

ASD community in ways that current crop of autistic fiction has not yet achieved. (Rozema 30)

For Rozema, the existing depictions are too positive and thus biased to be good templates for young readers, since he is mostly concerned with the role young adult fiction plays in portraying characters autistic readers will identify with. Indeed, it almost seems as if the eagerness to create positive portrayals is sending media depictions spiralling towards a one-sided and glossed-over way of portraying autistic individuals, thus merely creating the illusion of representation and leaving autistic adolescents and young adults with limited possibilities for identification. Consequently, literature can leave us in the wrong when it purports ideas that do not hold true.

Who Gets to Narrate Autism?

The “steady rise in the number of diagnoses” (Semino 142) has created more awareness in the public but also a need for further education on this topic. Autism narrative is thus also the literary way of processing new information that has entered the intermediary discourse:

Autism narrative is a new genre: not expert reports by clinicians or reflections by theorists, but stories about people with autism, told by the people themselves, or their families, or by novelists, or by writers of stories for children. (Hacking, “Autistic autobiography” 1467)

Even though it is a growing genre, its selection is still limited. My analysis in Chapter 3 demonstrated how a set of stereotypes is frequently perpetuated within these narratives. One might argue that on a broader level, all portrayals, even the stereotypical, serve the purpose of creating awareness. However, Hacking theorises that

[n]ovelists study autobiographies, whose authors learn from theorists. Parents pick up ideas from novels when they are thinking about their children. We all watch movies and documentaries. ... The story-tellers learn from autobiographies how to tell their tales. But ... [t]oday's autistic child, brought up on children's stories about autistic children, and who in later years goes on to write an autobiography, will give accounts that are textured by the early exposure to role models. (Hacking, "Autistic autobiography" 1467, 1469)

On one hand, there is an overarching discourse that subsumes all other discourses on autism, not only unified by terminology (labels) but, according to Hacking, shared ideas that are purported across different discourses. On the other hand, I believe, different agents can be identified behind some of the statements, such as medical professionals and autism activists. Here, it might be argued that these experts form their own discourses that feed into the general discourse on autism. Moreover, at least two of these specialised discourses are fighting to influence the public opinion, as I will show below. Fiction, on the other hand, reflects statements made by the intermediary discourse. Unless a novel was published with propagandistic intents, I can thus assume it reflects ideas of the intermediary discourse, which discusses and combines specialised normalities. In other words, I consider novels to be somewhat reflective of society's current understanding of autism and public opinions.

However, on the downside, the media discourse can easily amplify misconceptions. Any portrayal influences the public perception of autism, creating a hermeneutic circle which is constantly updated by new portrayals. Misinformation can be introduced as easily as knowledge and a layperson may not have the means of distinguishing them since their conception of autism is not based upon or updated by knowledge stemming from the scientific discourse or the autism community. Instead, a large part of laypeople solely relies on acquired stereotypes for information on autism. For one thing, this is because the public discourse does not engage in the question of autism diagnosis. It is not concerned with the details of what autism is or how to diagnose it, but

how to simplify the concept. However, while labels have the power to invoke stereotypes, the public also has the power to apply labels, thus attaching new meanings and consequently also stereotypes. Retrospectively labelled characters are thus aligned with intentional portrayals, suggesting a certain family resemblance which will change the working concept. Consequently, the public yields at least some power over the label autism and its stereotypes, if only by sheer number. However, one must not assume ill intentions, for they often also remain without the means of recognising their conceptions as stereotypical and possibly prejudiced.

To better understand the autism discourse, I will assume two opposite parties. One goes back to the medical roots of autism diagnosis; this one I dubbed the 'conservative movement'. It is opposed by the autism rights movement which famously found its beginning with Jim Sinclair and stands for self-advocacy and empowerment. This I will call the 'activist movement'. In parts, it has recently merged with disability studies into the neurodiversity movement, which originated in the late 1990s and suggests that "minority modes of neurocognitive functioning ... are disabled by a hegemonic 'neuro-typical' (i.e. 'normal') society" (Chapman 371). It is most prominent online, i.e. in social networks, where it simultaneously fosters pride in neurodivergent individuals, sometimes also referred to as neuroqueer, while also rejecting "the idea that there is neuro-normality" (Hacking, "Humans, Aliens & Autism" 46). The neurodiversity movement is well embedded, drawing from and participating in

a wide range of political modalities, including grassroots mobilization, human and children's rights activism, self-advocacy, promotion for system change targeted at service and government bureaucracies, and nonviolent political action. (Bumiller 981)

It partially overlaps with autism activism, but originally also embraced ADHD, and dyslexia, and has since grown to foster awareness for FAS, tic disorders, Tourette, and mental health, just to name a few. The general idea that some 'disorders' are in fact merely differences in the way

the brain works certainly borrows from the field of disability studies. It reframes ‘deficits’ as divergences and sometimes even as assets. Neurodiversity is often opposed to neurotypicality. The term ‘neurotypical’ is commonly used to contrast a non-autistic person with an autistic. I too have used it in my study, however, it is neither limited to the meaning of ‘non-autistic’, nor actually in agreement with the idea of neurodiversity, since it suggests that there is a ‘default’ mode of thinking. Yet, ‘neurotypical’ is also a term used by advocates and activists of the neurodiversity movement. Thus, I hope it takes of the ableist edge of contrasting ‘autistic’ with ‘neurotypical’ individuals.

