also the associated stigmata, stereotypes, and prejudices. 'Being normal' and 'fitting in' is the only way to escape ostracization and subsequent harassment, thus many autists choose this road over fighting for acceptance and awareness. It is also commonly encouraged in autists, to the point where the ways by which individuals avoid stigmatisation have become their own field of research.

Masking and Camouflaging

Avoiding stigmatisation could be understood as an intrinsic motivation towards appearing normal and obviating a deviant status, although it must of course be considered a consequence of pressure by society's standards. We are all part of this phenomenon by aligning ourselves according to normalities, as well as navigating and negotiating deviance. In terms of autism, this pressure towards 'being normal' manifested itself in the form of therapies and attempts to find a cure, especially before the activist movement gathered pace. For example, in the wake of Baron-Cohen's theory that autistic individuals lack a Theory of Mind, training programs were developed that aimed at educating – and training – autistic individuals to become 'normal' members of society. A well-known technique is called Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) and relies on operant conditioning.

> To put it briefly, ABA represents a suite of therapeutic modalities whose end goal involves behavioral shaping toward the normative, toward the prosocial, toward compliance. It is, in combination with aversion therapy, one of the primary methodological forerunners of what might now be termed reparative therapy. Paradoxically, it remains the contemporary autism therapy of choice, endorsed by numerous medical authorities, including the U.S. Surgeon General. (Yergeau 29)

ABA is also considered a viable option in other countries, e.g. France, the United Kingdom, or Germany, and there are schools that offer stan-

dardised training programs (e.g. ABAA4all). In *The State of Grace*, Grace hints towards having attended such training programs (109). However, she does not remember them in a positive way, reflecting the change in attitude that has occurred in recent years when complaints surfaced:

> In the autistic community there has emerged a distinctive ex-ABA movement, one led by traumatized autistics and parents alike. Survivors of ABA speak of hours-long sessions spent on inculcating compliance, assent, and normalized gender roles, hours spent on social stories that reinforce stereotypical and cis/heteronormative behaviors. (Yergeau 29)

Such criticism can be attributed to the activist movement; albeit not necessarily grounded in the fact that these individuals oppose the idea of a cure, the obvious grievances certainly furthered their cause.

Obviously, behavioural programs are oriented towards normativity rather than flexible normalism. In contrast, the activist movement was likely accelerated by the fact that "over the past thirty years the incident rate of autism worldwide may have increased three- to fourfold" (Bumiller 967). In the meantime, parents, teachers, and medical staff alike have encouraged autists to "'fit in' and 'act normal'" (Han et al. 17). Consequently, these individuals are openly pressured to change while continually reminded of their deviance. I have previously discussed how stigma can be internalised and reframed (see also Chapter 4.5). However, these coping strategies would lead to acceptance of stigma and integration into identity. This section, on the other hand, discusses forms in which stigma is reduced. It could be considered somewhat of a middle road for those neither fighting for a cure nor fighting the label of a disorder:

> To manage stigma and its negative consequences, the literature suggests that autistic individuals may adopt a few main strategies: concealment and camouflaging, selective disclosure and self-advocacy, as well as positive reframing and reconstructing identity. (Han et al. 18)

Camouflaging "refers to the use of conscious or unconscious strategies, which may be explicitly learned or implicitly developed, to minimise the appearance of autistic characteristics during a social setting" (Hull, Petrides, and Mandy 309). Unfortunately, "numerous, potentially overlapping terminologies have been used in the literature" (Livingston and Happé 729), such that these concepts can easily cause confusion. One model differentiates two forms of camouflaging, i.e. compensation and masking ('concealment') (Hull, Petrides, and Allison et al. 2524). Yet even these categories have no clear division.

> Masking encompasses the aspects of camouflaging that focus on hiding one's ASC [Autism Spectrum Conditions] characteristics and developing different personas or characters to use during social situations. (Hull, Petrides, and Allison et al. 2525)

In other words, it is a mask these individuals put on or a role they act out so as not to appear autistic. On the other hand, compensation

> will also result in a more neurotypical behavioural presentation, however, it goes further than masking/suppression of autistic traits and, instead, involves alternative cognition to circumvent underlying cognitive difficulties. (Livingston et al. 102)

There is a fluent transition from masking to compensation when those 'rules' and behaviours become internalised. Another possible way to differentiate these two modes of behaviour would be to define masking as imitating other people's behaviour versus compensation as actively constructing rules (Livingston et al. 102).

The results of training programs that seek to integrate autistic individuals can be understood as learned camouflaging behaviour. While camouflaging in general and compensation, in particular, might improve outward behaviour in terms of normality, there is "great heterogeneity in the degree to which symptoms lessen, persist or even worsen across the lifetime" (Livingston and Happé 729). Here, it cannot be stressed enough that camouflaging refers to masking, not *healing*,

i.e. camouflaging is not a treatment for autism. However, it is a vicious circle which sets the standards for others, i.e. the better some autists are able to fit into society, the higher expectations become for others. In terms of normality and deviance, individuals may 'outgrow' their diagnosis in that they no longer fulfil diagnostic requirements, sometimes also referred to as 'optimal outcome' (Livingston and Happé 736). In extreme cases, highly able autistic individuals may never or much belatedly be diagnosed. "Success here may be defined as simply not having overt functional impairments or raising concerns of teachers or other professionals" (Hull, Petrides, and Allison et al. 2521). Thus, it is sometimes said that autism in "high-functioning individuals is an invisible disability" (Kelley 123).

