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' autist, 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' autist 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

different retelling of an individual's life story. In other words, the autism diagnosis, especially one received later in life, is a form of deviance that has to be meaningfully integrated into an individual's identity. However, because autism is presented as a different way of thinking and perception, it testifies to a fundamental form of deviance. The diagnosis consequently becomes the overarching theme of the life story, and all events are reinterpreted in light of it. This, I believe, is particularly true for individuals who embrace autism pride, whereas I have already stated that some autists strive toward fitting in and appearing or being 'normal'. The latter are fighting the stigma and refusing to make it part of their identity, although they may ultimately be forced to – at least partially – accept it, e.g. in social situations where they have no opportunity to renegotiate their deviance.

Autism activists will naturally engage in different storytelling than those within the conservative movement. Therefore, when one side perpetuates the idea of a 'quirky but gifted' individual, the story turns deviance into an advantage. It thus also allows for a positive way of integrating a stigma into the self-understanding and the reclaiming of the label. On the other hand, those severely affected by their autism might not even have the means of telling their own life story. Here, the story paints the diagnostic picture of a 'shut out', 'violent', and 'disabled' person. In their study, Duffy and Dorner analysed the language used within the medical discourse to describe autistic individuals, focusing on the Theory of Mind, or a lack thereof, i.e. so-called 'mind-blindness'. The term 'mind-blindness' was coined by Simon Baron-Cohen to describe "the notion that autistic people are pathologically impaired in recognizing and attributing mental states" (Yergeau 12). Blindness indicates that these individuals are physically barred from perceiving mental states in others and perhaps themselves. I have already mentioned this idea when discussing the stereotype 'Robot', as well as the question of whether autistic individuals are less complex in their inner workings because they cannot or do not communicate their feelings etc. in a way that neurotypicals understand. Indeed, studies show that "[d]iminished internal state language, including cognitive process words, has been

interpreted as reflecting Theory of Mind impairments in ASD" (Boorse et al.). It is one of the most influential explanations for autism:

> In short, ToM is the ability to understand that other people have their own unique mental states, feelings, beliefs, and desires. It is the ability not only to recognize intentional stances, but to apprehend that intentional stances exist to begin with. Yet contemporary theories about ToM also invoke and assert other cognitive phenomena – including, but not limited to, mentalizing, metacognition, self awareness, imaginative play, and expressing empathy. In other words, to lack a theory of mind is not simply to lack a theory of others' minds – it is also to lack an awareness of one's own mind. (Yergeau 12)

Psychologists will use 'false-belief tests' to detect a working ToM. "As a corollary, it does not kick in as early, or as well, for most autistic children" (Hacking, "Humans, Aliens & Autism" 54). However, for one thing, these individuals can consciously adopt a ToM, which compensates for any inert deficiencies (Kissgen and Schleiffer 38), to the point where it becomes subconscious, albeit a little more strenuous to the individual. (Livingston and Happé 735). Secondly, deficiencies in ToM co-occur in other children, too, most notably in aphasic or deaf children, or in children with Trisomy 21 (Kissgen and Schleiffer 31, 36).

However, because the idea of a Theory of Mind makes such fundamental assumptions about autists, Duffy and Dorner argue that

> it ultimately attenuates the humanity of autistic people by representing autistics as evolutionary deviant, hypothetical beings, and, ultimately, as tragic figures. (Duffy and Dorner 202)

Thus, according to Baron-Cohen their 'mind-blindness' makes them akin to "'higher primates,' [and] 'many lower animals'" (Duffy and Dorner 206). When the conservative movement uses phrases such as 'shut out' to describe (severely) autistic individuals, it perpetuates the idea that these individuals are barred from participating in society. Additionally, describing them as 'violent' and 'disabled', could poten-

tially foster the idea that autists are somewhat 'lesser' beings. I believe, this narrative found its origins in Leo Kanner's description of autistic children, which is also why I argue that the conservative movement reaches back to him. Kanner listed the following criteria:

> a) 'inability to relate to themselves'
> b) 'extreme autistic aloneness'
> c) 'anxiously obsessive desire for the maintenance of sameness'
> d) 'limitation in the variety of spontaneous activity'
> e) 'excellent rote memory'
> f) 'good relation to objects' [as opposed to people]
> g) 'delayed echolalia'[9]
> h) 'extreme literalness in their use of language' (qtd. in Duffy and Dorner 202–3, own numbering)

