Autism Stereotypes Portrayed in Fiction

In the previous chapter, some criteria were established to identify stereotypes portrayed in novels. These criteria remain contestable, as does the selection of stereotypes. However, I believe that, based on the criteria, readers will get a good idea of which characteristics are commonly portrayed. The following analysis mostly serves to demonstrate whether these stereotypes are portrayed in fiction, and if so, in what combination. Beforehand, I wish to briefly comment on dynamic characters in relation to stereotypes. Characters can be considered dynamic if they change and develop over the course of the story. In this case, I used the criteria of the stereotypes as indicators. For example, a character that finds friends when previously they had none and were lonely, has made a significant step towards being more included and less ostracised, thus lessening the defining impact of the stereotype 'Disabled'. Equally, a character that learns how to deceive others – even if it would only be considered a white lie – has improved their conversation skills. However, because it can be argued that all characters undergo some form of change or are faced with new situations, I have only concentrated on the most-defining stereotype. If by the end of the story this stereotype had arguably less impact on the character's outline, i.e. their self-understanding as well as their standing in society, then I considered the character dynamic. The following table is based on a close reading of the novels concerning the representation of stereotypes. The data suggest that further evaluation could be promising.

Table 1: Representation of stereotypes from strongest (1) to least (5)

	Disabled	Genius	Childlike	Robot	Alien	Dynamic
Curious Incident	2	3	1	4	n/a	No
London Eye Mystery	4	2	(3)	1	n/a	Yes
Marcelo	2	4	1	3	Yes	Yes
Mockingbird	3	4	(2)	1	n/a	Yes
Trueman	4	2	1	3	n/a	No
State of Grace	2	5	4	3	Yes	Yes
What to Say Next	4	2	3	1	n/a	Yes
Can You See Me	2	4	1	3	Yes	Yes

Source: Own work.

The fact that all novels featured all four stereotypes indicates that they are indeed commonly portrayed in autism narratives. Three novels even alluded to the alien trope. However, stereotypes are used to varying degrees and thus allow for more variation, making these characters appear more mimetic and less thematic. On the other hand, these characters were explicitly labelled, which reinforced their thematic components.

There are already some observations to be made but also some limits to be kept in mind. First of all, the stereotype 'Childlike' is somewhat misleading if one analyses young adult fiction with protagonists ranging from ten to seventeen years of age. In the depictions of Trueman (*Trueman Bradley*) or Christopher (*Curious Incident*), the dissonance of this stereotype is captured in full force, whereas Caitlin simply *is* a child. Thus, this particular stereotype gains exponentially in effect, the higher the discrepancy between expected and perceived age-related behaviour, an aspect considered for the evaluation. Trueman and Christopher also show no progress, nor do they seem to have the urge to fit in and the reader may envision these characters as 'forever children' and forever dependent on others for everyday tasks.

Secondly, genial abilities may be less pronounced due to the genre. Apart from Trueman, these characters do not allude to the stock character 'Holmesian detective'. Christopher, Marcelo (*Marcelo*), and David (*What to Say Next*) are all portrayed as having extraordinary scientific abilities, but these are for the most part negligible as synthetic functions. For example, David makes some complicated calculations concerning a car accident and finds inconsistencies, only to figure out that Kat had been lying to him. However, the novel is not concerned with David's genius. Whereas crime-solving is the Holmesian detective's raison d'être, David's portrayal leans towards its mimetic components. In other words, David is first and foremost human, not a genius or a detective.

Finally, three novels allude to the 'alien' trope. While it is only hinted at in *Marcelo in the Real World* and *Can You See Me*, *The State of Grace* explicitly toys with the idea. The novel starts with "Being a human is a complicated game – like seeing a ghost in the mirror and trying to echo everything they do" (*State of Grace* 1). Grace does not refer to 'being human'

but to imitating a human being. Here, the alien trope allows her to explore the fine line between trying to fit in and not losing her own (autistic) identity since it metaphorically suggests that 'being human' does not come naturally to Grace. Her everyday struggles are mainly due to the fact that she is constantly trying to fit in, as well as her anxiety over being 'found out' and consequently losing her friends. This ongoing panic mode combined with her hypersensitivity causes her to be easily overwhelmed. However, it is not unlike portrayals of anxiety, such as Aza in *Turtles All The Way Down* by John Green. Interestingly, Grace's portrayal contrasts with the others in that it does not fit certain stereotypical assumptions. In fact, she even calls them out:

> I do sometimes wonder whether I sneezed one day and she caught Asperger's from me, or at least the bits everyone reads about, because unlike her I've never written a list in my life, and I'm hopeless at maths, and I don't have a special superpower like drawing entire cityscapes from memory. (State of Grace 43)

Thus, while *The State of Grace* emphasises the alien trope, it deliberately defies other common stereotypes.

