

# Sian Heder's CODA and the Struggle for Artistic Freedom

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## Abstract

This study analyzed the relationship between the main character's artistic freedom and her complex family responsibilities as reflected in Sian Heder's CODA. The writers focused on analyzing how Ruby, a young musician from a deaf family, handles her inner conflict between gaining her creative ambition and her social expectations and familial responsibilities. The writers analyzed how Ruby resolves the tension she faces and makes decisions and resolutions to pursue her artistic ambition. This study was expected to deepen our understanding of the complexities of balancing creative expression, family, and self-discovery. The writers got the main data from Sian Heder's CODA, while the supporting data were derived from English literature journals, e-books, and other sources on the internet. The result shows that Ruby manages to handle her inner conflict, make decisions and resolutions to pursue her dream, and make her family believe that what she decides will bring betterment for her and her family.

**Keywords:** CODA, Sian Heder, Artistic Freedom, Familial Responsibility, Hearing Children, Deaf Parents

## 1. Introduction

Movies are a form of art that represents stories that captivate our emotions and attention. They may be great or average, depending on the impact they have on the audience. Influencing people towards perception by giving them ideas is what good movies do (Erasmus, 2020). Amongst others, films reflect human mental behaviour and the organization of society (Sumarsono, 2022). By watching movies, we can know what the mindsets of people are and the state of society. The normative system in various societies and cultural diversity are some of the things that can be learned from movies about different cultures and traditions. Some movies put us in a position where we have to understand complicated human emotions and relationships while others address issues that already exist within society. Not only do they cover historical moments they also deal with politics making you more aware of your history. Also sometimes these movies can show true feelings or actions that we don't even know about ourselves, thus expanding our knowledge about the human soul (psychological realism). In mass communication particularly when the message's content is both implicated and indicated, cinema becomes a potential subject for analysis (Subina, 2021). This background makes Sian Heider's *CODA* their study's focal point.

Sian Heder is an American television writer, producer, and film director famous for creating and helping the CODA. She was nurtured in Cambridge, where he was born. After she graduated from Carnegie Mellon University, where she studied acting and cinema, she continued her studies at Cambridge Rindge and Latin. She worked as an actress in New York and Los Angeles (Meek, 2016). Besides pursuing a career as an actress and screenwriter, she worked for a nanny agency where she got inspiration from her experiences caring for families vacationing at five-star hotels for *Mother*, her debut short as a writer and director (Olsen, 2016). Sian Heder has a long history of success, and before its 2016 Sundance release, her first movie, *Tallulah*. was made into a Netflix Original (Brouwer, 2016; Perkins, 2016). Notable accomplishments include her winning short film *Mother* at the 2006 Cannes Film Festival and her Peabody Award for the TV series *Men of a Certain Age*. Heder was also nominated for a WGA award for *Orange is the New Black* and a Spirit Award for *Little America* (McCormack, 2021). During the 2016 Sundance Film Festival, Heder showcased *Tallulah*, catching the attention of Philippe Rousselet and Patrick Wachsberger, who were keen on adapting it for a US audience from the 2014 French film *La Famille Bélier* (Molloy, 2021). They named the remake *CODA*.

*CODA* presents the tale of a hearing adolescent girl, Ruby Rossi, who is an interpreter for her Deaf family (Menta, 2021). Heder chose Marlee Matlin to play Jackie Rossi, the first Deaf performer to win an Oscar in 1986. Kotsur played her on-screen husband, Frank, Durant played their son Leo, and Emilia Jones played the Rossis' hearing daughter, Ruby. Deaf actors incorporated their own experiences in their

performances, which provided complexity to several sequences. A powerful scene was inspired by a real-life encounter with a daughter, according to a "CODA" actor (Holohan, 2021). The way the director tells the story of CODA, the original connection among the characters, and the sentimental actual storyline, make the film a popular feel-good movie that drives audience appeal of emotional power, all attributed to the dedication of those involved and it is the combination of the captivating storyline and the commitment of individuals behind the creation of the movie that generates its impact resonance (Buffa, 2021). As a close-knit family negotiates the challenging process of embracing one other's dreams, forming an enthralling balancing act, the film explores heavy subjects like co-dependency, ambition, and the fear of failure (Moore, 2022).

San Heder's *CODA* became a hit movie instantly when it was released for the first time at the first-ever virtual Sundance Film Festival, and Heder was awarded the festival's U.S. Grand Jury Prize, and Best Director for the U.S. Dramatic Section (Schmidt, 2021). Canfield (2022) stated that *CODA* broke a record distribution agreement with Apple, and the cast of *CODA* was nominated for BAFTA awards, including Best Picture, lead actress (Emilia Jones), supporting actor (Troy Kotsur), and best-cast (Screen Actors Guild). At the Oscars, *CODA* won Best Picture, and Sian Heder, who wrote and directed it, won best-adapted Screenplay, while Troy Kotsur won Best Supporting Actor and became the first Deaf actor to get the honour (Morris, 2022).

CODA (Children of Deaf Adults) refers to hearing children born to deaf parents (Bishop & Hicks, 2005). It was reported that more than 90% of deaf adults have children with average hearing ability (Hoffmeister, 2008; Christodoulou et al., 2009), but due to the distinctive differences between the deaf and hearing worlds, these children frequently encounter communicative, social, and cultural issues (Duta, 2023). Ericson in Frank (2019) states that the deaf and hearing communities are two distinct cultural, social, and linguistic communities to which children who grow up in these unusual circumstances are continually exposed. They have a working hearing apparatus, but they still struggle with the ambiguity of being "culturally deaf." These families, more notably the CODAs, could, therefore, have to mediate between the hearing and Deaf worlds, which could present communication and cultural difficulties (Clark, 2003). The capitalized "D" sets Deaf people apart from the rest of the Deaf community, who have always spoken language or may become hard of hearing as they age (Young et al., 2014).

CODA has disadvantages and some advantages (Editor, 2014). Parenting and communication are tricky, especially during the early childhood years. It takes some work and family assistance to teach hearing youngsters how to speak clearly and communicate effectively with their deaf parent or parents. Given that parents are aware of their children's speech development, they must take a more active role in teaching them proper speech. Most deaf intentionally choose sign language as their preferred form of communication, including children of deaf adults (CODAs) (Jaeger, 2019). Since most deaf people use sign language to communicate, communication becomes one of the biggest obstacles to CODA's existence (Cardiff, 2020). As a result, just as hearing kids who learn spoken language from their hearing parents, their hearing kids grow up naturally learning sign language (Schiff & Ventry, 2016). Some deaf kids' hearing parents will teach them how to sign in ASL at home. American Sign Language (ASL) is a visual language that combines intellectual, perceptual, and physical learning (Rojas-Murillo et al., 2021). Deaf and disabled children frequently experience bullying and mockery due to their use of sign language, as do their parents (Samantha, 2022).

Deaf individuals face various obstacles connected to interpreters (Schniedewind et al., 2020). It can be challenging for the deaf to communicate with the hearing. Therefore, sign recognition is necessary (Alsulaiman et al., 2023). Sign language is the single most significant factor that unites the deaf population (Filer & Filer, 2000). Sign languages are the native tongues of Deaf communities across the globe, organically emerging from the interactions of deaf people (Keleş et al., 2023). Codas frequently act as their parents' interpreters, acting as a conduit for communication between their parents and the hearing world since they use at least two languages, sign language and verbal (Pizer et al., 2012). Because they naturally desire to help, young children frequently support their parents in communicating (Napier, 2013). It is too young to resist or negotiate some CODAs' handling of family communication and potential exposure to unsuitable surroundings (Hall & Guńy, 2010). In most circumstances, the children may become emotionally involved in these interactions (Singleton & Tittle, 2000). The interpreter role in culturally Deaf families may create a 'role reversal', where a child feels responsible for their parents, and the parents expect the child to be responsible for them (Moroe & Andrade, 2018). Too frequently, professionals, teachers, healthcare providers, and others seek a CODA to translate conversations or direct them just to the CODA, dismissing and excluding the Deaf parent. Alexiskashar (2020) states that these circumstances frequently put the child in an improper position, which can cause many types of distress for the youngster, including "parentification" of a child. A power shift occurs as the CODA kid assumes adult roles. In Ruggero (2022), Pichler reports that some Deaf parents do not want their hearing child to translate. According to Torres (2003), deaf parents are conscious of their dependence on their hearing kids. Children acting as language brokers may protect their parents from negative comments or embarrassment during interpretation, ensuring they do not interpret insensitive remarks about their Deaf parents (Morales & Hanson, 2005).