An extreme reading of this description allows for the idea that autists exist without knowing they do, they are anxious for routines to the point of being obsessive because any changes upset them, and they are in essence alone because they cannot relate to themselves or anybody else. There are some obvious parallels between Kanner's description and the stereotypes as defined in Chapter 3.3. A brief recap:

- Disabled: characterised through otherness and subsequent harassment; dependency on others; possibly narrated as a family tragedy.
- Genius: gifted individuals with a unique perception of reality but profound loneliness.
- Childlike: naïve, honest, and literal individuals, which causes others to be patronising; possibly able to grow and adapt
- Robot/Computer/Machine: individuals that portray repetitive routines, a love for order, a lack of emotions, and a barrier when it comes to understanding/communicating emotions
- Alien: a trope that jokingly suggests autists are not actually human

9 Repetition of sounds, words, and phrases; normal occurrence in children during language acquisition although the term is usually reserved for a pathological context.

Similarities with Kanner's criteria include 'Disabled' ('extreme autistic loneliness', 'limitation in the variety of spontaneous activity), 'Genius' ('excellent rote memory'), 'Child' ('inability to relate to themselves'[10], 'extreme literalness in their use of language'), and 'Robot/Computer/Machine' ('anxiously obsessive desire for the maintenance of sameness', 'limitation in the variety of spontaneous activity', 'excellent rote memory', 'good relation to objects' [as opposed to people], 'extreme literalness in their use of language'). Additionally, the alien trope alludes to 'extreme autistic loneliness' and arguably a 'good relation to objects' as opposed to people. I will not defend these allocations in detail because I do not wish to stretch my hypothesis too far. Here, it would be hasty to conclude that the stereotypes originated in these descriptions. After all, this would require another discourse analysis, possibly based on linguistic criteria; and there is always the possibility that both, Kanner's descriptions and the stereotypes, can be backed up by actual cases.

However, there are certainly some ideas that align. Moreover, Kanner's narrative arguably constructed a reality of autism that is reinstated to this day and subsequently also affects literary portrayals. For example, Kanner's ideas are in line with Hacking's question of whether autistic individuals at the other end of the spectrum, i.e. non-verbal, highly dependent or cognitively impaired, are less interesting characters, perhaps even living a 'lesser' life (Hacking, "Autistic autobiography" 1467–68). Hacking's question, on the other hand, was prompted by autism narratives, thus again alluding to Duffy and Dorner's theory that autism diagnoses are 'storytelling in character'. Except that most autistic individuals either do not have opportunities to tell their stories or their stories are told for them. What lies at the heart of this, is, I believe, what Wittgenstein put as 'the limits of my language are the limits of my world.' Because I can only make myself understood to the extent that I communicate my needs, desires, and beliefs, somebody who is unable to communicate more than their immediate needs, cannot possibly write an autobiography, and vice versa, I can only speculate on their inner

10 This can be understood as a reference to Lacan's mirror stage which "develops an individual's ability to identify with others" (Staiger 66).

workings. If I feel like somebody is not communicating at all – although I might just be unable to perceive their communication efforts – I might be inclined to conclude that this person simply has nothing to say. In other words, this person cannot have an identity (life story), emotions, or thoughts, otherwise, they would share them. This very assumption is implied by the idea of 'mind-blindness', and since this person also has no self-awareness, i.e. no life story, their story is told by somebody else. However, Duffy and Dorner argue that it is not simply told, it is *invented*. According to them, science describes an imaginary being "upon whom researchers and readers may project their own theories of difference and normalcy, empathy and estrangement" (Duffy and Dorner 208). Duffy and Dorner also (sarcastically) argue that since autists are so different, "so remote from our own sensibilities" (208), one must fabricate them "through acts of great imagination" (208).