I consider nearly all characters dynamic, with the exception of Christopher (*Curious Incident*) and Trueman (*Trueman Bradley*). It can be argued that Christopher ventured out to look for his mother, travelling for the first time and on his own, and learning new things such as riding the tube. However, at the end of the novel, Christopher's outlook on life has not changed and he is still highly dependent on his parents. His relationship with his father was severed but it did not affect Christopher's black-and-white thinking, nor does Christopher reflect on the fact that his mother simply left. Christopher remains childlike naïve in his perspective on the world. As for Trueman, he manages to build a detective agency and find friends and thus could be considered a dynamic character. Yet I remain reluctant to do so because he has not truly changed but rather carved out a niche for himself, not least thanks to the several million dollars he inherited. The obvious message of the novel is that autists are loveable the way they are and that they do not have to change

just to fit into society's understanding of normal. In reality, however, this form of radical acceptance does not work, neither for autists nor for neurotypicals. Indeed, young adult fiction in particular tends to portray the tension that arises from social expectations placed on adolescents and their subsequent journey of finding their place in life (cf. Chapter 5.1). Similar to Christopher, Trueman has not gained any independence by the end of the story that could be traced back to self-growth and would have helped lessen the impact of the stereotype 'Childlike'. Again, I do not wish to oppose the idea of acceptance as a solution, but neither should the growth of characters be neglected.

Evaluation by Stereotype

For this evaluation, the criteria from the previous chapter were used to identify relevant text passages that relate to the four stereotypes (see Appendix A for data). The mean average was established by and for comparing these eight novels only and has no significance beyond that. However, the evaluation demonstrates how some novels lean more heavily towards stereotyped portrayals and what criteria appear to be most prevalent.

Key:
white: *not applicable/only hinted at*
light grey: *at least one instance but few compared to other characters*
dark grey: *several instances/recurring motif*

Table 2: Manifestation of the stereotype 'Disabled'

Stereotype Disabled	Othering	Dependency	Harassment	One-Dimensional	Tragic	Comment
Curious Incident	dark	dark	dark	light	dark	All characters experience othering in some form, i.e. obstacles when it comes to participating in society and generally being perceived as 'different'. Closely linked to this, these characters also experience harassment due to their differences. Although 'Dependency' seems another criterion at first glance, most characters are dependent because of their age (child/teenager).
London Eye Mystery	dark		light		light	
Marcelo	dark	dark	dark		light	
Mockingbird	dark	dark	dark			
Trueman Bradley	dark	dark	dark	dark		
State of Grace	dark	light	light		light	
What to Say Next	dark	dark	dark	light	light	
Can You See Me	dark	light	dark	dark	dark	

Source: own work.

Table 3: Manifestation of the stereotype 'Genius'

Stereotype Genius	Gifted	Hyper-attentive/ -sensitive	Combined with Loneliness	Comment
Curious Incident	■	■		On the surface, this stereotype applies to all. However, it is in fact the hyper-attentiveness/-sensitivity that is characteristic of all portrayals examined. If the protagonist was determined to find friends, they were usually portrayed as (retrospectively) lonely. All characters are portrayed as having a special interest they are really good at/know much about, however, in Ted, Grace, Marcelo, and Tally it is not combined with an unusually high IQ
London Eye Mystery	▨	■	■	
Marcelo	▨	■	■	
Mockingbird	■	■	■	
Trueman Bradley	■	■		
State of Grace		■		
What to Say Next	■	■	■	
Can You See Me		■		

Source: own work.

Table 4: Manifestation of the stereotype 'Childlike'

Stereotype Childlike	Naivety	Honesty	Literalness/ Pragmatics	Patronising	Dynamic	Comment
Curious Incident						The majority of characters struggle with figurative language and pragmatic competence. Moreover, most of the characters are portrayed as being very honest (even if the situation requires more tact), which is closely linked to pragmatic competency. Finally, many of them tend to have a naïve view, including being oblivious to the intentions/power games of others. However, three of the characters are still children (Ted, Tally, and Caitlin).
London Eye Mystery						
Marcelo						
Mockingbird						
Trueman Bradley						
State of Grace						
What to Say Next						
Can You See Me						

Source: own work.

