

The Reading Room



BOOK REVIEW

Listening Closely—A Journey to Bilateral Hearing

By Arlene Romoff

Read about HLA-NJ President Arlene Romoff's dramatic return to the world of hearing.

Imagine Publishing, a Division of Charlesbridge Publishing, Watertown, MA \$19.95

Review by Peter Yerkes

Arlene Romoff's powerful and new book, *Listening Closely—A Journey to Bilateral Hearing*, is a must-read. The best and most up-to-date work I know on cochlear implants, it also describes the astonishing changes that come with bilateral cochlear implants.

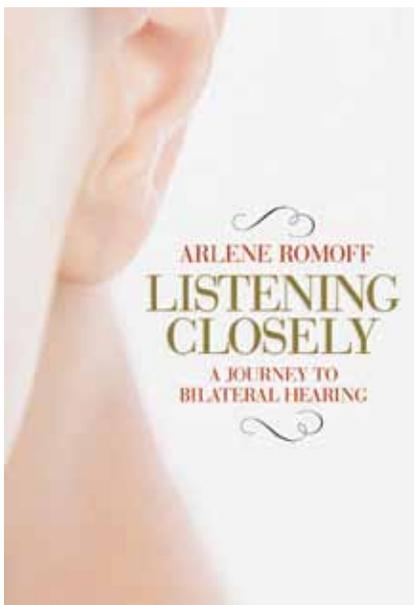
In addition, the book is brimful with lessons for people with normal hearing. She explains the world of people who are hard of hearing and deaf and shows the importance of optimism, persistence, and good humor for anyone facing adversity. She clearly agrees with a quote she cites from Helen Keller: "Life is either a daring adventure, or nothing at all."

The book begins in 2008. Her hearing is near-normal, thanks to a 1997 cochlear implant that reversed 25 years of hearing loss. She was living in the North Jersey suburbs, enjoying music and theater and becoming a force in advocacy for people with hearing loss. She summed up her new life in a letter to the editor of *The New York Times*, printed in response to an article on cochlear implants:

As a cochlear implant user for the past ten years, I am still in awe of being able to hear again, and am reminded daily of its enormous impact on my quality of life. I doubt that people with normal hearing will ever truly grasp the magnitude of this miracle.

In a savage irony, shortly before the letter was published, the internal processor at the heart of her cochlear implant went dead. The silence, which lasted for 17 days while she waited for surgery to put in a new cochlear implant, provides the subject for the first, and most emotionally-harrowing, section of Romoff's book.

"It's impossible to function like a human being," she writes. Texting and e-mail were no substitute for the sound of a human voice.



She resolved to learn from her experience, and to teach others. She sought out activities that didn't require hearing—and she began to write. She needed to write, she found, "to document in real time, the experience of being plunged into silence."

She coped. But after 17 days of silence, she summed up the experience wryly: "Audacious bravery meets total exhaustion."

On April 2, 2008, she underwent surgery for a new cochlear implant, with improved technology. This opened a new phase in her story. She found new appreciation for music; she could enjoy the casual conversations of everyday life

more easily; she was better able to cope with noisy restaurants and parties.

As a result of the many changes, friends told her she looked far more relaxed.

Not one to linger in her comfort zone, she decided on bilateral cochlear implants. That would protect her if one processor should fail, and give her new insight to hearing and the brain.

How would it work for her? On October 2, 2008, driving into New York for her activation, her husband put on a CD of a biography of Albert Einstein. The combination of technical material and road noise made it an effort, so she stopped listening. But on her way home after the activation, she found herself absorbed in the same CD, even with the road noise.

The third part of the book, chronicling life with cochlear implants in both ears, is filled with wonder. Sounds were richer, she no longer had a "bad side," she could turn toward her name, even from 75 feet away...she took new pleasure in the sound of her voice.

The book closes on April 4, 2009, as she and her husband visit Bok Tower Gardens in Florida, which features a 205-foot carillon tower. A little more than a year before, she had been totally deaf. Now, as she walked through the gardens, the carillon began playing "America the Beautiful" and she was overwhelmed by the beauty of the sound.

"I burst into tears. . . . It was all too perfect, too magnificent. My head was filled with the brilliance of the bells and their intricate harmonies, and my immediate reaction was euphoria."

It is a euphoria that readers of this wonderful book, whatever the state of their hearing, will find easy to understand, and to share. ■■■■

Peter Yerkes is a trustee of the Hearing Loss Association of New Jersey and lives in Summit, New Jersey.