> The result is a novelistic, poetically intensified account of sadness—we call this a rhetoric of scientific sadness—in which autistic people are mourned even as they are apparently explained. (Duffy and Dorner 202)

It is also this assumption that is fought tooth and nail by autism activists. Yergeau quips:

> Under such logics, I have written this book, presumably unaware of my reader and my (non)self. The involuntary actions, thoughts, writings, and behaviors of my autistic body negate my claims to writerhood, rhetorichood, and narrativehood. Instead, this book might be better understood as a cluster of symptoms. (Yergeau 13)

The crux of this is that the medical discourse has essentially crafted a narrative for autism and subsequently for autistic individuals which effectively muzzled them for a long time until autism activists offered resistance, although "[a]t present, there is no empirical evidence to support or disprove ToM hypotheses" (Duffy and Dorner 205). Yet, as long as the lack of ToM is held against autists, they will not be accepted as fully ac-

countable, reliable, or indeed human. It is, why Yergeau wrote she has no 'claims to writerhood, rhetorichood, and narrativehood'.

Perhaps, this matter cannot be discussed in any other way than the sarcastic tone Yergeau has chosen. Obviously, if I assume that autistic individuals have no Theory of Mind, they do not need any application templates in fiction. Ironically, *Autism Speaks*[11] of whom Singer is the vice-president, is the largest non-profit autism research organisation in the US and is famously known for portraying autism as a disease that 'dehumanises' and 'steals' children away from their parents, destroys families, leads to bankruptcy, and must be fought at all costs (Autistic Self Advocacy Network); a stance that has caused a significant uproar among autism activists, not least because autists have for the longest time been considered 'less human'. On a related note, this alludes to the alien trope, a metaphor that is also claimed by the conservative movement:

> A nasty variant was used in a disturbing autism awareness sound bite given wide distribution a couple of years ago by the advocacy organization CAN: Cure Autism Now. After a bit of ominous music, an intensely concerned young father intones, 'Imagine that aliens were stealing one in every two hundred children. … That is what is happening in America today. It is called autism.' (Hacking, "Humans, Aliens & Autism" 44)[12]

It is the changeling myth all over again, emphasising the tragedy a disabled (autistic) child causes for a family and the rhetoric of sadness that Duffy and Dorner suggest surrounds some autism narratives.

One prime example of this is *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Nighttime* by Mark Haddon. Whenever I discussed novels in this study, I made exceptions for *Curious Incident*. The reason for this lies in the fact that it portrays the narrative of the conservative movement, or so I hypothesise. When *Curious Incident* was first published,

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11 Ironic also in the sense that this organisation mostly speaks for autists that cannot speak for themselves.

12 Hacking explored this stereotype at length in his paper *Humans, Aliens & Autism* (2009).

> Charlotte Moore wrote that 'Autistic people are not easy subjects for novelists. Their interests are prescribed, their experiences static, their interaction with others limited.' (Hacking, "Autistic autobiography" 1469)

In other words, according to Moore the lives of autistic individuals need to be embellished to make them interesting enough for the reader, similar to the question Hacking asked. Moreover, Haddon himself stated in an interview that "if Christopher were real he would have absolutely no idea how to entertain a reader" (The Guardian). This hints towards the idea that autists are 'mind-blind', thus lacking a Theory of Mind. Additionally, Haddon included a scene where Christopher is being tested:

> And one day Julie sat down at the desk next to me and put a tube of Smarties on the desk, and she said, 'Christopher, what do you think is in here?'
> And I said, 'Smarties.'
> Then she took the top off the Smarties tube and turned it upside down and a little red pencil came out and she laughed and I said, 'It's not Smarties, it's a pencil.'
> Then she put the little red pencil back inside the Smarties tube and put the top back on.
> Then she said, 'If your Mummy came in now, and we asked her what was inside the Smarties tube, what do you think she would say?' …
> And I said, 'A pencil.'
> That was because when I was little I didn't understand about other people having minds. And Julie said to Mother and Father that I would always find this very difficult. But I don't find this difficult now. Because I decided that it was a kind of puzzle, and if something is a puzzle there is always a way of solving it. (*Curious Incident* 145)

This false-belief test (sometimes called 'Smarties task') is one of the most widely used to assess Theory of Mind or social understanding. Since it is so specific, I will assume that Haddon knew about the implications and its relation to ToM. Curiously, he claims no intention of portraying an autistic person. In fact, he stated

> I know very little about the subject, I did no research for Curious Incident … I'd read Oliver Sacks's essay about Temple Grandin and a handful of newspaper and magazine articles about, or by, people with Asperger's and autism. I deliberately didn't add to this list. (Olear)