Table 5: Manifestation of the stereotype 'Robot'

Stereotype Robot/Computer/Machine	Order/Routine	Lack of emotions	Communication Barrier	Mind-blindness	Comment
Curious Incident	grey	grey	grey	grey	All characters show a need for routine and an aversion to surprises, however, in varying degrees. Some may wear the same clothes every day, eat the same foods, have strictly planned schedules, etc, whereas others are more spontaneous but become anxious if too many new sensations occur. Nearly all characters have difficulties communicating their feelings in a way that others understand and are consequently perceived as aloof or robotic. Mind-blindness: grey = alluded to but not portrayed
London Eye Mystery	grey	grey	grey		
Marcelo	grey	grey	grey		
Mockingbird	grey	grey	grey	grey	
Trueman Bradley	grey	grey	grey		
State of Grace	grey		grey		
What to Say Next	grey		grey		
Can You See Me	grey	grey	grey		

Source: own work.

Taken together, one may state that these portrayals share the following combination of characteristics: a need/love for routine, hyper-attentiveness and/or -sensitivity, a barrier when it comes to communicating feelings, as well as a tendency to communicate very literally. Finally, most characters are also portrayed as being very honest. All this combined leads to instances of othering, with characters not being able to fully participate in society.

I would not want to base any statistical assumptions on this data, but I believe that it is safe to state that, except for the alien metaphor, these stereotypes are indeed portrayed in fiction. I have previously toyed with the idea of 'the Autist' as a literary type and it appears I have also found some common denominators, which frankly accumulate to a rather rigid character. At first glance, this might appear redundant, after all, I set out to find stereotypes in characters and now that I have found them, I declare them stereotypical. However, in theory, if 'the Autist' was an actual literary type, no explicit diagnosis would have to be mentioned in the text. Its implicit recognition value alone would trigger the association. Interestingly, Draaisma gives very similar examples for his stereotypes, i.e. literalness, aversion to touch, a love for order, and hyperattentive-ness, before he ventures into the field of savantism (cf. 1476–77). His definition works the other way round, i.e. through an artistic device, usually a mentioned diagnosis, the author or filmmaker alludes to a character's autism, which subsequently triggers a set of stereotypical assumptions that supply the audience with enough information to understand the character's motifs and intentions. According to this theory, the explicit labelling within the text would result in the reinforcement of the stereotypes portrayed.[13]

However, several aspects limit my findings. For one thing, this analysis is biased, having only taken into consideration the stereotypes previously identified by other authors. There might be more stereotypes commonly associated with autism portrayals that have not yet been considered. Secondly, the sample size is equally limited. I have only focused my

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13   On a related note, Draaisma's theory might not refer to first-person narrators in fiction, since he is mostly concerned with movies.

analysis on young adult fiction and adolescent protagonists, and thirdly, this study merely represents my own findings and interpretation of textual evidence. The instances I have identified may not all be conclusive evidence, and the possibility remains that I have overlooked other text passages. However, my findings are still relevant for they are representative of a tendency in each novel, even on the grounds that not all examples were identified or would have been identified by other readers. I am therefore confident that my data is sufficient to prove the presentation of these stereotypes in literary portrayals. Additionally, Draaisma's theory suggests that merely alluding to the label 'autism' or derivations thereof will trigger a set of stereotypes in the readers. Therefore, if the stereotypes I identified coincide with the reader's, they will necessarily reinforce each other. Vice versa, if the reader's stereotypes contradict my selection, the confirmation bias will overrule textual evidence to a certain extent. At this point, the study enters into reception theory and requires other methods to proceed.

Another aspect that limits my findings is the fact that most of the novels examined portray dynamic characters that are capable of changing and evolving, therefore losing some of their stereotypical rigidity. *The State of Grace*, especially, tries to defy common stereotypes such as extraordinary abilities or an inability to lie. Thus, the stereotypes alone do not serve as adequate characterisations of these protagonists. Vice versa, the protagonists are not ideal personifications of a type. However, literary types are per definition thematic, i.e. representative of a group of people, and stylised to the point where they become largely predictable. In the novels at hand, the mimetic component is too pronounced for those characters to be considered purely thematic.[14] Still, it is telling that all four stereotypes were present in all novels examined, testifying to their widespread acceptance (and perhaps my confirmation bias). Since this study aims at identifying stereotypes in literature, I do not wish to push the subject of a literary type. Any justifiable findings would require an extensive discourse analysis.

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14   Although the 'autistic detective' might pose an exception to this rule, see Chapter 7.5.