I have contrasted the conservative movement within the autism discourse with the activist rather than the neurodiversity movement. This is in part because the neurodiversity movement only overlaps with autism activism, but it is also because I fear that the impact of the neurodiversity movement could at times be misrepresented within scientific papers. Not only have researchers caught on to the term ‘neurodivergence’, but it is also at times presented as a buzzword. However, the hashtags ‘autistic’ or ‘autism’, alone or in combination with positive addendums such as ‘pride’, ‘awareness’, ‘acceptance’, etc., have been added to significantly more posts or videos on platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, or TikTok than the hashtags ‘neurodiversity’ or ‘neurodivergent’. I therefore suggest that the idea of neurodiversity could be considered a generalised abstraction, perhaps similar to the idea of ‘queerness’, but that individual labels such as autism, Asperger’s, or ADHD are of much more significance when it comes to representation and identification. In other words, the neurodiversity movement might manifest itself in an increased awareness and acceptance of individual labels without actually being named as such.

What I describe as the ‘activist movement’ within the autism discourse has produced “something akin to autism pride” (Hacking, “Humans, Aliens & Autism” 46). Here, activists are fighting for acceptance, against the label of ‘disability’ or ‘disease’, and against a cure. Although one should bear in mind that such labels as ‘activist movement’ hide the facetious appearance of this community, I believe, it is adequate for the issue at hand.

The conservative movement, on the other hand, has its roots in the medical origin of autism. Instead of placing autism on a neurodiverse spectrum, this movement stands for the dichotomy of disease and cure. Thus, it not only defines autism as a disorder but also promotes finding a cure. Again, not everybody who participates in the autism discourse necessarily belongs to one movement or the other. Consequently, one should not place all ‘activists’ within the activist movement, nor all psychologists, doctors, etc. within the conservative movement. However, the conflict between these two movements is not solely grounded in the debate around cure or anti-cure. Referring to Hacking’s essay “Autistic Autobiographies”, he at one point quotes Alison Singer, mother of an autistic daughter, who advocates for finding a cure:

Many days it is hard to believe that the challenges Haley faces with regard to her Asperger syndrome and those Jodie struggles with are related under the same DSM-IV diagnosis. At one end of the autism spectrum, we often find lower functioning persons like my daughter who cannot speak, have violent tantrums and can be self injurious, while at the other end we have persons who struggle with very significant, but very different, predominantly social issues. (Singer, no date, qtd. in Hacking, “Autistic autobiography” 1468)

This, of course, clashes fundamentally with “a growing wing of the autistic community that rejects the idea of looking for a cure” (Hacking, “Autistic autobiography” 1468). However, as Singer mentions, the conflict also arises from the fact that ‘autism’ has become an umbrella term for different diagnoses, a change not all within the community were happy with, either (see Chapter 6.3). Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a label applied to ‘low-functioning’ autists, as well as ‘high-functioning’ individuals. The rift mostly refers to intellectual abilities but also the manifestation of symptoms in general, which tends to be more severe in ‘low-functioning’ individuals. Severely autistic individuals can be very limited in their ability to participate in society. Therefore, stereotypically high or low expectations can be equally harmful.

I suggest that the activist and the conservative movement have both created their own narratives of autism (cf. Duffy & Dorner below), both of which feed into literature. The activist movement has streamlined their arguments toward the 'quirky but gifted' autistic, who is high-functioning, loveable, and potentially able to save the world. Here, the activist movement fights to reduce the communication barrier. On the other hand, the conservative movement, to whom I may count Singer, paints the picture of a 'low-functioning', violent, disabled, and shut-out child. It lobbies for a cure for autism and thus benefits from a narrative that suggests autistic children are in fact a family tragedy. For lack of better terminology, but because of their social impact, I will continue to use the terms high- and low-functioning, despite their ableist tendencies.

Within the autism discourse, two competing narratives co-exist. However, influencing the public opinion by streamlining the narrative towards either the 'quirky but gifted' autistic or the shut out, 'low functioning', violent, and disabled child, is equally harmful. Although I will not be able to identify all forces that influence these discourses, I believe it is useful to contrast these two – slightly exaggerated – narratives in order to demonstrate the role of the intermediary discourse and public opinions.

The Narrative of Theory of Mind – *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*

In 2011, scholars John Duffy and Rebecca Dorner proposed the theory that

diagnoses of autism are essentially storytelling in character, narratives that seek to explain contrasts between the normal and the abnormal, sameness and difference, thesis and antithesis. (Duffy and Dorner 201)

If diagnoses of autism are indeed storytelling, then one could argue that an autism diagnosis is a form of deviance that requires a fundamentally