isolate and browbeat the child, he attributed what he saw as her failings to her parents' temperaments and small brains.

Gitter provi
nuanced portraits of Laura Bridgman
Samuel Howe, and the relationship
tween them as well as between Laura
the teachers who did the actual work
teaching and rearing her. Ernest Freeb
focuses (as the title of his book indicat
on the way that Bridgman was educat
Freeberg provides little of the human d
ma behind this process but supplies a mu
more detailed discussion of Howe's teac
ing methods and the intellectual feud f
which he used Laura. In this context, he e
capsulates the cruel irony of the expe
ment to which Laura was sacrificed: Tl
last scientist to examine Laura Bridgma
was a psychologist, G. Stanley Hall, wh
administered a battery of psychologic
tests. Hall, Freeberg notes, was more i
terested in Bridgman's sense of balanc
than in her sense of right and wrong. B
the end of the century, the burning reli
gious controversies that had motivate
Howe's program for Laura Bridgman's edu
cation seemed "dated and somewha
quaint." ■

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