The focus of this study is to analyze the complicated dynamics of balancing one's ambitions with those of other members of the family by going extensively into the film's plot, particularly focusing on Ruby's persona. The study also focuses on uncovering the lasting obstacles that block Ruby from balancing her artistic freedom with domestic responsibilities by examining the difficulties faced by artists like Ruby, who must be able to strike a delicate balance between her creative objectives and familial and societal expectations. The study explores Ruby's persistent pursuit of gaining her artistic independence and how she manages to solve the underlying conflicts, crucial choices, and concluding resolutions.

Additionally, this inquiry provides a platform for illuminating a bigger problem. It tries to connect with people facing similar difficulties

to reveal the complicated connection between personal goals and their obligations towards their families and communities. The study confirms that no matter what kind of work an artist does or what field any other person is in, there are certain universal hardships they face when trying to balance their artistic freedom and family duties. This study aims at understanding the complex interrelationship between Ruby's journey and artistic expression as well as her role as a member of a family.

The primary goal of the research is to further our understanding of complex interactions among familial responsibilities, art, and finding oneself. The study seeks to deepen our understanding of human experience by analyzing Ruby's dream of becoming a singer while at the same time taking up roles as daughter and translator. In addition, this research was supposed to unfold her journey and explain how conflicts, choices, and resolutions formed her route toward artistic independence within the aspect of personal ambitions versus broad societal contexts.

## 2. Methodology of the Research

To analyze this study, the writers used a qualitative methodology based on library research. The research was done through a comprehensive analysis of Sian Heder's film *CODA* aimed at studying the conflict between the artistic ambitions of the main character and her familial obligations. The article concentrated on one main character, Ruby, who wishes to make a career in music as the sole communicator for her family. For instance, character analysis is applied in this article to examine Ruby's struggle with family and how she manages to find her path in life. The main information was taken from the movie, and the supplementary was found in relevant papers, e-books, literary journals, and other online sources. To collect the data, the writers watched the movie, reviewed some previous publications to understand the issue better, and conducted an internet search to learn more about the conflict between the artistic ambitions and familial obligations portrayed in the movie. From thereon, they started taking some notes which highlighted key areas. Afterward, writers selected and filtered crucial information by categorizing, examining, and debating.

## 3. Literature Review

The writers went through Burge's *Children of Deaf Adults: Interpreting Identities* for better grounding on the issues in this research. Burge (2018) researched CODAs' perceptions regarding deaf and hearing identities and their interpretations or mediations for their parents who are deaf. CODA language practices tend to be flexible when it comes to interpreting since various ways can be used by a child of deaf adults (CODA) interpreter as per the communicating preferences, reading levels, and degree of deafness of both sides i.e. the CODAs and their parents. When they were younger, CODAs regarded interpretation by their parents as a form of power struggle that involved censorship and control over language. By being able to interpret, a CODA loses his or her "child" status, and gets promoted to an "adult".

Casey (2023) also argues that Sian Heder's *CODA* has already begun affecting the everyday life among the d/Deaf population as well as the perception by hearing society concerning these d/Deaf people. The film was awarded both Best Picture and Troy Custer received Best Supporting Actor at Oscars for recognizing CODA as an authentic presentation of deaf culture. People must realize the daily communication challenges the d/Deaf community faces, how maintaining a dialogue might lead to exploitation, and how, because of differing speech codes, we should all treat one another with respect, according to evidence from *CODA* and history. The anger between these two sides might lessen if these three recommendations are implemented.

The writers also read a review by Hornaday (2021) that concludes that the sunny optimism of so many genre masterpieces permeates *CODA*, giving it a brisk appearance and atmosphere heightened by the fact that the film is set in Gloucester, Massachusetts. Ruby, who is forced to put up with Frank and Jackie's reckless approach to everything, notably their sex life, which turns into a running joke, is given an appealing balance of diffidence and forthrightness by Jones. Heder has created a film on the universal ideals of first love, familial ties, and the pull of an unknown future inside a highly specific yet readily intelligible context. In *CODA*, deafness is a part of life but not its all-defining feature.

