'Realistic' and 'Good' Portrayals

On behalf of the representation of autism and with a nod toward disability studies, some scholars set out to identify 'good' or 'accurate' portrayals, assuming they equalled 'positive' or 'realistic' representation, which in turn was critically apprehended by autism activist and scholar Robert Rozema.

> In a recent study of juvenile and young adult fiction, Dyches, Prater & Leininger (2009) suggest two central measures for evaluating such works: portrayals of individuals with disabilities must be both realistic and positive. To be considered realistic, a book must depict the characteristics of the disabilities accurately, in keeping with current professional practices and literature. Books with positive portrayals must characterize an individual with disabilities in some or all of the following ways:
> (a) realistic emphasis on strengths rather than weaknesses
> (b) high expectations
> (c) making positive contributions beyond promoting growth in other characters
> (d) becoming self-determined
> (e) being given full citizenship in the home and community
> (f) expanding reciprocal relationships. (Rozema 26)

These criteria are based on Mary Ann Dyches's and Tina Prater's *Developmental Disability in Children's Literature* (2000), which has since been used in several studies that focus on the portrayal of disabilities in children's literature (cf. Dyches & Prater, 2005; Dyches, Prater, & Cramer, 2001; Larson, Whitin, & Vultaggio, 2010; Leininger, Dyches, Prater, & Heath, 2010). When assuming that "[r]ecognizing disabled people's role in public life … begins with imagining their practice of citizenship outside of the norm" (Bumiller 982), these criteria seem very comprehensive. However, one should be cautious when applying them. First of all, the guidelines by Dyches and Prater were published by the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC), a non-profit organisation "dedicated to improving educational outcomes for individuals with exceptionalities, including dis-

abilities, gifts, and/or talents" (Council for Exceptional Children). The CEC also created the Dolly Gray Award for Children's Literature to honour children's books that are "related to the field and to the mission of the MRDD" (Dyches and Prater 79).[8] In their 2009 study, Dyches and Prater examined novels eligible for the Dolly Gray Award, however, considering that both their guidelines as well as the Dolly Gray Award were issued by the same division, this seems self-perpetuating. Secondly, but related to the first, the awards, while a good incentive, are not too widely known and their impact is questionable (see footnote 53). While autism narratives are arguably a niche, the criteria by Dyches and Prater as well as their study must be considered severely limited.

Finally, both aspects of 'realistic' and 'positive' have been criticised. For example, Jane E. Kelley examined novels that won the Dolly Gray Award in terms of their depiction of ASD in accordance with the *DSM-5* (see Chapter 6.1). She found that

> few fictional stories depict the difficulties of social communication. Therefore, narrative fiction that overplays the restrictive, repetitive behaviors and underplays the social communication deficits, perpetuate the misconceptions about ASD, that is, quirky behaviors rather than hindering social deficits. (Kelley 123)

What Kelley essentially criticises is the limited educational aspect of these portrayals since symptoms are not portrayed equally strongly. While I cannot confirm this critique in regard to the novels I have analysed – all of them emphasised the social deficits which resulted in harassment and othering – I believe Kelley wishes to warn against overly

8 The Dolly Gray Award as well as the Schneider Family Book Award, which honours "an author or illustrator for a book that embodies an artistic expression of the disability experience for child and adolescent audiences" (https://www.ala.org/awardsgrants/schneider-family-book-award [Accessed 21 Feb. 2024]) are the most renowned awards for portrayals of disabilities in the U.S. The UK equivalent might be The David Ryan Award for Positive Media Impact by the National Association for Special Educational Needs (nasen) (previously nasen & TES Award).

positive portrayals that gloss over the difficulties and render these characters into quirky but harmless stereotypes. Ironically, Kelley's critique is the complete opposite of Loftis's as discussed in Chapter 3.3. Contrary to Kelley, Loftis argues that autism is not a list of symptoms and thus cannot be reduced to diagnostic criteria. In other words, Kelley emphasises the thematic component of those characters and their educational function, whereas Loftis emphasises their mimetic component, but equally stresses the educational impact. However, portrayals that are intended to educate are generally more likely to sacrifice the individuality of characters in favour of representative traits, rendering these characters thematic. It therefore seems as if the purpose of education counteracts the diversity of application templates, and vice versa.

In theory, all portrayals increase representation and thus lead to more options for the identification and application of life curves. However, portrayals that are limited in variety and number will result in an equally limited choice of identification templates. While autistic adolescents or young adults would find themselves with a vast selection of neurotypical life curves (presumably reinforcing the pressure of 'fitting in'), the neuroatypical ones are still rather few and far between. Rozema gives a scathing verdict on young adult fiction with autism portrayals, arguing that there is

> something limiting about these novels—something too pat, too reductive in the "autistic kids are really quirky but are capable of saving the world" messsage that is manifested in feel-good stories such as [*The Half-Life of*] *Planets*, *Colin Fischer*, and *Marcelo*. (Rozema 30)

Instead of emphasising positive portrayals, Rozema advocates in favour of more diverse roles.

> … [I]f we want developmentally disabled readers to find themselves in adolescent fiction, we would give them more than one role to play. They can be heroes, villains, winners, losers, angels, demons, and everything in between. In allowing ASD teenagers to lead rich lives on the page, adolescent literature would recognize the diversity of the

> 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