



A Case for the Autistic Perspective in Young Adult Literature

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A Case for the Autistic Perspective in Young Adult Literature

The author discusses five novels with characters on the autism spectrum and integrates her readings with her brothers' experiences with autism and Asperger's syndrome.

The constant hum of the sticky, humid swim complex began its periodic crescendo as five swimmers took their mark. By the time the crowd hit a dull roar, my youngest brother was two body-lengths ahead in the freestyle heat. His coaches crouched at the pool's end, enthusiastically waving him on to victory. Then, nearly two-thirds of the way to the finish line, he stopped. He looked at the coaches, glanced back at the other swimmers—now gaining on him—and looked at the coaches again. Good-natured laughter mingled with cheers as he finished the race with a series of neatly executed underwater flips. He barely made second place, but no matter, he'd rather have the red ribbon anyway. Red is his favorite color.

Patrick's behavior may seem strange, perhaps even unsportsmanlike, but those who gather to watch the Special Olympics know the competition is rarely focused on winning. My brother Patrick, who is autistic, is content to just be in the pool. Enveloped by water, the sights, sounds, and smells of the world outside—stimuli that constantly bombard and overwhelm his senses—are dulled. The abstract notion of competition has no significance for Patrick, and he abandoned many races in his early years of swimming because he knew he had to get out of the pool once he reached the finish line. He preferred to take his time in the water. To the typical observer—neurotypical, that is—Patrick's logic makes sense only if his perspective and priorities are known.

Understanding among different groups of people is fostered by awareness of each other's perspective. Educators often promote consciousness of

constructs that influence the creation of minority groups such as race, gender, sexual identity, and ethnicity. Historically, however, disabilities such as autism spectrum disorder (ASD) are viewed as problems that require a solution rather than a form of diversity to be respected and perhaps even celebrated. As Scott Michael Robertson points out in *Disability Studies Quarterly*, the journal of the Society of Disability Studies, this “deficit model,” which has pervaded public discourse on autism in the past century, ignores the possibility that what is perceived as an ASD individual's weaknesses may also function as strengths. More recently, however, a neurodiversity model, which honors the “personhood of autistic people through the lens of human diversity,” has begun to supplant the deficit model (Robertson). This concept is particularly relevant in the context of ASD because it acknowledges that many of the difficulties autistic individuals encounter are a product of “living in a society designed for non-autistic people” that “contributes to, and exacerbates, many of the daily living challenges that autistic people experience” (Robertson).

In *English Journal's* November 2010 special issue dedicated to “Re-seeing (Dis)Ability” many of the issue's contributors, notably Patricia A. Dunn, the issue's guest editor, and Daniel L. Preston, promote this inclusive model as it applies to all disabilities, including ASD. They argue that encouraging this mindset in the classroom is beneficial for students with and without disabilities. Mark Letcher's column, “Off the Shelves: Autism in Young Adult Literature,” is an excellent resource for teachers seeking to introduce students, through

young adult (YA) fiction, to characters who exhibit traits of ASD.

My introduction to autism occurred firsthand, and over the years I have been privileged to know several individuals with ASD. Both of my brothers are designated ASD; Benjamin, nearly 22, is on what some would term the higher-functioning end of the spectrum with Asperger's syndrome. Patrick, 20, is labeled mildly to moderately autistic but is particularly challenged by the fact that he is practically nonverbal. Though terms such as *high functioning* and *low functioning* are common in discussions of autism, a more accurate description would be *high rate of assimilation* versus *low rate of assimilation*. My mother's work as a special education teacher and my own brief experience as an aide to autistic children put me in contact with other ASD individuals who have achieved various rates of assimilation into a neurotypical society. Placing the burden of assimilation solely on the shoulders

The national focus is shifting from children with ASD to dealing with the unique challenges faced by teens and young adults with the disability. The implications of this transition are vast, but teachers can prepare students to accept the challenges and rewards inherent in association with their ASD peers by exposing them to these issues through literature.

of ASD individuals is unfair, and as members of a community, we should meet our peers halfway, a process that starts by being cognizant of and sensitive to their unique perspective.

If You've Met One Person with Autism . . .

