

"Electrifying, a wonder." —CELESTE NG

# T TRUE BIZ

A NOVEL



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# *true biz*

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*sara nović*



*Random House*  
*New York*

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Published in the United States by Random House, an imprint and division of Penguin Random House LLC, New York.

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An earlier version of Eliot's story was published as "Conversion" in *Guernica*, February 17, 2014.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Names: Nović, Sara, author.

Title: True biz : a novel / Sara Nović.

Description: First Edition. | New York : Random House, [2022]

Identifiers: LCCN 2021024265 (print) | LCCN 2021024266 (ebook) | ISBN 9780593241509 (hardcover) | ISBN 9780593241516 (ebook)

Classification: LCC PS3614.O929 T78 2022 (print) | LCC PS3614.O929 (ebook) | DDC 813/.6—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021024265>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021024266>

Ebook ISBN 9780593241516

*Illustrations by Brittany Castle*

[randomhousebooks.com](http://randomhousebooks.com)

*Book design by Elizabeth Rendfleisch, adapted for ebook*

Cover design: Tree Abraham

ep\_prh\_6.0\_139713517\_c0\_r0

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Those who are born deaf all become senseless and incapable of reason.

—*Aristotle, 384–322 BCE*

Those who believe as I do, that the production of a defective race of human beings would be a great calamity to the world, will examine carefully the causes that lead to the intermarriages of the deaf with the object of applying a remedy.

—*Alexander Graham Bell, 1883*

A manufacturer of amazing medical devices known as cochlear implants, which restore hearing to the deaf, sold defective implants to young children and adults for years—even after learning that a significant number of the devices had failed.

—*NBC News, March 14, 2014*



February Waters was nine years old when she—in the middle of math class, in front of everyone—stabbed herself in the ear with a number two Ticonderoga. Their teacher had been chalking the twelve times tables up on the board, providing February a window in which to sharpen the pencil, the grinding drawing her classmates up from their daydreams, their eyes following her across the room toward the teacher’s corner. February stepped unsteadily on the felted swivel chair, then planted herself in a wide stance on the desk and jammed the pencil deep into her left ear.

The class let out a collective gasp, breaking their teacher from her blackboard reverie. She hoisted February, who was bleeding more than she’d expected, from the desk in a fireman’s carry; February dripped a delicate trail of crimson all the way to the infirmary.

After the nurse removed the graphite and determined the damage was superficial, she gauzed up the bleeding and took February across the hall to the principal’s office, where the secretary produced a suspension form for “violent and disorderly conduct unbecoming of a student.” Then, once it was determined how, exactly, to contact her parents, she was sent home for the week.

Back in 4-B, February’s classmates hailed her as a hero, having sacrificed her very blood to buy them twenty-five minutes of unsupervised bliss. The school, on the other hand, deemed the incident a cry for help, given what the principal had taken to calling February’s “family



circumstances.” Really, February explained to her father when he came to get her, she wasn’t upset at all, just tired of listening to the times tables, the buzz of the broken light above her desk, the screech of metal chairs against the floor. He didn’t know what it was like, having to *hear* things all the time, she told him. And with that he couldn’t argue.

What had pushed February over the edge specifically was Danny Brown calling singsong from the row behind her, “February’s very hairy, and she eats the yellow snow.” Only deaf people would name their daughter February, she’d thought then. Certain months were acceptable for use as girls’ names—April, May, June—and her name was undoubtedly the result of some miscommunication of these guidelines. But February’s parents had always preferred winter, the silent splendor of snow clinging to the chinquapin oaks, and in the Deaf world of her childhood beauty was taken in earnest. Her parents’ friends weren’t concerned with looking corny, and February had never seen any of them say something sarcastic. It was a world she disliked leaving, especially for such hostile territory as the fourth grade.

*You can be Deaf on the inside, her mother said that night when she tucked her in. But you can never do that again.*

Of course, things are different now, February thinks as she looks out over the quad at the River Valley School for the Deaf, squinting against the early sun. The internet has been world-opening for deaf people, and Deaf culture has evolved to accommodate plenty of mainstream snark and slang. Plus, hearing people are naming their kids all sorts of weird things now—fruits and animals and cardinal directions.

