Conclusion

A growing number of characters in novels, movies, or TV series are labelled autistic, either within the work itself or by the audience. This poses the question of how autism is portrayed, to what end, and why some characters are reinterpreted as autistic when the author or producer had likely no intentions of presenting them as such.

In my study, I focused on characters in young adult fiction, but the ideas of character theory can be applied across different media. Characters differ from living human beings in that they are simultaneously larger and lesser than life because they are words which become alive in the readers' minds. Their teleology lends them a certain determination, thus characters are always representative of something larger than life, such as an idea or a concept. On the other hand, however, fictional characters are very much like dead people, because they cannot create new memories and are trapped within narratives. Consequently, even autism autobiographies feature literary characters. However, such characters cannot be autistic because they only exist as 'glimpses' with large gaps in between. Both aspects, i.e. their teleologically heightened purpose and their limited 'existence', coincide with their synthetic and thematic components as theorised by Phelan. The synthetic component of a character makes them artificial, therefore they cannot be real and consequently also not autistic. On the other hand, the thematic component makes them representative of a class of people or a concept. In the case of autism portrayals, these characters are therefore representative of the concept of autism, but only to the extent that they match the reader's understanding of the latter. Thus, whenever hobby psychologists engage in

'diagnosing' characters, it throws more light on their individual understanding of autism than on the characters themselves.

On a linguistic level, such ascriptions can also not be considered 'diagnoses' because they were made by laypeople. Instead, they are labels. In general, labels refer to the concepts a person holds, i.e. the 'building blocks of our thoughts'. All knowledge is thus organised in these concepts. However, when it comes to processing our surroundings, we will not consult all knowledge (memories, experiences, facts) we have on a certain concept. Instead, we tend to rely on stereotypes. Lippmann, who coined the term in its modern sense, stated that 'for the most part we define first and then see'. Stereotypes can thus be considered automated responses that allow us to simplify and quickly judge our surroundings. They can be understood as abbreviated, i.e. condensed, versions of the concepts a person holds. These semi-automatic responses do not usually allow us to reflect on everything we know about something or someone. Therefore, stereotypes can make us biased, to the point where our confirmation bias will turn them into self-fulfilling prophecies. If (negative) emotions are involved, stereotypes may even become prejudices. Literature also contributes to the perpetuation of these stereotypes, since readers apply them to literary texts and characters, too. The explicit labelling in a text will naturally trigger the stereotypes a person holds on this concept, thus activating the primacy effect and the confirmation bias. However, the same can happen if a character gets retrospectively labelled, making readers biased to the point where they will discard textual evidence in favour of their interpretation. This can lead to a vicious circle that will slowly replace knowledge with prejudices.

Generally speaking, stereotypes can only be counteracted by knowledge. Additionally, readers will only abandon their interpretation if the textual 'evidence' is irreconcilable with it. Here, it is important to note that readers will never decode characters the way they were encoded by the author. Because of the aesthetic nature of these portrayals and the fact that readers rely on their understanding of the world to make sense of a character's motifs, there is no 'one' character but a kaleidoscope of interpretations. Therefore, discussions on whether or not characters are representative of autism will never come to an end, not

even for intentional portrayals. However, if a text explicitly uses a label but the portrayal does not coincide with the reader's understanding of this concept, it will be considered bad or unrealistic. However, sometimes stereotypes are the only information a person has on a certain concept. This can lead to instances of carelessly labelled characters. Secondly, readers may have only become acquainted with certain concepts through literature or other media. I suggest that readers are able to recognise similarities in characters based on Wittgenstein's theory of family resemblance. In other words, because these characters share overlapping features, they are attributed to the same concept. Thus, even though a reader might already be acquainted with the concept of autism, every autism portrayal will extend and change the outline of the concept. A layperson's understanding of a concept such as autism can thus be very limited, either because it solely consists of stereotypes or because it is based on (stereotypical) fictional portrayals. Again, stereotypes do not necessarily have to be wrong or pejorative, but they will always be limited. Consequently, stereotypes affect how autists are seen and treated in real life. Since literature has the power to change or perpetuate stereotypes, autism portrayals should not be considered purely fictional but with an educational impact.