Characterizing the ASD perspective is not simple. As the term *spectrum* indicates, there are no clear divides; even the designation between autism and Asperger's syndrome is often murky. An individual with ASD will exhibit any number of qualities or behaviors that characterize the disorder, yet may also embody traits opposite those expected. In an effort to center discussion of the seemingly nebulous territory of ASD, I have distilled its common characteristics into five categories, which are based on my personal observations:

1. Hyper- and hyposensitivity: either a heightened or dulled physical sensitivity in response to certain stimuli

2. Patterning: an affinity for repetition, ritual, and routine
3. Language barriers: trouble communicating verbally and/or awkward use of language often characterized by literal interpretations of figurative speech
4. Social barriers: low cognizance of the function of social communication and codes
5. Mind-blindness: a limited perspective characterized by the inability to anticipate and interpret the thoughts and feelings of others

Though a more scientific analysis of the characteristics that define ASD can be found in the widely adopted American Psychiatric Association's outline of the disorder in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition (DSM-IV)*, it is important to ground our collective understanding of autism in the social, rather than clinical, realm.

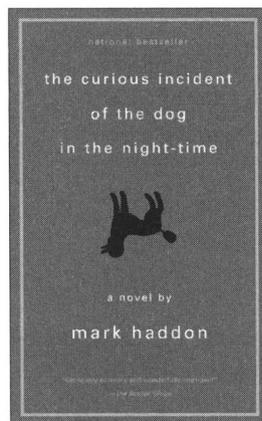
Public awareness of autism has grown in the past 20 years as ASD has become more prevalent among children. Now, children like Patrick, who were diagnosed at the forefront of the epidemic, have matured into young adults. A recent *New York Times* article on the autistic individual's transition into adulthood projects that "200,000 autistic teenagers are set to come of age in the United States over the next five years alone" (Harmon 1). For the first time, the national focus is shifting from children with ASD to dealing with the unique challenges faced by teens and young adults with the disability. The implications of this transition are vast, but teachers can prepare students to accept the challenges and rewards inherent in association with their ASD peers by exposing them to these issues through literature. A small subset of young adult fiction that deals with the topic of ASD addresses the personal and social challenges faced by these individuals and highlights positive aspects of their unique cognitive outlook. Taken together, the characters portrayed in five novels I describe below provide a broad representation of the many manifestations of ASD, illustrating an insightful adage among the autism community: *If you've met one person with autism, you've met one person with autism*. The sidebar on page 35 highlights some of the many ways in which the protagonists in each novel manifest ASD.

The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time

Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* has been lauded—and at times criticized—for its portrayal of Christopher Boone, who is assumed to be autistic. Though the book jacket clearly labels him as autistic, Haddon expresses regret for the error; he did not intend to portray an ASD character and denies any expertise on the disorder (Haddon, “Asperger’s & Autism”). Intent aside, Haddon’s protagonist displays some remarkable similarities to an individual on the spectrum, and the book is widely regarded as one of the first autism novels.

To read Christopher as an autistic character is to accept that he is an autistic savant. Haddon’s protagonist is an accomplished mathematician and logician and has an incredible capacity for memorization. However, he admits he has trouble interpreting subjective data such as emotions and facial expressions. Christopher asserts that people are confusing because they “do a lot of talking without using any words,” and he cites the example of a raised eyebrow signifying both flirtation and condescension (Haddon, *Curious* 15). Likewise, he detests metaphors and insists they are tantamount to lies. Purportedly the author of the novel, Christopher relates his story precisely as it unfolds; no sense of restraint shapes his narration. While Christopher’s unfiltered lens can at times be shocking and uncomfortable to some readers, his essential honesty is endearing.

Christopher’s inability to make inferences based on social contexts facilitates the novel’s ironic twist. By applying the emotional inferences that Christopher fails to connect to the interactions he objectively describes, readers are able to “solve” the mystery Christopher is investigating before he does. This apparent mind-blindness, which is brought into relief by the narrator’s struggle to adapt his logic-based cognition to an inference-based society, is a defining aspect of the autism perspective. Similarly, his Holmesian approach to the investigation, relying solely on observation and his capacity for logic and patterning, is indicative of ASD tendencies. A fondness for prime numbers represents Christopher’s reliance on patterns, some of which



are arbitrary, such as letting the color of cars that pass determine whether it will be a “Good Day” or a “Black Day” (24). It soon becomes clear that Christopher’s excessive patterning is an attempt to fill the informational gaps created by his inability to draw conclusions from social interactions or interpret the significance of social codes. Notably, Christopher also displays evidence of hypersensitivity to physical contact. He does not like to be touched, and he and his father show affection by spreading their hands into a fan and letting only their fingers and thumbs meet.

