first, a premise on which I would base my future findings. Assuming, then, that portrayals of autistic characters are not so much guidelines for pragmatic principles (despite their schema-refreshing tendencies), I conclude that the authors of these portrayals do indeed assume pragmatic competency in their readers, and thus also a shared Cooperative Principle. Put starkly, the reader needs to be pragmatically competent or they will miss out on the 'inside jokes'. This raises the question of how entertaining such portrayals are for individuals who lack pragmatic competence, and whether they are in fact patronising to a certain degree, despite their good intentions.

For Riggan, the naïve narrator is intended to convey social critique, and again, this is perhaps what Semino termed schema-refreshment, i.e. an outside view from somebody who "has not yet entered the social world and who is largely unfamiliar with it on any direct experiential level" (Riggan 169). Personally, I do not see portrayals of autistic characters as a critique of social norms and values, but rather a way of raising awareness for a) the struggles, especially for those lacking natural pragmatic competence, b) their unique perspective, and c) the various ways these individuals are discriminated against. While the latter could be seen as a social critique in a strict sense ('there is discrimination in our society'), it is also an argument, *ex negativo*, about how (not) to treat neuroatypicals. However, returning to Nünning's question *Unreliable, compared to what?*, the answer would be 'compared to the reader's own experience, worldview, and pragmatic principles'. After all, unreliability is not so much a criterion on which I can base my analysis of autistic characters, but a way of triggering the audience to read the novel cross-eyed, i.e. from the perspective of the protagonist and their own, which often manifests itself in utterance made by background characters.

Niches, Genres, and Roles – *Trueman Bradley*

So far, this chapter discussed several narratological aspects of autism portrayals. I lastly return to the stereotype 'Genius' and how it carved out a contested niche. Rozema criticised how autistic characters are por-

trayed as quirky but will still manage to save the world, demanding that the representation should become more diverse in terms of role models. Bumiller, too, takes issue with how "portrayals tend to focus on the extraordinary abilities, or what is often called the savant qualities, of autistic persons" (Bumiller 970)[14]. It thus seems as if special abilities are meant to compensate for social shortcomings. On one hand, the outsider position of autistic characters is cemented in pragmatic incompetence and inferior abilities to negotiate their deviance, but they can redeem themselves if only they get a chance to prove their worth. On the other hand, this only seems to apply to neuroatypicals, since 'normal' people are allowed to be losers, psychopaths, or socially inept. One only needs to imagine a child growing up with superheroes as their sole role models.

Trueman Bradley is an example that fits Rozema's criticism to the dot. Intended to raise awareness and advocate for autists, the novel features a young autistic adult who moves to NYC in order to become a private detective like his comic book hero Slam Bradley. Having grown up in a small town in Illinois, as well as being home-schooled by his grandfather, he is ill-equipped for the busy streets of New York. However, he soon finds a group of four trusted friends who will cater to his needs, including a landlady who cooks, and a chauffeur, paid for by his inheritance of over five million dollars. Trueman faces several difficulties, including harassment by others who are less understanding of his needs but proceeds to invent several formulas and gadgets that help him navigate his surroundings, as well as a crime-solving equation which, once time, place, and type of crime are entered, will lead straight to the culprit. By the end of the novel, Trueman has discovered that the NYPD police chief is doing business with the mafia and consequently becomes a famous detective in NYC. The story is awfully contrived, and while there are several instances in which Trueman explains himself and his needs, thus fostering an understanding of his weaknesses, he simply is not a realistic role model. Granted, this may be a nod toward superheroes in comics, however, the novel turns into another unrealistic depiction, including the fact that he

14 The term ‚savant' is inaccurate, see Chapter 3.3.

can buy himself everything he wants. Additionally, the motherly tendencies of his friends do not render him equal, despite their assertions, but rather into a child prodigy whose needs are catered to back-to-back. Of course, this does at times remind the reader of portrayals such as Sherlock in the BBC TV series, not least because of his landlady Mrs Hudson who mothers him, seemingly inept police officers who are in dire need of his help, as well as people catering to his whims but equally regarding him as a child (e.g. Mycroft).

Returning to Trueman, I can state that in terms of pragmatic competence, he is as inexperienced as his educational background would suggest. Unfortunately, this cements his childlike status.

> "Okay, dear," she [the landlady] said. "Well, maybe I should get out of your hair, then. I really should be getting home for lunch."
> I touched my hair.
> "My hair?" I asked. "What are you going to do to my hair?"
> "No, I didn't mean that, dear!" she said. "Bless you! It's just an expression! 'Out of your hair' means I'll go off and leave you alone. Don't tell me you never heard it before?"
> "Oh, I see," I said. "Of course I heard of it before. I just didn't immediately realize you were using an expression. I don't understand why you need to talk about my hair if you are actually talking about leaving me alone. Next time, can you please just tell me that you are going to leave me alone? I prefer for you to speak with me using clear language, Mrs. Levi. Expressions and idiom are confusing to me sometimes." (*Trueman Bradley* 9–10)