To prove the existence of autism stereotypes in fiction, I used stereotypes previously identified by other authors to generate criteria for the analysis of the novels. In total, I was able to single out four stereotypes: autists as disabled, as geniuses, as childlike, and as robotic. My results showed that all four stereotypes were present in every novel examined, albeit to different degrees. Three of the novels also referred to the alien trope, a metaphorical joke that autists are 'aliens' among humans. All portrayals shared as common characteristics a love for order and/or routine, hyper-attentiveness or -sensitivity, a barrier when it comes to communicating feelings, as well as a tendency to communicate very literally. Characters were also portrayed as overly honest. Since sometimes stereotypes evolve into literary types or stock characters, i.e. literary conventions with recognition value, I briefly considered the possibility of 'the Autist' as a type. However, my analysis is too limited to yield any findings about literary conventions, thus I abandoned the theory on the ba-

sis of speculation. Moreover, I gave two examples of characters who were not explicitly labelled autistic within the text but subsequently reinterpreted as such. Sherlock Holmes's portrayal (*The Sign of the Four*) alludes to only two out of four stereotypes. Thus, although the stereotypes were present in autism narratives, they did not serve as indicators for portrayals that were retrospectively labelled 'autistic'. Yet, by associating characters with the label autism, they suddenly appear to be paradigmatic, which in turn might be highly problematic if those characters are associated with or generate negative or false stereotypes and ideas. Here, one of the most controversially discussed novels is *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* by Mark Haddon. Some autists were deeply offended by the way the protagonist is portrayed as elitist and ignorant. Although the book jacket originally featured the label 'Asperger's', which has since been removed by the publisher, the portrayal is still one of the most widely quoted, which is why I have included it in my analysis.

Having determined the existence of all four stereotypes in the novels, I proceeded to explore them further. I had based my study on the premise that autism portrayals deviate in some form from neurotypical portrayals. In a way, this made my analysis biased, because I was looking for differences rather than commonalities. However, since the characters represented intentional autism portrayals, they had already been labelled and thus marked as deviant. I used discourse theory to conceptualise the workings of normality and deviance, based on Link's and Keckeisen's theories. Link suggests that the intermediary discourse – which consists of several discourses – processes ideas generated by specialised discourses and the elementary discourse. By combining these sectionalised normalities, the intermediary discourse creates a cross-section of normality. This normality can take the form of protonormality, which is defined by a narrow set of normative rules, or the form of flexible normalism, which establishes a broad normality that seeks to integrate deviations. Both forms of normality co-exist, although modern society tends towards applying flexible normalism.

The intermediary discourse is not congruent with the public sphere. Instead, Habermas theorises that the public sphere is 'a network for the communication of content and statements'. It is therefore unsur-

prising that Link locates the public in relation to discursive events, i.e. events with political and medial impact. Literature is produced by and consequently reflects the intermediary discourse, but it also influences the public opinion. The stereotypes that I previously used to analyse the novels can be considered to be part of the intermediary discourse and consequently public. The fact that they are present within the literary discourse indicates their presence within the intermediary discourse. All four of the stereotypes denote deviance in relation to the normality the intermediary discourses created. For example, the idea of disability is contrasted with 'normal' participation in society, consequently the stereotype 'Disabled' references criteria that mark a character's deviance, e.g. being dependent on others for everyday tasks. Here, the deviance of a character often results in harassment. In other cases, for example when a character appears (stereotypically) childlike and is thus perceived as 'not behaving their age', others might react patronising or outright hostile, depending on the situation. Similarly, the other two stereotypes are also linked to some form of deviance.

All forms of deviance are negotiated, per Keckeisen's definition. It is thus often the powerful (and sometimes the masses) who will influence ideas of deviance and normality, as well as public opinions. However, deviance is also negotiated on a smaller scale such as everyday conversations. Individuals who lose such a negotiation are then forced to accept their deviant status, at least within a certain community or social setting, Goffman describes this as a stigma; while stigmata can come in the form of bodily marks, they may also be invisible and thus again subject to negotiation. The institutionalised form of stigmatisation is called 'labelling' and includes diagnoses, criminal records, etc. Once an individual is stigmatised or labelled, they are categorised, and their behaviour is subsequently perceived as deviant. Therefore, labelling and stigmatisation technically refer to the same ascription of deviance, i.e. when the deviant status becomes ontological in a constructivist sense.