The Deaf world is no longer her safe haven but her place of employment, and at the moment she is screwed. As headmistress, she is supposed to have her finger on the pulse of the school. Instead, she has done the worst thing possible—she has lost other people’s children. Two boys, Austin Workman and Eliot Quinn, a sophomore and a junior, roommates.

In front of Clerc Hall, police have parked a mobile surveillance unit from which they access Homeland Security cameras in Cincinnati and Columbus. They try to tap into the boys' GPS location, but this only leads them back to the dorms, where three phones are found in a neat stack beneath a common room table. The third phone prompts another round of bed checks, but everyone is accounted for. Eliot's and Austin's parents arrive, yelling in a mix of languages at February, at the police, at one another. Superintendent Swall arrives, also yelling, demanding her office keys so he can go inside and write a statement. An emergency alert will be blasted out to every mobile phone in the tri-county. And February will have to speak to the morning news.

She ducks into a lower school bathroom, pins back her hair, and applies lipstick before a very short sink. She wonders if this shirt is okay, then admonishes herself for thinking about her outfit at a time like this.

She returns to the quad and lingers near the police camper. She can already tell it's going to be an unseasonably warm day for her namesake month—no snow in sight, sunlight refracting off dewy grass. It's such a nice lawn, meticulously kept Eagleton bluegrass that looks vibrant though it's not yet spring, a hardy species she chose personally because it would take the picnics and Red Rover games in stride. She has always done her best to make things as pleasant for the students as she can.

She tries to steel herself for the press, to choose words that might tamp down the frenzy, or at least not add any fuel. "Lost" is wrong; she shouldn't say that—she hasn't misplaced them. They escaped, more like it, though that makes the school sound like prison. "Runaways" is charged with a certain angst, suggests abuse. Eventually she settles on "gone missing," the passive obscuring responsibility.

Superintendent Swall emerges and hands February the statement, eight-by-tens of Eliot's and Austin's school photos, and a large mug. She stares at the pictures as she downs the coffee—both boys in button-ups looking neat and agreeable, if not exactly smiling. Austin's eyes are the famous Workman green, a light, almost spearmint color. Eliot's are so dark they're almost black, and she tries to meet his gaze instead of letting her own eyes

drift down to the scars on his cheek. For a moment she is overwhelmed by the feeling that the boys are staring back, blinks hard to push the thought away. Then she hands her mug to Swall and steps up to the makeshift podium.

When they go live, February holds up the photos first, then puts them down so she can sign and speak her statement simultaneously—a short physical description of each boy, followed by the superintendent’s message: The River Valley School for the Deaf is working round the clock with the Colson County Sheriff’s Office and doing everything we can to bring our students back safely and as quickly as possible. If you see these children, please call the tip number on your screen. As she says the final line, her phone vibrates in her pocket. Distracted, she pauses for just a hair too long. The reporters leap in with their barrage of questions, largely unintelligible except for the one closest to her, who says,

Do you have any worries about the welfare of the boys, given the nature of their handicap?

February bristles. Not the time for grandstanding, she knows, but she has to say something.

I’m concerned for the students’ welfare, she says. As I would be for any missing teenager.

But if they can’t hear—

The students are intellectual equals to their hearing peers.

Are they implanted?

February is taken aback by the unabashed way he demands this information, but tries not to show it.

I’m not authorized to divulge a minor’s medical history on television, sir, she says.

The reporter reddens, but isn’t ready to surrender the limelight:

Any evidence of foul play? Do you anticipate charges of a criminal nature?

He pushes the microphone against her chin and gives her a sympathetic look that rings false around the eyes.

If you’ll excuse me, I have to go speak with the police, she says.

She steps away from the podium, but the reporter's face will not leave her. He's right—Eliot and Austin are not as safe as they would be if they were hearing, though not in the way the man had meant it. What if a patrolman finds them and shouts for them to stop, but they keep running? Or if they *do* need help but have no way to call the police? What if everything ends well and they return unscathed, but Child Protective Services uses the incident as an in to throw their weight around in the cochlear implant debate? She's read about it happening in other states. February has to bite her lip to cut the panic short—she's getting ahead of herself again. She checks her phone. The text was from Mel: u ok? She doesn't know how to respond. She shoves the phone back in her pocket, and looks up to find another parent, Charlie Serrano's father, leaning against the police RV.