Mrs Levi, the landlady, generally reacts understanding and friendly towards Trueman's shortcomings, however, in this case, she also expresses some incredulity ('don't tell me you never heard it before?'), indicating that she would have expected Trueman to react differently considering his age. I may also read her reaction as a little condescending ('bless you'), thus I can assume that she does not take Trueman seriously. Furthermore, Mrs Levi's expression leads Trueman to touch his hair, indicating that he took her words literally, something Christopher reports in terms of figurative language (7.3). It is one of many conversations throughout

the novel in which Trueman struggles with non-literal meaning, often resulting in people not taking him seriously or becoming angry. Additionally, Trueman forfeits reputation, being called 'stupid', 'naïve', or a child. Nonetheless, Trueman often tends to admit to his lack of understanding, thus not even trying to hide his pragmatic deficits. Obviously, this characterises him as both naïve and childlike, dependent on an adult for explanations, even though he simultaneously appears very honest. Ironically, he detests being treated like a child (cf. 31) but remains oblivious to many of the rules that guide social interactions. Partly this can be attributed to his upbringing, partly to the fact that he apparently does not need to assimilate himself because he can expect his surroundings to cater to him. For example, the novel does not mention one instance in which he prepares himself a meal, cleans his apartment, or goes to the shops, everyday tasks I would consider vital to independent living. In this instance, I would also argue that he is slightly condescending towards Mrs Levi ('I prefer for you to speak with me using clear language, Mrs. Levi.'), with the air of someone who is used to people catering to him (likely on the base that they are paid to do so). However, his (pragmatic) deficiencies are reduced to the question of whether or not Trueman can become a detective; which in turn is portrayed as something he can compensate for by being rich and mathematically gifted. Furthermore, although Trueman has to face some instances of severe harassment, these mostly boil down to 'mean people', i.e. criminals, or, in less severe cases, incredulous people who need further convincing. In essence, Trueman has found his niche, or in his case, partly paid for it. He does not need to change and assimilate to fit in but can expect others to consider his shortcomings. On one hand, this is sending the right message, since in general people want to be accepted and liked for who they are, and we all have deficits in some area or another where we demand compassion from others. It is a characteristic of young adult fiction that the protagonist is in search of their identity, thus the struggle to 'fit in' is not solely confined to autistic characters. However, this particular novel seems unbalanced, in the sense that Trueman has to put very little effort into actually socialising with people and understanding 'their' ways, since ultimately, Trueman only succeeds because he has the money and the ex-

traordinary (superhuman) abilities. On the other hand, finding a niche as well as our own identity usually requires us to work hard and reflect on our own life stories in regard to ideal life curves.

On a general note, the "genius detective, … is invariably depicted as a reasoning and observing machine …" (Scaggs 39). I have mentioned it briefly in relation to the stereotype genius, however, it seems as if the idea of a genius detective with asocial tendencies has enamoured present-day media and since brought forward Spencer Reid (*Criminal Minds*), Holly Gibney (*The Outsider*), or Saga Norén (*Bron/Broen*), as well as modern re-interpretations of Sherlock Holmes (*Sherlock*). It is usually their attention to detail, their ability to focus, and their outstanding memory that makes these characters exceptional sleuths, while their drive towards justice (or just solving the puzzle) excuses any social blunders. After all, these are crime-solving machines, working for the greater good of humanity. What is worrisome with these portrayals is the fact that these characters appear to be their work; they are undeniably outstanding at it, but they also have little else in life. They are, in fact, machines, thus also reinforcing the stereotype 'Robot' when linked to autism. It is this one-dimensionality that makes these portrayals come closest to a literary type or even a stock character. The 'Autistic detective' would consequently be closely related to the 'genius or Holmesian detective', thus any interpretation of Sherlock Holmes as autistic reinforces these ideas. The special interests of these characters lie in crime-solving only, leading people to not only associate autism with crime-solving but with very narrow interests. Perhaps it was their schema-refreshment that was so welcomed by the crime genre since these detectives not only have an undeniably unique perspective but also do not have to stop for niceties. While Doyle's original Sherlock apologises for his blunders (*A Study in Scarlet* 18), the BBC series features a Sherlock who will unapologetically insult most people he meets (e.g. "Anderson, don't talk out loud. You lower the IQ of the whole street." *Sherlock*, created by Mark Gatiss and Steven Moffat, season 1, episode 1, Hartswood Films, 2011). However, what is funny in fiction or TV would be less so if I found myself at the receiving end of such insults.

Perhaps it was also a logical evolutionary step from the 'genius detective' towards one whose genius is flawed by their inability to find and maintain meaningful relationships; one for whom one feels sorry because of the 'lesser' lives they lead, such as the brooding detective who has a tragic past and drowns their sorrows in alcohol.

Although less pronounced in young adult fiction, for obvious reasons, the extraordinary abilities that are linked to the character's autism diagnosis tend to be combined with loneliness. It is a recurring theme that the protagonist has a deep wish to find friends (cf. *Mockingbird*, *The London Eye Mystery*, *What to Say Next*). That said, autists should not need to have 'superhuman' abilities in the first place to prove their worth[15]. Fortunately, the majority of young adult fiction does not portray superheroes but individuals who struggle to build and maintain meaningful relationships. Even Trueman is happy to make friends along the way (*Trueman Bradley* 107). However, there is an undeniable tendency towards portraying them as making a significant contribution to their community, particularly in the form of solving crimes. Unfortunately, while such portrayals are entertaining, they do not supply adequate life curves for adolescents or young adults and they will also reinforce stereotypes.

Obviously, assumptions should not be generalised, but I believe that portraying autistic characters as seeking meaningful relationships rather than saving the world should be considered normal, especially in fiction that serves the purpose of representation and identification. Yes, society could benefit from a genius' abilities to solve crimes or make inventions, but portraying autists as machines that serve the greater good is harmful and dehumanising. I do not wish to deny these characters their special abilities, extraordinary memories, or other forms of giftedness, but they should not be all-defining for the portrayal. As human beings they do not have to prove their worth, nor should they be considered void of emotions. After all, everybody encounters social hiccoughs and misunderstandings without having to withdraw from society.

15 On a related note, these characters are not usually set in a science-fictional world where their abilities would be 'normal'.