While the discourses that create normality and deviance have a powerful influence on societies and individuals, normalities, deviance, and stigmata must be considered fleeting, or rather, anchored in space and time. Therefore, not even scientific 'facts' are of supra-historical signif-

icance. Retrospectively applied, a diagnosis such as autism will reduce a character to their symptoms and drastically diminish their free will and the complexity of the portrayal, consequently failing to take into account their self-understanding (which did not include autism) and their interaction with others, who were equally unaware of such a diagnosis. This poses the question of how a label will affect the labelled individual. The controversy around the label *Autism Spectrum Disorder*, which was introduced by the medical discourse, generated more labels such as 'high- and low-functioning'. It can be read as indicative of the fact that labels are linked to different stigmata, thus owning a label allows a person to manage their identity and stigma more successfully. A label with negative connotations will always result in stigmatisation and perceived deviance – not least due to the primacy effect and the confirmation bias, thus labels should not be handled carelessly, especially since a deviant status can be detrimental to the mental health and the self-understanding of a person. Because of their ostracising nature, stigmata are often associated with poor mental health and bullying. However, some stigmata appear to be more 'manageable' and less disparaging than others, thus the label 'Asperger's' might be preferred over the label 'autistic'.

Still, instances of othering and harassment occurred in all novels examined, with *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* being most often criticised for normalising verbal and physical violence against autists. I believe that *Curious Incident* is emblematic of a fundamental debate about autism. I theorise that there are two movements within the autism discourse, i.e. the conservative movement that originates in the medical discourse and the activist movement. Here, autism activists are fighting for the acceptance of autism and against the idea that autism needs to be cured. Their agenda partially overlaps with the neurodiversity movement and the field of disability studies, suggesting that autism is not a disorder but a difference in cognitive function. Such claims are contrasted with accounts of severely autistic individuals, which are claimed to be 'mind-blind' and therefore shut out from the world. The conservative movement originated in the medical discourse on autism and advocates for a cure. According to Duffy and Dorner, it reframed autism as a narrative of sadness, one that defines autists

as inherently tragic beings because they lack a Theory of Mind and therefore something fundamentally human. This idea feeds into the stereotypes 'Disabled' and 'Robot'. Generally speaking, Theory of Mind is a concept that is most often associated with autism. It is theorised that neurotypical individuals have naturally developed a Theory of Mind by the age of four, thus enabling them to recognise emotional states, desires, intentions, and beliefs in others. By implication, individuals who lack a Theory of Mind are considered unaware of their own emotions, desires, etc., and thus outlined as 'emotionally thin', a theory Hacking heavily criticised because it denies these individuals not only their humanity but places them below sentient animals. Autism may cause regression, where a period of typical development is followed by the loss of previously acquired skills. This form of late-onset autism gave rise to the metaphor of a changeling and the idea that autism 'steals' the child away from the parents, both tropes that were used by the conservative movement.

Technically, the activist and the conservative movement both feed into the intermediary discourse and thus by implication the literary discourse. However, their narratives are largely divergent, which is furthered by the idea of a spectrum. The label *Autism Spectrum Disorder* is often criticised for implying that autists can be placed on a gamut, with those considered 'severely autistic' on one end, and 'mildly autistic' on the other. In novels, but also TV series and movies, those less affected by their autism are usually overrepresented. Here, autism is often paired with extraordinary abilities, allowing these individuals to be exceptional detectives, or brilliant mathematicians, scientists, or inventors. This gave rise to the stereotype that autists are naturally gifted in one area or another, sometimes interchangeably used with the term 'savant', which, however, refers to a different diagnosis. While the intermediary discourse usually aims at reconciling different incoming information, the literary discourse is dominated by overly positive portrayals. Robert Rozema criticises this idea of autists being 'quirky but capable of saving the world', which creates unrealistic expectations for autists in real life and does not serve as realistic role models for children and adolescents. Young adult fiction especially is a 'fundamentally didactic' genre thus