In response to *Curious Incident*, neurologist Oliver Sacks proclaimed "Mr. Haddon … so accurately portrayed the Asperger experience that it must have come from firsthand knowledge" (Gussow). However, Haddon is not autistic. Instead, what happened was mutual backslapping of those on the (conservative) side within the discourse. Autist and activist Amalena Caldwell remarked: "It reads like a neurotypical person trying to understand the thoughts of a neurodiverse person rather than the actual thoughts of an autistic" (Caldwell). Once again, the story is told for them. It is self-praise for having a fictional representative of Kanner's and Baron-Cohen's narrative while disregarding that it is essentially based on assumptions. In this narrative, deficient ToM becomes the characterising trait of autists, rendering them mute and oblivious to what is considered 'being human', thus perpetuating Duffy and Dorner's idea of tragic figures that are 'evolutionary deviant'. Singer even used the adjectives 'violent', 'disabled', and 'shut out'. There is certainly violence in *Curious Incident*, as well as the acceptance thereof as a given. Christopher is shut out and does not question this status – and although I cannot necessarily state that he is 'low-functioning' since he is able to communicate verbally, he certainly fits the stereotypical criteria of 'family tragedy'.

Unsurprisingly, Haddon's portrayal was not met with particular enthusiasm by the activist movement. Autism activist Elizabeth Bartmess states:

> Christopher is portrayed as elitist, violent, and lacking empathy. If this book were my only or primary exposure to representations of autistic people, I would think they were threatening and cared only about themselves. … Even in the best case scenario, this book does not give an inexperienced reader any sense of how an autistic person could be an interesting conversation partner, or a friend, or a kind person. …

> Haddon may be trying to show the reader that Christopher sees non-autistic people in the same way they often see him in the novel; regardless, the effect is that Christopher looks intolerant and dismissive. (Bartmess)

Indeed, the perhaps most harmful aspect of Haddon's portrayal is the fact that Christopher seems oblivious to relationships with others, i.e. not interested in having meaningful connections such as friendships and simultaneously unaware of abuse directed towards him: "Christopher doesn't appear aware that he's being insulted, nor does he appear bothered by it; it's allowed to pass without comment" (Bartmess). Bartmess thus concludes that "[t]he book normalizes abuse, presents the autistic protagonist as responsible for it, and suggests that he is not harmed …" (ibid.).

It has also been criticised how Christopher's alleged 'lack' of Theory of Mind is exploited for stylistic effects. For example, Christopher is able to imagine things, to deceive someone, and to anticipate reactions (William). Thus,

> [o]ne wonders if Christopher has mistakenly come to accept that he cannot lie, joke, or imagine after years of hearing such from his family and teachers, who view him as not only socially challenged but also as cognitively impaired (despite their simultaneous acknowledgment of his mathematic genius). (William)

Moreover, while Christopher struggles to recognise other people's emotions (cf. *Curious Incident* 2–3), Haddon portrays this deficiency so inconsistently that it creates the effect of indifference. Here, an incapability becomes a choice; Christopher is no longer regarded as being incapable of communicating but he chooses not to do so because he has no need for 'mingling with the crowd'. Consequently, Christopher's portrayal perpetuates the idea

> that people with ASDs are not cognitively *deficient* with respect to Theory of Mind, but rather lack the *motivation* to attend to others' minds, including others' emotions. (Semino 151, original highlighting)

Arguably, the minds of people without a Theory of Mind cannot be portrayed because they are unfathomable. However, the portrayal of a deficient Theory of Mind can easily be interpreted as wilful neglect to cater to other people's needs. This, I believe, is particularly harmful in combination with extraordinary scientific skills. Once again I am referring to Loftis who fears that the stereotypical association of autists with Sherlock Holmes and other crime-solvers reinforces negative stereotypes (cf. Chapter 3.3). If those characters were ordinarily skilled – which would make them arguably less interesting – they would appear harmless. However, the idea that an exceptionally gifted person has no interest in considering other people's emotions and needs hints toward psychopathy. I am not targeting Christopher in particular, for he is also portrayed as being highly dependent on others for everyday tasks, but rather the combination of stereotypes often found in 'autistic' crime-solvers such as Sherlock Holmes, Spencer Reid, or Saga Norén. What Loftis criticises is their 'maintained liminality between criminal and crime solver' and thus the suggestion that these characters could turn against humanity at any time. Taken one step further, it might even allude to a sentient robot, lacking emotion and humaneness but surpassing all others through their intelligence. It is an exaggerated picture that I paint, but it might just have been the 'lack of motivation to attend to other's minds' that distinguished Moriarty from Holmes.