Such aspects situate Christopher as an exemplar of an ASD perspective, but despite the similarities, Haddon’s characterization does not reflect my own experience with ASD. Christopher’s character is similar to actor Dustin Hoffman’s portrayal of autistic savant Raymond Babbitt in the 1988 film *Rain Man*. Though it is an excellent film, this early representation of autism inadvertently perpetuated the misperception that all autistics are savants, a myth Haddon seems eager to distance himself and his work from by reminding readers that he did not intend for Christopher to be read specifically as an ASD character.

Nevertheless, Haddon cleverly utilizes Christopher’s unique perspective and logical analysis of social patterns to share some poignant insights into society’s own peculiarities, making the novel as much about us as it is about Christopher. From a purely literary standpoint, this is a rich novel. The use of lists, charts, diagrams, and other illustrations adds depth and underscores the importance of multimodal learning, and the social subtext implied by the narrative is gripping. A Whitbread Book of the Year, the novel has also been awarded *The Guardian* Children’s Fiction prize as well as the Booktrust Teenage Fiction Award. A crossover book for YA literature, this novel is written at an elevated level and contains some explicit language, sexual discourse, and violence, which may not be suitable for all readers.

Rules

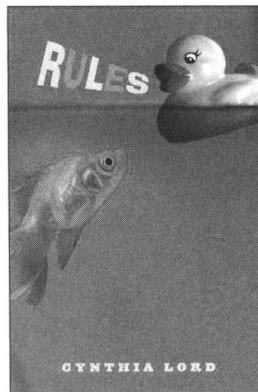
Rules, by Cynthia Lord, demonstrates one young girl’s growing awareness that disability is not necessarily a restrictive force. The twelve-year-old narrator, Catherine, is eager to make new friends but

self-conscious about the peculiar behavior of her younger brother, David, who is autistic. Conflicted by the desire to be a good sister and to be perceived as normal, Catherine establishes rules to help David “fit in” with society. Eventually, she realizes—thanks in part to a friendship with Jason, who is physically handicapped—that her own insecurities and anxieties about fitting in are just as disabling. In addition, Catherine learns that modifying her own behavior can lead to rewarding experiences and relationships with those who have difficulty adapting to the world around them.

David’s representation as an autistic individual bears many of the disability’s hallmarks. He is hypersensitive to noise and doesn’t like to be wet; his dependence on patterning is illustrated in his method of putting puzzles together, line by line, as if he’s reading them; and he listens to his *Frog and Toad Together* cassette repeatedly. David’s inability to interpret social codes and aspects of mind-blindness establish the novel’s premise, as Catherine’s rules largely function as protocol for social situations.

At first, Catherine invokes the power of rules in an attempt to manage her brother’s sometimes embarrassing behavior. Her prescriptive plan is an effort to approach David at a level on which he can relate; as she puts it, “David might not understand some things, but David loves rules” (Lord 4). The literal-mindedness of the rules, which supply much of the novel’s humor, helps establish David’s particular manifestation of ASD symptoms. For example, the necessity of rules as specific as “A boy can take off his shirt to swim, but not his shorts,” gives the reader a sense of the severity of David’s deficit in terms of social assimilation, considering that the basic social code of modesty is still unappreciated by this eight-year-old (10). Likewise, David’s enthusiasm for his sister’s dicta underscores his appreciation for structure and patterns. Ironically, Catherine begins to rely on her own set of rules, signaling an attempt to cope with a situation that’s largely out of her control.