the significance of realistic portrayals should not be overlooked. During adolescence, people begin to carve out their identities in relation to society and its normalities; and they will continue to meaningfully integrate their selves throughout their lives, both dia- and synchronically in the form of life stories. Jürgen Link theorises that by positioning ourselves in relation to ideas of normalities, our 'live curves' align or diverge from that of socially idealised ones. Indeed, every society offers a plethora of such 'application templates', portrayed in art and literature in the form of narratives. Young adult fiction naturally addresses questions of conformity, normality, and deviance. However, the overrepresentation of high-functioning individuals with extraordinary abilities denies young autists realistic application templates for their lives, leaving them instead with neurotypical role models and the pressure to 'fit in' and 'be normal'. Indeed, the fact that autism is widely considered to be a stigma often pushes those individuals to engage in masking and camouflaging, i.e. the intentional and at times subconscious hiding of autism traits. Sometimes, autists are even trained through behavioural programs to suppress autistic behaviours such as stimming in order to appear 'normal' and not draw attention. Camouflaging refers to all conscious or unconscious strategies that allow an individual to appear 'less autistic'. They may be explicitly or implicitly learned, to the point where they become internalised. At times, this is likened to learning a second language. Other times, individuals choose to mask their autism by actually pretending to be someone else. While this also allows an individual to hide their autistic traits, it often comes at the cost of mental health problems and identity loss. Camouflaging strategies cannot be considered a form of 'healing' autism, although it is sometimes referred to as 'outgrowing' autism, to the point where individuals no longer fulfil diagnostic requirements. In these cases, an individual is able to successfully camouflage their autism through conscious and unconscious strategies, thus appearing normal. Within the medical discourse, this is referred to as the 'optimal outcome'. However, it can be difficult for individuals to lose their stigma, even if they no longer fulfil the criteria that actually triggered the stigmatisation in the first place. Both, the primacy effect and the confirmation bias will sustain the stigma. Usu-

ally, an individual will have to hide (or lose) their deviance and move to a new community in order to cast off a stigma.

I have stated before that autism has a complex and multifaceted clinical picture. Camouflaging or masking further distorts it, by enforcing ideas of normality. Indeed, the pull of normality should not be neglected. For example, it is theorised that individuals who were only diagnosed as adults had subconscious ways of 'compensating' for their difficulties, which, however, can often lead to depression or burnout. Thus, the way autism shows not only differs from individual to individual but also changes over time. On the other hand, stories in novels usually only offer glimpses into the lives of the characters, which are then cut short on the last page. Therefore, the window for any development is short. Moreover, novels usually draw their tension from unresolved conflicts. In young adult fiction, such tension often arises from social expectations and the proximity or distance of normality and deviance. Even though modern society leans toward flexible normalism, literature thus also engages in reinforcing (ideas of) normality. Most protagonists in the novels examined could be considered dynamic in that they acquired new skills, formed new relationships, and gained insights that allowed them to become more independent, improve their social standing, and obtain new perspectives. Put starkly, they moved away from being stereotypically autistic (i.e. deviant). This should not be read as me mapping ideas of normality onto autistic individuals. Rather, the protagonists in these novels were either portrayed on the threshold of adulthood or their growth stemmed from successfully reducing the communication barrier and making themselves and their needs understood by others. While the latter alludes to the double-empathy-problem, it is also a form of renegotiating the stigma.

I also explored narratological features that portrayed a character's deviance. Some texts used visual rhetoric to highlight different ways of thinking, e.g. bulleted lists or timetables that were included in the text. Additionally, nearly all characters were portrayed as struggling in social situations and communication, often because they lacked pragmatic competence. Portraying characters as very literal and honest turned out to be a common stylistic device of autism narratives, often introducing