What opposes my findings is the example of Sherlock Homes. The character is often labelled autistic, yet I would argue that in *A Study in Scarlet* (Arthur Conan Doyle, 1887) Holmes's characteristics only partly match the stereotypes 'Genius' and 'Robot'. He is of course hyperattentive when it comes to details, but he is not described as loving/needing routines, nor as having difficulties communicating his emotions or employing metaphors. Here, Draaisma's theory cannot be applied, because the label 'autistic' did not exist when the story was published. It was not the author who supplied this interpretation, but journalists or avid fans. Indeed, I believe two aspects came together. Firstly, the reinterpretations were based on a 'hunch' rather than fact. The character was checked against the individual's concept of autism. However, because the understanding of autism was limited – or perhaps even wrong – in the first place, there were too few criteria that could have counteracted such a reading. Quite likely, these readers applied concepts, i.e. stereotypes which were even more simplified than those I established. Afterwards, these readers fell prey to their own confirmation bias, subsequently neglecting to take into account any facts that would falsify their hypothesis.[15] Interestingly, it appears as if these reinterpretations were met with little resistance so one might ask why the original characterisations were so easily overruled. Likely, the confirmation bias was strong enough and the concept of autism unspecific enough to be applied to this character. Additionally, if the original text was not re-read, the memory of the character could have been too hazy, further blurring the lines. In the case of Sherlock Holmes, there are also many remakes that may have gradually shifted the character towards this particular interpretation. Perhaps knowledge could have prevented such errors, but the confirmation bias is quite strong. By spreading the opinion that Holmes appears autistic (e.g. journalists via newspaper articles), a snowball effect was created, causing first-time-readers to be biased,

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15   There is, of course, the third option that I have failed to find the common denominator that links all these portraits together, but this would presuppose an ontological property that can be found.

too, due to the primacy effect, which then went hand in hand with the confirmation bias.

The example of Holmes demonstrates how intentional portrayals and those retrospectively reinterpreted need to be considered independently when it comes to stereotypes. In my opinion, there is a fundamental difference between an author intending to portray autism in a character, e.g. for educational purposes, and a fictional portrayal that was labelled 'autistic' by journalists or readers. Even though the first still leaves much room for interpretation, any evidence in the text may not simply be challenged by the confirmation bias. Moreover, these intentional portrayals can be considered the 'core' of stereotypical portrayals, whereas those associated through family resemblance might merely be distant relatives. Indeed, in some cases the 'resemblance' boils down to a common label, which might have been carelessly attached. Here, one would have to willingly succumb to the confirmation bias, further muddying the waters. However, it would certainly be interesting to conduct a thorough analysis of characters surmised to be on the spectrum, as it would reflect society's (laypeople's) current understanding of autism. Still, labels should not be affixed carelessly, and I wish to avoid contributing to that. My study is therefore based on intentional portrayals only, marked by an explicit mention of the diagnosis.

Taken together, there are four main stereotypes associated with autism: autists as disabled, childlike, gifted, and robotic. All four stereotypes have different implications, which I have matched to the criteria for my analysis. Not all criteria turned out to be relevant, e.g. mindblindness was not commonly portrayed. However, at least two out of three criteria were fulfilled for every stereotype and in each novel respectively. Thus, it can be said that these four stereotypes are commonly portrayed in fiction, too. Vice versa, this set of stereotypes might be what Draaisma theorises to be the general understanding of autism. However, the labelling of Holmes as autistic shows that characters are associated with autism even if they only match very select criteria of the stereotypes. Secondly, intentional portrayals would dismiss these stereotypes as necessary conditions. Therefore, two possibilities remain: either these characters were labelled incorrectly, based on stereotypes

that were too vague to count as more than a hunch, or I have overlooked an essential characteristic that allows for identification. While I have identified the core of the stereotypes, it might turn out impossible to trace the outline. The core stereotypes carry with them the potential of 'the Autist' as a literary type, a working hypothesis that I have temporarily laid to rest on the basis of speculation. The fringe, however, carries with it the potential of deconstruction. I then might simply declare any character autistic if I only look hard enough for the evidence.

This is of course slightly exaggerated and yet I hope there is something that denotes these characters as different as opposed to 'normal' characters. Put starkly, if the core of autism portrayals perpetuates a certain set of stereotypes, then it must be opposed by its complete opposite: not disabled, not gifted, not overly childlike, and not robotic. A standard human being, which of course does not exist, but could maybe be grasped in terms of normality in deviance. After all, ideas of normality exist, whereas the characters mentioned appear to all be extraordinary in some way, making them stand out from the crowd. I will therefore continue my investigations by exploring the idea of normality and deviance.