## 4. Finding and Discussion

Ruby Rossi is at the centre of a riveting story in Sian Heder's engrossing film *CODA*, where her artistic aspirations stand out as a characteristic trait. Ruby has a talent and interest in music that she does not realize before she joins Mr. Bernardo's music class. Finding that she has the talent, interest, and opportunity to get a higher education in music, she tries to pursue her singing career. Her passionate ambitions show up as both a compass and a daunting barrier. Ruby is driven to pursue her dream of becoming a singer by her passion for music and the harmony and resonance permeating the world outside her family. Ruby's resolve to pursue a career in singing is a compelling example of her unwavering commitment and fortitude. Ruby was born into a family where deafness is the norm; her parents and elder brother are deaf. Ruby's love of music might appear out of place, but it is a monument to various human aspirations. Her desire to become a vocalist in a field dominated by auditory experiences proves the power of individual dreams that defy limitations. Her love of music is revealed at the movie's opening when she accompanies her father and elder brother catching fish on the sea. Additionally, her teacher, Mr. Bernardo or Mr. V, sees her as having a beautiful voice and recommends that she apply for a scholarship to Berkley to study music.

On deck, Ruby (17, in fishing Grundens), belts out the song as she runs the winch, raising the net above the sorting bin. She sings along with the radio as she works (Heider, 2021; 0.02.16 – 0.03.03).

Ruby's love of music extends beyond merely seeking a creative outlet; it also provides a significant source of comfort and a platform to communicate her identity and ambitions. Her singing voice, a captivating and exceptional instrument, serves as a channel for her feelings,

inner struggles, and goals. Ruby's musical skills give her a way to communicate herself that goes beyond the limitations of sound in a family where communication occurs visually and tactilely. She finds a way to express herself to the world outside her family and a place where she can accept her individuality through singing. To make her dream come true, she commits to herself that she will practice a lot with her music teacher and partner. She tries to spare her time to practice singing after helping her family, but her journey in pursuing her dream is not easy.

As the sole child who was born into a deaf family, she has difficulties in facing her life. On the first day of her music class, when she is asked by her music teacher why she runs away from his class, Ruby says that she is afraid that the other students will mock her because she has a traumatic experience on her first day at school. She talked like deaf people do, and they bullied her. As a CODA whose father and mother are deaf people, Ruby learned her first language, ASL, so when she was on her first day at school, she talked like the deaf talk, using sign language, and the hearing students thought it was funny

Bernardo "Why did you run out of class?"

Ruby "I got scared"

Bernardo "Of what? Other kids?"

Ruby "Maybe. Or maybe finding out that I'm bad."

Bernardo "Do you know what Bowie said about Bod Dylan "A voice like sand and glue." There are plenty of pretty voices with nothing to say. Do you have something to say?"

Ruby "I think so" (Heider, 2021; 0.18.22 – 0.18.55).

Mr. Bernardo thinks Ruby does not know how to sing, so she leaves the music class. After he asks her why she left the class, and the answer is that she is worried and afraid that the other students will mock her, he finds the real reason. Believing that Ruby knows how to sing, he gives Ruby one more opportunity to join his class. He knows that Ruby has something that can be developed and trained in music. He motivates her to practice singing and recommends she apply for a scholarship to a music college. He ensures that Ruby has the potential to be a good singer and musician, and it is very important for her future.

Bernardo "You can sing (Ruby turns) You have no control but your tone is lovely ... You would need to sight-read and learn a classical piece. I need your nights and weekends. I do not waste my time. So, if I am offering, it is because I hear something." (Heider, 2021; 0.31.32 – 0.33.50).

The path of Ruby becomes a microcosm of the global human struggle to pursue one's interests despite the difficulties of interpersonal relationships. Her artistic aspiration sheds light on the innate human spirit that propels people to forge their paths, even when they depart from the well-traveled ones. We are urged to reflect on the incredible resiliency of the human soul and the unstoppable power of artistic expression as we follow Ruby as she pursues her goals. Ruby can direct her future besides her domestic responsibilities to her family. She is responsible for being the family interpreter since she is the only child in the family who can communicate with the hearing people. She is the one in the family who helps her family to connect to the hearing world. She is at a crossroads, having a dilemma of whether to follow her way or their parent's way. She knows that her parents rely on her, but she has her dream to achieve. Ruby is the presentation of people who have the spirit to find their way to the betterment of their future. People who have artistic freedom decide to pursue their golden dream.

Ruby's desire to become a singer goes beyond a simple personal aspiration; it acts as a powerful tool for defining her unique identity and accepting her unique place in a world that sharply contrasts with the lived reality of her family. This passionate desire, set against the common experience of deafness in her family, captures the core of her story. The movie *CODA* expertly ties Ruby's pursuit of musical achievement into the intricate web of her forming identity. She aspires to create a distinctive space for herself among the opposing currents of sound and silence through her melodic initiatives, in addition to gaining recognition for her vocal abilities. She wants to prove to her friends or people who bully her that she has her own identity and that she has a voice to say to the world, although she is a CODA.

Ruby "*I like to sing*" Jackie laughs, rolls her eyes.

Ruby (Cont'd) *What?*"

Jackie "*You're a teenager. If I was blind, would you want to paint?*"

Ruby (signed and spoken) "*Why is it always about you? ... I'm meeting people! I'm making friends. You know what, you should get out in the world too*" (Heider, 2021; 0.34.16 – 0.34.53).

Her dreams cause a tumultuous mix of pride, trepidation, and strife in the close-knit environment of her family. The complexity of her position as a sister and daughter in a close-knit deaf family gives rise to the conflict. Her journey's emotional centre is formed by the tension between her artistic ambitions and her familial obligations. The movie shows Ruby's internal battle as she tries to balance her aspirations for artistic expression and her essential duty as a link between the hearing and the Deaf. She plays a crucial part in her family's communication and weaves her aspirations into her kin's well-being as an interpreter, making her more than an ordinary person. Her family needs her very much to bridge them with the hearing world. She is the only link between the hearing and non-hearing worlds. Her duties go much beyond the typical sphere of housework; they also include providing emotional support, facilitating communication, and maintaining familial bonds. Her father and brother need her to accompany them to catch fish because they cannot afford to hire a hearing

person who must work for them on the boat. A fishing boat must have at least one hearing person to sail on the sea. Otherwise, they will be fined and not allowed to sail for a certain period. Moreover, Ruby's position is needed very much after establishing the fisherman cooperation. Ruby must help them communicate with other fishermen in their business meetings and other people with different professions. Without her, her family may have serious problems. In essence, every day becomes a series of emotional labyrinths for her as she navigates through communication intricacies among her family members ranging from subtle translations of emotions to light sharing of jokes. Out of these very interactions the initial difficulty in her journey comes from.

Jackie *"Where are you going?"*

Ruby *"I have my music practice."*

Jackie *"You can't go..."*

Ruby *"What's this?"*

Jackie *"The news! They're doing a story on the family!... How are we gonna do the interview? ... This is important."*

Ruby *"My stuff is important too! I can't."*

Jackie *"You want us to fail?!"* (Heider, 2021; 0.57.57 – 0.58.30).

Ruby's path toward fulfilling her creative aspirations unfolds along a landscape swarming with intricate internal and external dilemmas, which form the crux of Ruby's narrative. Internally torn between pursuing artistic liberty as an upcoming singer and acknowledging her critical role in her family dynamics, she finds herself at a crossroads frequently. Since it is crucial to support communication for her deaf parents within the non-deaf world after setting up their fishing partnership business - staying close-knit becomes vital on familial grounds. Aspiring artist or not, roadblocks comparable to ordinary struggles are strewn across this heroine's journey from stepping outside known territory into new realms – herein being music; spotlighting features defining both personal circumstances accompanied by prevalent societal hurdles echo through every choice made including decision-making boundaries formed around mixed emotions encountered during transition. On one hand, parental expectations often hinder Mr. Bernardo from achieving his dreams, leading to frequent late arrival and late vocal practice. However, timely commerce and shared responsibilities are necessary for children to fulfill their dreams, despite the unfortunate reality of these challenges.