a comical aspect but also sometimes defended as schema refreshments. Other instances included over- and undersharing of information and body language such as smiling, as well as unintentional impoliteness (furthered by being overly honest), as well as not understanding figurative language such as metaphors. In some ways, these hiccoughs in conversations could be traced back to the non-observance of the Gricean maxims. Infringements of the maxims indicate that a speaker is not operating under the same Cooperative Principle as the listener. Here, misunderstandings may arise if the non-observance of the maxims is perceived as an intentional violation. Since the protagonists are usually native speakers, they are expected to adopt the same Cooperative Principle. Failing to do so will result in deviance and loss of status. Deficits in pragmatic competence therefore almost always come at the cost of the 'autistic' character, whereas the reader is expected to understand the subtext and thus be entertained. Quite often, background characters will be representative of the Cooperative Principle the protagonist (or other character) violates, thus building the backdrop for their deviance. If the reader is privy to the thoughts of the deviant character, they may still sympathise with them and gain further insights into their thinking. This allows a reader to better understand the character's Cooperative Principle, perhaps even making them appear less deviant if effects can be assigned to their cause. However, deficits in pragmatic competence might be artistically heightened in autism portrayals. While studies showed that autists in real life tend to think and communicate more literally, other researchers found that autistic individuals with average intelligence typically pick up on figurative speech and are as capable of understanding it as their peers once they reach adulthood. Therefore, such portrayals can be considered the result of neurotypical authors imagining an autist's way of thinking. Even novels that were written with the explicit intention of creating awareness and educating on autism, might easily fall into the trap of exploiting a character's deviance for humorous effects, making them one-dimensional and trite.

To avoid the fallacy of stereotypical portrayals, characters should be portrayed as dynamic and capable of change and growth, without, of course, suggesting that they should be 'cured' of their autism, which

would change the message altogether. It would, however, not be an easy fix to simply concentrate on novels written by autistic writers. For one thing, audiences seem to prefer portrayals by neurotypical writers, potentially because these perpetuate publicly held stereotypes. Additionally, however, autistic authors participate in the same discourses and have therefore adopted similar ideas. In "Autistic Autobiography", Hacking even suggests that autism discourses bleed together through shared ideas and create the language in which autism narratives are told. Therefore, autistic and neurotypical authors employ the same concepts to tell their stories. In a sense, autism narratives have thus evolved too far to be disentangled from each other merely on the basis of their authors. However, it might still be beneficial to examine whether the autism stereotypes I identified are perpetuated in fiction written by autistic authors, and if so to what degree. After all, autism narratives are permeated by narratives of autism.

Outlook

My sample size for this study was small and less diverse, considering that I concentrated on young adult fiction only. It would be interesting to apply the same criteria to portrayals in adult fiction, as well as to compare protagonists with secondary characters. I would imagine that autism portrayals where the reader is not privy to the thoughts of the character easily result in one-dimensional characters mostly introduced for comical effects or the appearance of diversity. Such characters might serve as stepping stones for the protagonist or others, and they are also likely to perpetuate stereotypes due to their lessened mimetic components.

The criteria I have established for the analysis of the novels could also be adapted to movies and TV series, which have a much larger audience and thus arguably a higher impact on society's understanding of autism. Here, it would be interesting to see what stereotypes are portrayed, how they are weighted, and what roles these characters take up within the storylines. Personally, I believe portrayals such as those in *The State of Grace* and *Can You See Me* should be considered desirable, where

the characters are not exceptionally gifted, nor expected to save the world to 'prove their worth'. It is also quite possible that 'the Autist' has established itself as a type or stock character within literature, movies, or TV series. I have offered a preliminary outline of its characteristics, but again a larger sample size would be needed, perhaps to the point of a discourse analysis. The existence of such a type or stock character would prove that 'the Autist' has ascended to an artistic realm and should therefore be considered fictional and symbolically heightened. However, I do believe that this study is a first step toward discussing autism portrayals in terms of stereotypical assumptions. Having identified some of the workings and origins behind those stereotypes, such portrayals should be re-evaluated in light of these findings. Autism awareness should entail awareness of the stereotypes, too, so that fictional portrayals can serve as realistic representations and application templates for autists in real life. Awareness of stereotypes also allows for the conscious rejection or critical evaluation of the same, thus offering a tool for a more objective discussion of autism portrayals – intentional or retrospectively labelled. Stereotypes are not necessarily bad, but prejudices and generalised assumptions can only be counteracted by knowledge, and for this, we must be aware of where our knowledge ends and our stereotypes begin.