In contrast to *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, I found many similarities in David’s characterization and my experience with my autistic brother Patrick. Sometimes the autism ex-



perience can be laughable, like when David blatantly disregards the “No toys in the fish tank” rule. Had I developed a set of rules for Patrick, it would have included a “No brothers in the fish tank” rule. But often, seemingly ordinary tasks can become a trial. In David’s case, for instance, it’s the ongoing battle to convince him that if a person is late, it doesn’t mean he or she isn’t coming. I empathize with Catherine’s many predicaments and am pleased to

see her portrayed as harboring no animosity toward her brother. Nevertheless, a few notable passages bear witness to the inherent struggle to reconcile feelings of frustration, guilt, and injustice that accompany a sibling’s disability. After a moment of frustration with David, Catherine laments, “and the first tiny pinpricks poke me, little guilty jabs whispering, ‘He’s doing the best he can.’ And I brace myself for the *ka-boom*, sure to follow. The full guilt avalanche” (110). Catherine’s guilty conscience is an acknowledgment that holding David to typical standards of behavior is implicitly unfair because he does not recognize the significance of such codes. Catherine’s development throughout the novel eventually leads her to question the concept of normalcy altogether.

David’s language barrier provides one of the novel’s most unique conceits, and Catherine’s response to this challenge anticipates her eventual realization that modified expectations can foster more inclusive relationships. Like my brother Patrick, David understands language better than he is able to relate to others. To help him communicate, Catherine allows David to “borrow someone else’s” words when he can’t find his own and suggests Arnold Lobel as a source of inspiration (38). The siblings’ use of lines from Arnold Lobel’s *Frog and Toad Together* is sweet, witty, and a poignant example of how people can communicate in new ways. For instance, after he knowingly breaks the no-toys-in-the-fish-tank rule, David explains, “‘Will power is trying hard not to do something that you really want to do,’ said Frog,” to which he expects Catherine to respond, “‘You mean like trying not to eat all of these cookies?’ asked Toad” (57). The siblings’ bond over these shared words is a touching and beautiful illustration of the depth of their connec-

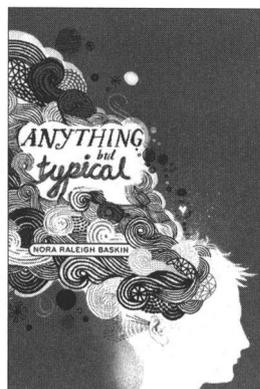
tion despite significant barriers in their ability to communicate.

Winner of a host of awards, including the Newbery Honor Medal and Schneider Family Book Award, *Rules* is a heartwarming tale of acceptance. As Catherine shifts from focusing on the things people can't do to embracing each individual's unique abilities, she is liberated from her own paralyzing sense of self-consciousness. While this novel will likely appeal to younger readers, it is an enjoyable and insightful read for YA audiences and adults of any age.

Anything but Typical

In Nora Raleigh Baskin's *Anything but Typical*, sixth-grade narrator Jason Blake speaks to the reader about letters, saying: "when letters are put together, they can mean so much, and they can mean nothing at all" (Baskin 3). Jason should know, because letters have defined him since the third grade. Letters such as ASD, which his mother will not use, or others such as "NLD, nonverbal learning disorder" or "PDD-NOS, pervasive developmental disorder—non-specific" (3). Jason's position along the autism spectrum is unclear, and his example illustrates the imprecise and often detached nature of such clinical categorizations.

Jason seldom speaks, but he writes well. He connects to the world outside through Storyboard, an online community for amateur writers. When writing, he doesn't have to worry about how he sometimes has trouble controlling his hands, or interpreting other people's emotions; and no one will care that he wears his shirt tucked in, pants hiked up, and his belt a little too tight. In essence, Jason writes so he can be heard without being seen. However, not wanting to be seen does not necessitate wanting to be ignored. Jason craves the input of other Storyboard users, and his eagerness to check for responses to his latest posting induces an almost physical reaction in one incident. At school, however, he is more isolated. His interactions with Aaron Miller, a friendly classmate, are minimal, but Jason, in typical understated fashion, admits, "I am grateful I see Aaron sometimes" (83).