Bernardo *"You want to know why I'm a teacher? I'm good at this. But I can't do my job unless you do yours. And I certainly don't need a lesson in failure from someone who's too afraid to even try."*

Ruby *"I've never done anything without my family before"* (Heider, 2021; 1.01.13 – 1.01.34).

The story revolves around a complex assignment, a complex homefront, and a tangled web of relationships, involving royalty, understanding, and survival. It tests time, inefficiency, and modems ultimately evolving into a series of events and fostering unity through mutual collaboration and a harmonious approach. Ruby must have the courage to struggle to reach her dream, and she gets support from her music teacher. They need good cooperation between the teacher and her. For Ruby, although she gets her teacher's support, it is not easy for her since she cannot do it without her family. She has familial responsibilities that are very hard for her to abandon.

Ruby *"I want to go to college. At Berklee. Music School. My teacher's been helping me with my audition." ...*

Jackie *"You can't go now. We just started the business. With you!"*

Ruby *"That's all you care about? Losing your free interpreter?"*

Frank *"It's terrible timing."*

Ruby *"There will never be a good time. I can't stay with you for the rest of my life!... I have been interpreting my whole life. This is exhausting. Singing is what I love. It's everything"* (Heider, 2021, 1.01.46 – 1.02.54).

Ruby's path also faces skepticism from a variety of sources. In addition to her family's worries, she must deal with her music teacher's shock and the wider society's inability to comprehend her complex predicament completely. A person's struggle to be accepted and validated is a universal issue subtly portrayed in the film as she struggles with uncertainties that are not within her close circle. Her attempts to win over her family's support and her tenacity to convince skeptics in the music industry form a gripping story thread. Through this intricate web of contacts, Ruby's narrative is elevated above the confines of her situation to become a symbol of the resiliency needed to overcome internal and external challenges.

Ruby tries to balance the need for creativity with a sense of obligation to her family. Ruby grapples with forsaking her development and ambitions just for her family. The film shows how emotionally draining this is on her when she desires independence from her parent's wishes so that she might pursue what moves her. The story gives a moving and pertinent account of self-discovery as Ruby faces these challenges. Her story of overcoming obstacles, finding her voice, and learning to balance her responsibilities and aspirations is an inspiring example of the difficulty of balancing family responsibility variety, personal goals, flexibility, and adaptive capacity.

#### 4. Conclusion

Heder's *CODA* is a journey of Ruby, a representation of the complicated juggling act between dreams, family, and aspirations. Her character is like a rug that has been woven into resilience, growth, and self-discovery, passionately engaging with audiences on multiple

fronts, with many moments of choices and fixes. As our lovable protagonist, Ruby undergoes changes that symbolize the whole human search for identity and purpose through struggles, which are fostered by her distinct family situation as well as her all-consuming desire to become a vocalist.

Ruby's combination of dedicating herself to her family while at the same time working towards her ambitions, creates a complex dynamic that leads to conflicts becoming the emotional backdrop of her journey. Her anxiety is reminiscent of what every person who tries to find a way out between his favourite pastime and the obligatory duties of any close-knit community. Thus, she encounters this junction in life not only as an important milestone but also as a significant growth point seen in how she makes decisions based on what she learns about herself. Every choice she makes that may involve applying for an exclusive program or just singing for her parents underscores the change: from an individual, who tries to be like everybody else, into one, who appreciates and realizes the importance of being unique.

The threads of Ruby's story are connected at the movie's end. She was able to reconcile her dual roles as interpreter and singer, which not only helped her to overcome her inner conflict but also served as a monument to her unwavering resolve. Ruby exemplifies the spirit of compromise by combining her hobbies and obligations, showing that developing personally need not come at the expense of the connections that make us who we are. Ruby's journey is depicted vividly in *CODA* as an all-encompassing investigation of self, love, and the transformational force of accepting one's identity while appreciating the ties that bind us all. Ruby's story reminds us that the difficulties we conquer and the harmonies we forge amidst life's complex melodies enhance our journeys.

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### **Authors contributions**

All authors made substantial contributions to the conception and design of the work. The first author conducted the analysis. All authors participated in the interpretation of the collected data. All authors drafted the work and revised it critically for important intellectual content based on the editor and reviewer's comments. All authors approved the final version to be published and agreed to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

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