Dr. Waters? he says, his voice much smaller than his frame suggests. Not now! she wants to scream. Yours is a mess for another day. But she holds it together, says instead:

Mr. Serrano, we're in a bit of a situation. The campus is closed today, so you can take Charlie on home.

He blanches.

You mean, she's not here?

No—is everything okay?

It's just, it looks like she snuck out last night, and she's not with my ex, so I thought, maybe—

He sweeps his eyes across the quad.

Holy shit, she says under her breath. Three cellphones.

What? says Charlie's father.

He shifts his bulk against the vehicle, wrings his hands.

I'm just going to—February points to the police insignia plastered above them—give them a quick update.

Wait—

Just a moment, sir, really, she says. Then she rounds the camper and vomits her coffee onto its front tire.

*six months earlier*



*t*he summer before her sophomore year, as her parents' divorce limped to a close, Charlie's father won the custody battle and signed her up for Deaf school.

Colson, Ohio, in August was so muggy and laden with gnats it felt almost tropical, and they all broke a sweat on the short walk from the parking lot into family court, her father peeling off his suit jacket in the atrium, her mother dabbing at her brow with a paisley handkerchief. In the courtroom, the judge delivered his ruling, but Charlie could hear only the industrial-grade box fan propped on the windowsill beside them. It pulled flyaways from her ponytail, and eventually she gave up trying to smooth them and settled for counting the boards in the wood paneling.

When the judge finished speaking, it took everything in her not to shout WHAT HAPPENED? Instead she followed her parents outside, where, it turned out, she didn't have to ask. Both her mother's and her father's eyes were glassy with tears, but her father was smiling.

His and Hers teams of expensive lawyers had been evenly matched, and in the end, Charlie figured it was her lousy report card—another semester squeaked by on social promotion—that convinced the judge more than anything. There was also a ream of behavior infractions from her elementary school days, though on paper they looked long resolved. In reality they weren't, not exactly, but most grown-ups cared little about the real world, except when they were threatening teenagers about their

impending expulsion out into it. Whatever pushed the judge to his decision, she was just happy to get out. At Jefferson High, even a small misstep could get you bullied for years. As far as she could tell they were still teasing some kid for a lethal fart he'd let fly back in sixth-grade gym class, so whatever you imagine a deaf-voiced cyborg girl caught, it was worse. The things that happened to girls always were.

It'll be different now, her father said on their way back to his apartment. Of course, the ruling came with stipulations. Charlie would still have to wear her implant during instruction hours, even though it gave her a headache, even though its uselessness was half the reason her parents were getting divorced in the first place, though they'd never admit it. It's No One's Fault: the mantra in their house. But no one believed it.

—

When she was younger, Charlie's father once listened to a series of cochlear implant simulations on YouTube. Charlie stood beside him as he clicked through video after video, but the sound through the computer speakers was indistinct.

It's terrifying, he said. Everything sounds like the demons in *The Exorcist*.

It's not scary to her, her mother said. She doesn't know any better. She was right, to a point. What scared Charlie more was her mother talking about her like she wasn't there at all.

—

Charlie's mother was a pageant coach and a musician who'd never had her *Mr. Holland's Opus* moment, though that would've been bad in a different way. Charlie's father was a software engineer, whose constant proximity to technology was probably the reason why he was more willing to accept its shortcomings. He'd also grown up with a deaf cousin who had what Charlie considered the good fortune of being born in the seventies, and to a family of seasonal farm workers. Antonio's parents, new to the country and

still learning English themselves, weren't consumed with fears of what would happen if he couldn't pass, or how bilingualism might do him harm. His family learned a few of the signs he brought home from school; he graduated and learned a trade, soldering or something, and one-upped his parents, ears be damned, American Dream style.

Charlie wondered whether her parents had reached out to Antonio when they found out she was deaf, asked him what he thought about implants and deaf education, or if those first years were ruled autocratically by her mother's fear. Either way, the window for such a conversation had long passed—Antonio died in a car wreck when Charlie was four, and his memory was invoked almost exclusively by Charlie's mother, when she wanted to curse her husband's genes. Charlie hadn't met another deaf person since. Isolation was a requirement of the implant, her doctor cautioned; she needed to be one hundred percent dependent on it to learn how to listen. The device could only bring sound to her brain—it couldn't decipher it, or even do much to sift through what was important and what was just noise. Still, sign language had always been off the table—that would've been a cheat code, a crutch. If she had learned sign and could communicate her needs and understand others, what would motivate her to learn English?