The novel presents a compelling counterargument to the common misperception that people on the autism spectrum don't care about social interaction. ASD individuals are often described as "removed" or "detached," simply because they have trouble communicating verbally and participating socially. This assumption is unfair and unfounded. Even my brother Patrick, who is nonverbal, manages to express a desire to interact with his peers. In the novel, a dilemma emerges when Jason learns he and Rebecca, his online friend, will attend the same Storyboard conference. Jason's desire to meet Rebecca is tempered by his fear that she will abandon the friendship because his social awkwardness prevents him from living up to his online persona. Unfortunately, Jason's fears are realized when Rebecca is somewhat taken aback at their first encounter. She takes pause when Jason can't look directly at her or speak to her. Though Rebecca is still complimentary of Jason's stories, he insightfully notes a change in her tone: "her voice has already changed. She sounds more like a grown-up It is not for me It is for my mother" (162). Unfortunately, Rebecca's reaction to Jason is all too common an experience among people with ASD. Because people with ASD often struggle to communicate, others assume their comprehension of language is limited as well and will stop communicating directly with the individual, perpetuating the isolating nature of the disability.

Though Jason struggles to foster friendships among his peers, the relationships he has with his father and brother model a positive approach to ASD individuals. His father's quiet acceptance of his son's nature is a source of strength and security for Jason. Meanwhile, his younger brother's protection and simultaneous admiration of Jason is a touching component of the narrative. Conversely, the mother's struggle to accept Jason's disability manifests in the pair's relationship and makes her presence stressful to Jason without undermining her love for him. Fortunately, however, sharing the experience of the Storyboard conference helps develop their understanding of each other.

Anything but Typical has been the recipient of several distinctions, including the Schneider Family Book

Award and designation as an ALA Notable Children's book. The novel promotes positive messages on the importance of friendship, family, and self-acceptance to the ASD individual. This book will most likely appeal to younger teens, yet its theme is applicable to a broader YA audience as all teens struggle, to an extent, with self-expression and acceptance.

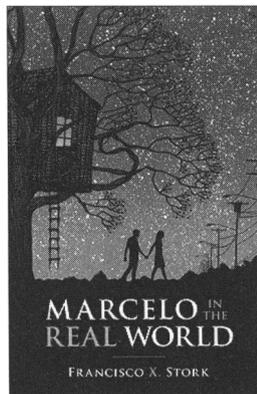
Marcelo in the Real World

Marcelo in the Real World by Francisco X. Stork is unique in its consideration of ASD's impact on a teen's impending transition into adulthood. Marcelo is excited to start a summer job tending the ponies at his school but is forced instead to work in the mailroom of his father's law firm. Marcelo attends Paterson, a special school where a culture of adaptation caters to the individual needs of children with disabilities. For Marcelo, who has Asperger's syndrome, the school represents a safe haven where he is allowed to "learn at [his] own pace" while surrounded by understanding peers and instructors (Stork 11). Concerned about his ability to cope with challenges in the less flexible world outside the school, Marcelo's father predicates his return to Paterson on the successful completion of a summer internship. The stakes are high for 17-year-old Marcelo, who must prove that he can navigate the demands of the fast-paced "real world."

Understandably, Marcelo is apprehensive about the internship, an anxiety that is exacerbated by his unique cognitive functioning. He is uncomfortable with new situations, gets flustered when asked to multitask, and often has trouble understanding idioms or interpreting facial expressions. In addition, he recognizes that people often expect him to respond in certain ways socially, but he is unable to divine what that response may be. His propensity to fall into the third person when speaking, referring to himself as *Marcelo* instead of *I*, makes communication with others seem even more awkward. Yet, despite these barriers, Marcelo is successful with his assigned tasks at the law firm, and he even takes on a special project that uncovers and corrects an injustice.

Marcelo's observations throughout the novel provide poignant insights into the world as he sees it. An observation on Asperger's syndrome itself is particularly enlightening: Marcelo explains, "'Cognitive disorder' is not an accurate description of what happens inside Marcelo's head. 'Excessive attempt at cognitive order' is closer to what actually takes place" (55). Though some perceive Marcelo as slow-witted, when allowed time to collect and sort his thoughts, he speaks with an honesty and wisdom that far exceeds his 17 years. In this way, and in many others, the character of Marcelo reminds me of my brother Benjamin, who also has Asperger's syndrome. Though Marcelo's thoughts are complex, his manner and outlook is one of childlike sincerity. For example, when Marcelo asks his coworker, Jasmine, "Does Jasmine know that she is beautiful?" he is not being coy or flirtatious; the question is frank and forthright (105). Likewise, the pride he feels when he recognizes another's use of sarcasm is a powerful example of how casually neurotypicals take the nuances of language for granted (111).

An often positive quality of ASD that the narrative explores is the presence of a "special or pervasive interest." Marcelo describes this as an interest that "absorbs the attention of the AS [Asperger's syndrome] person to the exclusion of other interests because it is more important and more fun than other interests" (56–57). This ability to focus intently on one subject for extended periods of time can allow ASD individuals to develop incredibly specialized knowledge in certain areas. My brother Benjamin, for example, has had a few pervasive interests over the years, and as a result he now has encyclopedic knowledge of caterpillars and fish. In recent years he has become a diligent author and graphic designer and has been drafting and illustrating a novel since 2008. Marcelo's pervasive interest is religion, and he displays his knowledge of and affinity for the subject throughout the novel. An element of mind-blindness is present in the fact that he must be told to curtail his discussion of this sensitive issue in the workplace, yet one is compelled to wonder if discussion of this universal issue wouldn't be such a faux pas if we all adopted Marcelo's open-minded perspective.

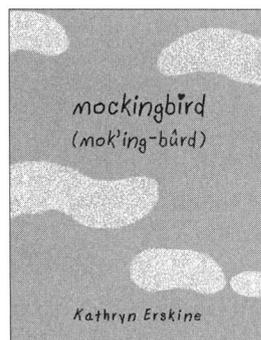


The true strength of the novel is contained in the authenticity of Marcelo's voice as one representation of the Asperger's perspective. His patterns of speech and awkward yet incredibly precise use of language depicts for readers a realistic sense of conversation with some Asperger's individuals. For instance, instead of saying his father will ask him how things are going at the internship on their ride home together, Marcelo matter-of-factly states: "it is time again for a periodic assessment of Marcelo's progress" (107). Similarly, using elevated language to describe simple concepts is a trait my brother Benjamin often exhibits. Once, when eating a hamburger that began to fall apart, Benjamin described it as "dilapidated"—an accurate, albeit uncommon, turn of phrase.¹

Marcelo in the Real World is an excellent book for familiarizing oneself with the traits displayed by some individuals affected by ASD, particularly Asperger's syndrome. Marcelo's experience illustrates that these individuals are fully capable of adapting to the demands of the real world, especially if guided by patient, understanding individuals. However, this novel also makes a compelling case for accepting the unique perspective of those with ASD as a gift rather than a disability. As Marcelo points out, the term *cognitive disorder* that is often used to describe ASD implies that there is something wrong with the way he thinks or perceives reality; yet he rightly argues, "I perceive reality just fine. Sometimes I perceive more of reality than others" (54). This book has earned several distinctions including that of a YALSA Best Book for Young Adults and as a *School Library Journal* Best Book for 2009. The novel's themes will resonate best with older teens, and some of the content is mature but entirely appropriate for young adult readers.

Mockingbird

In *Mockingbird*, Kathryn Erskine doesn't just tell readers what it's like to have ASD; she shows them. The narrative is derived from the first-person perspective of Caitlin, a fifth grader whose link to the outside world is suddenly eclipsed when a middle school shooting takes the life of her older brother, Devon. The literal, dispassionate in-



terpretations that characterize Caitlin's Asperger's syndrome make it difficult for her to work through her loss as she and those around her seek closure. Interestingly, however, the novel concludes with Caitlin acting as the catalyst for emotional healing within her community.

Erskine uses Caitlin's extreme hypersensitivity to help readers comprehend and empathize with some of the physical effects of ASD, which may cause behaviors that are perceived as peculiar. For example, Caitlin is an excellent artist but prefers to use only black and white because she's overwhelmed when colors mix together (Erskine 140). Likewise, she is particular about which styles, colors, and fabrics she'll don, and wears similar clothing each day because the range of textures and colors she is comfortable with is so limited. Her senses are overloaded when there are too many noises or is too much action, causing her to shut down or retreat into an enclosed, quiet place. In one example, Caitlin becomes so overwhelmed by a house full of mourners that she takes shelter underneath her father's sweater: "Dad talks to the world outside the sweater and his voice makes a low hummy-vibratey feel. I close my eyes and wish I could stay here forever" (9).

