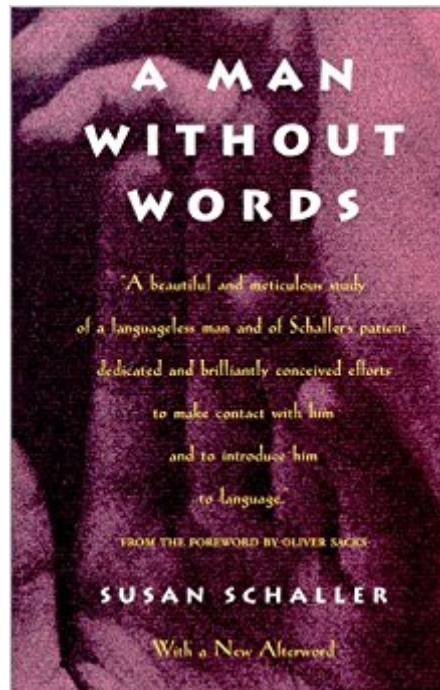




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# A Man Without Words



## Synopsis

For more than a quarter of a century, Ildefonso, a Mexican Indian, lived in total isolation, set apart from the rest of the world. He wasn't a political prisoner or a social recluse, he was simply born deaf and had never been taught even the most basic language. Susan Schaller, then a twenty-four-year-old graduate student, encountered him in a class for the deaf where she had been sent as an interpreter and where he sat isolated, since he knew no sign language. She found him obviously intelligent and sharply observant but unable to communicate, and she felt compelled to bring him to a comprehension of words. *A Man without Words* vividly conveys the challenge, the frustrations, and the exhilaration of opening the mind of a congenitally deaf person to the concept of language.

## Book Information

Paperback: 210 pages

Publisher: University of California Press; New Ed edition (August 29, 1995)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0520202651

ISBN-13: 978-0520202658

Product Dimensions: 8.3 x 5.4 x 0.5 inches

Shipping Weight: 0.3 ounces

Average Customer Review: 4.6 out of 5 stars Â Â See all reviews Â (28 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #720,181 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #221 in Â Books > Reference > Words, Language & Grammar > Sign Language #1685 in Â Books > Textbooks > Humanities > Linguistics #2285 in Â Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Anthropology > General

## Customer Reviews

Like a lot of university educated folks, I heard in Psych 101 that once you hit your teens, your capacity to learn languages takes such a nosedive that if you haven't learned by then, you'll never be better than "Me Tarzan, you Jane" no matter how hard you try. I'm not ashamed of accepting this "language expiration date" -- there was no reason not to, and besides, it tracked with my own frustration learning foreign languages. For decades, I accepted this Psych 101 nugget without question. When I started reading *A Man Without Words*, I had no idea my old Psych 101 nugget's days were numbered. I heard about the book as something a fan of Oliver Sacks would enjoy, and I associated it with Oliver Sack's book *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*, about neurological dysfunction, not Sacks's *Hearing Voices*, about the deaf. I assumed until I started reading that the

"man without words" was aphasic -- had brain damage that prevented him from understanding language. Turns out, though, the book's namesake is deaf and poor and had simply, at 27, never been taught any language. No one had ever bothered. Susan Schaller then proceeded to overturn the Psych 101 sacred cow I never knew I had by describing how she taught this young man the beginnings of ASL over the course of a few weeks. Then, so I couldn't think of him as a freak or fraud, Schaller goes on to show that many deaf people receive no language training and can also be taught to sign long after the Psych 101 "language expiration date." Schaller claims that almost every deaf teacher, and most hearing teachers, of ASL know of adults who have grown up without language.

I've read many of the previous case studies of languagelessness in children. We studied Genie and the Wild Boy of Aveyron in an education class on language and its place in education. This was my introduction to this particular group of disenfranchised, neglected, and abused people...except I thought it was all children usually discovered in late childhood (around age 13). From my neuroscience classes I remember being taught that the brain continues neuronal growth (to targeted synapses in the brain) until about age ten, then begins to cut back. This was supposedly an explanation for why language learning is so difficult later in life. So coming across this book, with its story concerning adults with no obvious psychiatric problems (just a physical difference in lacking hearing) who had managed to survive to adulthood with no language, came as a complete surprise. This book got put aside as I had to read other books for school and work, but I picked it up again and finished it. Schaller basically is providing a qualitative study, a case study, to draw attention to this apparent problem. This method of educational research is used more and more in writing dissertations, and I actually didn't recognize what it was until I took a qualitative research class myself. The writing and book tend at first to repeat itself. I am not sure what Schaller was doing in writing this way. Perhaps the book had to be a certain length or she felt readers might not pay attention to the seriousness of this problem for Ildefonso and other adults without language. This repetition caused the first half of the book to drag a bit. After I picked the book up again, I finished it in two days.

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