Countless experts confirmed that the best way to ensure she reached maximum implant potential was to practice, and a mainstream setting was where she'd practice the most, albeit in a sink-or-swim kind of way. This combined with the therapy appointments would equip her with the tools to parse the meaning hidden within the sound.

Charlie had been implanted at age three—not ideal, but still plenty of time left to build new neural pathways. By all measurable standards, her implantation was a success, and though no one ever said it to her face, she knew this meant the fact that she couldn't hack it was a personal deficiency. Maybe she just hadn't tried hard enough.

The educational term for her was “oral failure” (imagine the fun her classmates would have if they got wind of that), which from what Charlie could tell, basically meant she sounded stupid when she talked. Charlie



wasn't stupid. She'd just had to learn everything herself, and in an environment not at all conducive to learning: the public school classroom—endless tumult of squeaking furniture, student chatter, teachers spewing lessons with their backs to the class as they wrote on the board. Really, she thought, the fact that she could work out about sixty percent of what was going on with the robo-ear, maybe more with some good lipreading, was impressive. But in school, sixty percent was still a D.

She wished she could be rid of the implant, even as she knew the requirement that she keep wearing it was her mother's consolation prize, a sliver of hope Charlie might one day wake up able to make sense of the relentless static it pumped into her head. But being under her dad's governance was undeniably a victory. She'd enroll at River Valley as a residential student, and the two of them would attend community sign language classes the school offered after-hours. Things might finally take a turn for the better.

Her mother didn't appeal the ruling, a surrender Charlie found both a relief and a little upsetting. Mothers on TV always fought to win their kids back; it was their reason for living, all that. Then again, the three of them were pretty tired of going to court.

Now Charlie was packing, shifting most of her stuff to the apartment where her father had lived for nearly a year—new construction on the riverfront with big windows and an open kitchen, right out of the dictionary for “bachelor pad,” which as a bonus made her mother, French country devotee, crazy. From there, Charlie would bring an even smaller subset of belongings to the dorm.

Two weeks before the semester began, she and her parents went to a meeting at her new school. The headmistress was a tall, shapely woman with short black hair tied back close against her head. Charlie found her somewhat formidable even after they all sat down and the distance between their heights diminished. She signed and spoke simultaneously, her arms and hands moving with the grace and speed of a much more compact person. To sign and talk at the same time was an imperfect operation, the headmistress warned, and one Charlie wouldn't see much of at River Valley

after today. Charlie longed to find meaning in the arc of the woman's hands, but that meant looking away from her lips, something she couldn't afford to do. Not yet.

Headmistress pulled a series of papers from the tray of her printer and laid out Charlie's academic program. She would retake algebra and be enrolled in remedial English. She would still have to go to speech therapy.

But how will she learn sign language? Charlie's mother said.

We're signed up for community classes, said her father.

Great, said the headmistress. She looked back to Charlie. The \_\_\_\_\_ here at school will be key, she said. As with any language.

The what? said Charlie.

The headmistress removed a notepad from beneath a pile of paperwork.

IMMERSION she wrote.

Charlie shrugged.

To be surrounded, said the headmistress. The sign will come, if you put some work into it.

Charlie read the doubt on her mother's face—fair enough, considering Charlie's scholastic record. And hadn't the doctors said the same thing about English? Just one more lesson or therapy or specialist could be the thing to tip the scale. The headmistress, though, also registered the skepticism.

It's different with sign, she said. You're programmed for visual language.

She smiled, and Charlie knew she was trying to be reassuring, but the word "programmed" just made her think of the audiologist. Charlie watched her mother dig through her purse for her ChapStick, a signal she knew to mean the discussion was over.

Are you okay? the headmistress said.

At first, Charlie didn't understand why she was asking, then realized she had been rubbing the scar behind her ear again, the incision site of her implant. It had been feeling tender lately; Charlie had even made her mother check the spot, parts of which she couldn't see well in the mirror. But everything had looked normal.

Implant's on the fritz, said her mother with a forced brightness, and mumbled something about an upcoming appointment.

For about twelve years, said Charlie, and the headmistress tried to swallow her smile.