Unfortunately, Haddon's novel was hyped by the media, flooding the public with an understanding of what Sacks called "an archetype, a distillation" (Gussow) of Asperger's Syndrome and subsequently autism. Although Haddon later backtracked on the use of 'Asperger's' on the cover, he has been heavily criticised for having made "both his name and his fortune exploiting the Asperger's community" (Olear). Recent autism portrayals in TV series such as The Good Doctor or Atypical may have arguably reached a wider audience, but Curious Incident has certainly ad-

vanced to become the most widely recognised novel in autism narrative since being published in 2003. Activist Gyasi Burks-Abbott wrote:

> Today when I tell lay people that I am autistic, the first question they ask is, "Have you read *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*?" as if that were the best example of a book written about autism. (Burks-Abbott 295, original capitalisation)

Schools have incorporated it into their lesson plans to create awareness for Asperger's and autism, and a play-adaption was created, touring through the UK in 2018 and having been on stage as recently as 10 September 2023.[13] It is safe to say that the legacy of Curious Incident is living on.

Ironically, Curious Incident has been described as having "**r**eceived many awards [by neurotypicals] as well as criticism by the autism community" (Shim). This innocent remark demonstrates the rift that runs between the activist and the conservative movement. However, it is not the fact that Christopher has – or used to have – a deficient Theory of Mind that makes this portrayal harmful to autists, but the fact that he seems indifferent to others while simultaneously being the cause of a family tragedy. Portraying a protagonist without a ToM would be impossible, however, claiming a character has no ToM when obviously they do, leads the reader to question the character's intentions. Thus, even if the reader assumes Christopher's indifference merely to be grounded in his inability to work out social cues, the novel still perpetuates the idea that (severely) autistic individuals have no feelings that could be hurt by discriminating and harassing them. Such storytelling shifts the narrative from the impact autism has on the individual to the family and perhaps even society as a whole. It neglects to take into account the feelings of the

13 Cf. https://libwww.freelibrary.org/programs/onebook/obop17/docs/CuriousIncident_LessonPlansandResources.pdf [Accessed 4 Oct. 2023], https://www.curiousonstage.com/curious-incident-schools-tour-begins/ [Accessed 4 Oct. 2023], https://nkytribune.com/2023/09/nkus-school-of-the-arts-to-open-its-on-tour-season-with-curious-incident-of-the-dog-in-the-night-time/ [Accessed 5 Oct. 2023].

autistic individual, which their 'mind-blindness' conveniently explains away but retells the story with the parents (families, relatives, society…) as victims. Because the rhetoric suggests that these individuals are not fully human, they can be abstracted in terms of something alien or perhaps animalistic. The strain it puts on families to raise a child with special needs should not be glossed over in favour of an overly positive representation However, the assumption that a person has nothing to communicate, and the act of telling their story for them, will blur the lines of cause and effect and may muzzle minorities.

The Importance and Risks of Autism Narrative

In a black-and-white world, the conservative movement certainly paints a grim picture of autism. Its counterweight could be considered autists who publish their own stories as a form of self-advocacy and activism. This activist movement advocates for acceptance and against a cure, arguing that autism is merely a difference in thinking rather than a 'disorder'. I have previously stated that the neurodiversity movement should be apprehended as something abstract rather than measurable, whereas labels such as autism, Asperger's, or ADHD are of particular relevance to the self-understanding of the individual, not least because they are usually integrated into their identity. In *The State of Grace* by Rachael Lucas, 16-year-old Grace is officially diagnosed with Asperger's. When she goes on a date with Gabe, she finds out that he has ADHD and they have a conversation about the impact neurodiversity had on their lives.

> 'Sorry about that,' says Gabe, breaking into my rambling thought circles. 'I had to –' He pauses for a moment before all the words come out in a tumble. 'I've got these pills I have to take twice a day 'cause I've got ADHD. I forgot to take them with me.'
> 'What happens if you don't?'
> 'Best case – I end up a bit spaced out and I'm crap at paying attention. Worst – well, that's why I ended up moving schools.'