Ironically, there are also underlying expectations linked to 'appearing autistic'. This obviously manifests itself in diagnostic criteria when it comes to the health care system, but it may also surface in stereotypical expectations. Individuals who do not appear 'sufficiently' autistic may not get the support they need (Hull, Petrides, and Allison et al. 2528), and their surroundings may not be understanding of their difficulties. Thus, having a label, albeit a guarantee for deviance, may at times be more helpful than trying to avoid stigmatisation. Yet, to be recognised as autistic by lay people mostly consists of fulfilling public stereotypes. A study showed that some individuals were relieved not to meet the stereotype (2528), and consequently not having to fulfil these expectations, but others reported either delayed diagnosis or accusations of being imposters (2528). Thus, being considered normal can be detrimental at times, too.

Camouflaging has measurable benefits. Some participants of a study on this topic "reported feeling satisfied and relieved after camouflaging, particularly if they felt as though it went well" (Hull, Petrides, and Allison et al. 2527). They also assumed that by not appearing autistic they were more successful in life, reaching career goals and having relationships (2528). On the other hand, individuals may at one point become unable to stop their camouflaging behaviour even if they wish to do so (Hull, Petrides, and Allison et al. 2528). It therefore usually comes at a cost to mental health. Camouflaging in all forms

> often requires substantial cognitive effort, can be exhausting and may lead to increased stress responses, meltdown due to social overload, anxiety and depression, and even a negative impact on the development of one's identity. (Lai et al. 691)

Autistic individuals tend to describe camouflaging as "mentally, physically, and emotionally draining; requiring intensive concentration, self-control, and management of discomfort" (Hull, Petrides, and Allison et al. 2527). This is due to "a constant monitoring of the situation as if training oneself in self-monitoring, self-awareness, and monitoring others' reactions, both during and after the interaction occurred" (2527). Masking and shallow compensation, especially, will require much concentration. Internalised strategies, on the other hand, can be applied with less effort, however, only after the individual has invested considerable time and energy into establishing them.

> Put bluntly, camouflaging is not hands-on learning of social conventions but the constant struggle to abide by unknown rules that seem obvious to everybody else. While this might sound dramatic, autistic individuals often cannot tell whether their strategies were successful. (Hull, Petrides, and Allison et al. 2527)

A worst-case scenario might be unsuccessful camouflaging. In this case, individuals have all the costs but none of the benefits. It certainly has to be considered that individuals have different motivations and abilities to engage in such behaviour. However, some "struggle to maintain social relationships and may remain unemployed, despite having the motivation and capabilities to work" (Hull, Petrides, and Allison et al. 2521). For others, the cost of camouflaging might add up or increase over a lifetime and "have a downstream detrimental impact on mental health" (Livingston and Happé 736), leading to burn-outs (735). Others still might engage in camouflaging but be semi-successful, thus leading to "continued social awkwardness and reduced quality of friendships" (733).

All this considered, camouflaging is a common experience for autistic individuals (Hull, Petrides, and Mandy 313), mostly because they are

expected to fit in. Nevertheless, "camouflaging is not necessarily a beneficial behaviour, and should not be regularly expected or encouraged for individuals with ASC" (Hull, Petrides, and Allison et al. 2521), rendering training programs questionable. Representations of autism in the media likely set out to educate the public on autism but have involuntarily created and reinforced stereotypical expectations on what it means to be autistic (and equally, to appear so). Additionally, it can be argued that they have also increased the demand for autistic individuals to fit in, have jobs, friends, and relationships, and contribute to society. The latter may even be vindicated by extraordinary abilities that should be used for the greater good.

There is a plethora of instances in the novels where characters consciously try to mask or camouflage their deviance. I have previously discussed different forms of deviant behaviour and placed them on a gamut. Most notably, I distinguished between visible and invisible deviance, both of which may result in stigmatisation. However, 'invisible' deviance can be more easily camouflaged by avoiding social interactions. Visible deviance, such as being wheelchair-bound, will often lead to immediate stigmatisation and is more difficult to conceal. For autistic individuals, visible deviance may be reduced by adapting clothing styles, haircuts, or body language. It also includes losing 'autistic' body language such as hand flapping. However, since autists usually struggle with social interactions, their difficulties lie with camouflaging their 'invisible' deviance which is significantly harder to accomplish.

Masking and Camouflaging in Autism Portrayals

Masking and camouflaging techniques vary from individual to individual, and they are equally diversely portrayed in the novels. I have thus chosen but a selection of instances to demonstrate some ways in which these techniques are applied in fiction. In *The State of Grace*, Grace has chosen to hide her autism diagnosis. However, this leads to her having anxiety over 'being found out'. She puts it as follows: