

# Fighting words: david shields' dead languages

Literature



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

A thorough reading of David Shields' "Dead Languages" can only leave the reader inspired. On the surface it is the story about growing up Jewish with speech impairment but in depth it is the story of determination and struggle in the face of incredible adversity. Like Theodore Roosevelt's "Man in the Stadium" the protagonist, Jeremy Zorn is not a spectator, he is in the arena, literally beaten up and bloodied, but still alive and fighting until he ultimately succeeds. He is not alone in staying the course despite the obstacles. The entire Zorn family is a study in issues, problems and conflict.

Each of them has their own impediments, crises, and failings. On first glance Shields provides a family and situations that seem to overflow with cruel and uncaring feelings for one another. Each of them seem to resent if not hate the imperfections of the others. At any moment it seems as though they could, or should, break apart and never have another thing to do with each other. Their seemingly selfish interests cause conflict for one another and even the most innocent and pleasant experiences can turn into painful episodes. Yet through one common element they weather all the storms and remain intact to the end.

Somehow it is the power of language they have in common and keeps them together. The relationship between Jeremy Zorn and his father best serve to illustrate and define the symbol of persevering against incredible obstacles. However, in many ways Shields, as do the Zorns, use language as a vehicle, shield and distraction in telling the story of the triumph of two men in face of common obstacles. Shields creates the Zorn family individuals in such a fascinating manner that each character, in addition to Jeremy could make for a captivating novel.

Both parents are accomplished writers and without any great pressure both children gravitate towards it. This commonality is in contrast to their very different personalities. Mother Annette Zorn can only be described as the ultimate “ in your face” bitch. According to Jeremy The most amazing postcard ever written was written by mother and mailed to me from Stanford Hospital exactly a year later: “ Beth says I’m always making you feel guilty. About what I don’t know. That certainly isn’t my intent because you have nothing to feel guilty about as far as I’m concerned.

But I have a strong need to let people know where I stand and, if in their judgment I’m wrong, then it’s their responsibility to argue it out with me. ” (185) Jeremy’s older sister Beth, an incredibly intelligent academic achiever sets a high mark for Jeremy that would challenge his from grade school to college. His sister is the one student who will end up teaching the class when the instructor cannot. In high school a literary instructor who had her in class asks Jeremy “ are you sure you are a Zorn? ” in comparison to his sister (5).

Years later in college he asks the graduate student editor of the literary magazine if she knew his sister while at Palo Alto. “ Jesus, you’re kidding. Miss Historian? You have such a talented family” (204). The life of Teddy Zorn, Jeremy’s father, is in many ways a metaphor for the life Jeremy will lead. Teddy is severely injured as a child, almost to the point of death because of an accidental electrocution on a train track. It is a trauma he will carry with him for life, ultimately and perhaps perversely making a joke out of it. Additionally he is manic-depressive and often hospitalized for electro-shock therapy.

During one hospitalization Jeremy observed his father in bed: I didn't know what was the matter. I expected him to be pinning his arms to the mattress and bouncing up and down on the bed to indicate the thrill of the third rail; flipping the lamp on and off and whistling through his teeth in imitation of the oncoming local; arcing across the room to show how he'd been saved; stripping off his clothes to show how his skin had peeled; doing all the things I'd seen him do perfectly at parties... (50) Despite the physical injury Teddy rebounds and presents a very athletic image to his son.

He is a tennis player, a runner, and unexpectedly to Jeremy quite the basketball player. Jeremy follows suit; like his father he becomes a runner and soon distinguishes himself as a track star. As a youngster he commands a virtually unhittable softball pitch to the point of beating teams much older than his own. Courtesy of his father's instructions he becomes more than adept at basketball, to the point he takes on one of the local black kids who not only prides himself on his game but ridicules "the girlish-lookin' gunk you throwin' up" he learned from his dad.(85)

After beating the kid he is told "word better not get out what the score and who the victor was of our little encounter, or he'd murder my mother" (87). His father's "best game" was as a minor-league baseball umpire, the ballfield "his arena of glory" (56). Ironically if Teddy arose from an otherwise debilitating injury to pursue a lifelong activity in sports, Jeremy's budding athletic career ends after his failed suicide attempt by leaping off a cliff leaves his leg permanently damaged. When Jeremy was playing sports his stuttering was absent and seemingly without sports the speech impairment worsened.

Again there is a parallel between father and son regarding their respective disabilities. For both of them it is the reaction of Annette. In both cases she is anything but subtle. When her husband confides that he “ needed a little electroshock to get me through some bad patches” she “ fainted face-forward...I don't think their marriage every really recovered its equilibrium after that” (48). As a college student seeking support from his mother after he believes his writing is erroneously edited, he calls her and the following conversation ensues, with her coldly mimicking her stuttering son:

“ I want my writing to be a r-r-register of my—“ “ You're still using too many big words, sweetheart, and you're still stuttering miserably. I you don't want to write journalism, don't. If you want to r-r-register you sensational uniqueness, go ahead and register. ” (179) Although it is not directly pointed out, there seemed to have been almost a premonition with Teddy regarding the need to have a strong bond with his son. At one point as a teenager Jeremy decided to stop talking to his family altogether while on vacation. After two weeks of self-imposed isolation he won't even walk with them.

In total frustration his father pounced on him and the wrestled on the ground with Teddy shouting “ Why won't you walk with us? Why won't you talk with us? ” (75) It was as though he knew the days would come that communication would be all that mattered. Jeremy's relationship with his father is complex and contradictory. Clearly he admires his father during the time he is “ in control” as an umpire or shooting hoops. Yet he coldly states” even away from all the electrodes he never impressed me as having a genuine core upon which to draw. He could get very flustered if anyone else in the room said they were seriously sick.

That was his province" (193). Or was it? Perhaps "like father like son." As Jeremy continues through high school and college he has a string of successes and failures, some causing what could only be profound embarrassment. He runs for Class President as an eighth grader on a very unpopular (at the time) "integration" platform, and is pelted with food from fellow students while the principal crudely advises him that he will learn he gets trouble when he asks for it. A high school debate ends in disaster when he is overcome by emotion, leaves logic behind and launches into a tirade to the audience.

He turns a bit part in Othello into a disaster, blowing his line and then thinking the on-going dialog is directed to his mistake, so he draws his sword against the characters he believes are criticizing him. In college he arrives dead-drunk to recite his from his story, only to pass out on stage. While his disasters continue he still manages to carry on. At the same time his father is losing and gaining a string of less-and-less significant jobs. At one point they collide. Teddy is the director of an anti-poverty program and hires his son in as a summer-class assistant teacher.

A young girl gravitates towards him and helps him restore order to the class. Later on a field trip she stays close to him. Afterward the child's mother misinterprets a photo of her daughter whispering in Jeremy's ear. She scolds him: "You keep your itchy paws away from her, you understand? You so much as touch her your ass is glass" (173). In the end Jeremy becomes a caretaker of sorts for both parents. He and his sister take care of their mother during her last days, dying of cancer at home. Meanwhile their father is back at Montbel, the psychiatric facility.

It is up to Jeremy to tell him of his mother's death. In many ways it seems to be the end of a life they once knew. As critical and domineering as she was, Annette was the focal point, in a sense, of the family. Beth seemed to be always on the outside looking in, while it was the dynamics of the relationship father and son had with Annette that seemed to be an anchor of sorts in their lives. The Zorn family is seemingly obsessed with words and wordplay, and it serves several purposes for them. All of them are writers, a "creative art" that sets them apart from society at large and "performing art" as well.

Language is something to communicate with the greater public as well as use as a weapon, as Jeremy does in written satires and Annette uses to quell an obnoxious group of nude sunbathers. Beth of course is the master of language and rhetoric. Once again it is the parallel between Teddy and Jeremy that is significant. There is not all that much dialog between them, and often Jeremy can tell if his father is about to relapse by his repetitive language, a clear and subtle image for Jeremy, the stutter. Often they use language not just to communicate meaning but to obscure it as well.

At one point Jeremy points out that after a Halloween "which I was Lucifer and she (Beth) was a princess, our masks were permanently in place" (174). Similarly there is no shortage of word-play, which Shields obviously loves. At one point, when Jeremy is in the high school's production of Othello Shields cannot resist the line "it seemed to me his play moor than it was Othello's" (115) and manages two pages later describes the young cast as "they'd been through the crucible before" (117) as every high school actor has been in that play as well.

Father and son have endured both serious physical and psychological injuries; both have sought relief on a variety of ball fields. They have faced rejection on many levels, from peers to a generally cold society. They have not just tolerated, but in their own way loved the same woman. They have both endured and exhibited the stamina necessary to survive their personal arenas and can never be faulted for being a mere observer instead of participant.