Many of the books surveyed thus far allude to the issue of hypersensitivity in those with ASD, but only *Mockingbird* depicts the seemingly contradictory coexistence of hyposensitivity, or an apparent numbness to physical pain, in those on the autism spectrum. Emotionally taxing events are sometimes powerful enough to overcome the ASD individual's sensitivity issues, a phenomenon that counters the assumption that these individuals are closed off or devoid of emotions. Furthermore, the paradox underscores how ASD individuals are often grounded in the physical realm rather than in a neurotypical world of signifiers. For example, my brother Patrick has a constant wound on his hand that he prods whenever his feelings are hurt, presumably because his inability to conceptualize emotional hurt drives him to self-inflict pain; it's as if he's trying to bring the hurt out of the metaphysical and into the understood reality of the physical. Likewise, Caitlin has an episode where she compulsively rubs her finger back and

forth against a piece of unfinished wood, in what becomes an attempt to erase the memory of her brother's shooting death, which is signified by the unfinished wood of his Eagle Scout project.

In addition to Caitlin's physiological barriers, her literal-mindedness is a source of challenge but also of strength. The friendship she develops with Michael, a kindergartner, is a good illustration of how her childlike honesty precipitates an unprecedented level of sincerity. Of the books surveyed,

These young adult novels are excellent tools for promoting understanding of ASD. Applied more broadly, these texts also serve as a springboard to probing the question of normalcy in the context of disability.

Mockingbird goes the furthest in making the idea of mind-blindness palpable for the reader. The use of capitalization to emphasize terms like "Look At The Person" creates an emphatic refrain in which readers are inundated with the social cues that Caitlin has obviously been drilled on for years (16). Likewise, the indication of dialogue through

italics rather than quotation marks effectively makes speech feel disconnected or foreign—like an intrusion into the concrete reality of Caitlin's thoughts.

The newest of the novels surveyed, Erskine's *Mockingbird* provides an incredibly nuanced look into the mind of an individual with ASD. This National Book Award winner is delightfully perceptive and conveys a truly heartwarming story. I would recommend it to any YA reader, despite the young age of the protagonist.

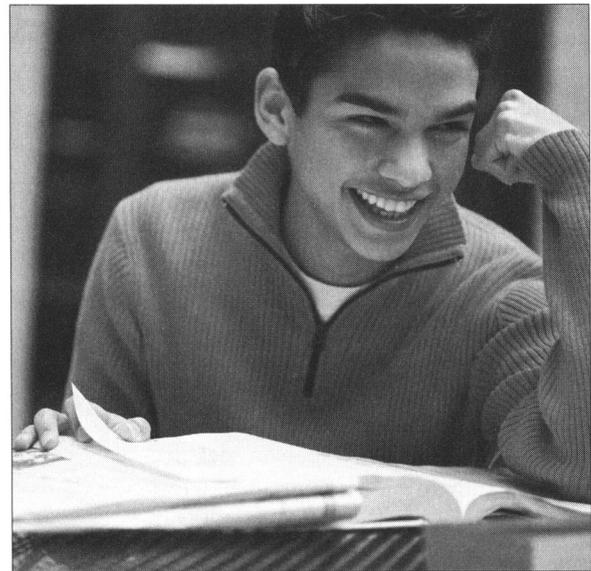
The Future of ASD Portrayals in Young Adult Literature

Diverse in scope and approach, each of the books surveyed offers unique insights on facets of the autistic perspective. Lord's *Rules*, Stork's *Marcelo in the Real World*, and Erskine's *Mockingbird* are most reflective of my personal experience with ASD. Teachers seeking to educate students about a particular student's manifestation of ASD may find Haddon's *Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* or Baskin's *Anything but Typical* better suited to their needs. Whether taught singly or as a unit, these young adult novels are excellent tools for promoting understanding of ASD. Applied more

broadly, these texts also serve as a springboard to probing the question of normalcy in the context of disability.

It is fortunate that these YA novels, among the handful that approach the subject of ASD through fiction, are written well and written responsibly. Three of these novels were published in the past few years, indicating that growth in this subset of YA literature is clearly on the horizon. In that vein, here are my hopes for further exploration of the unique ASD perspective in YA literature: I hope authors will continue to produce responsible and empathetic portrayals of autistic characters, and that these literary representatives will integrate seamlessly as protagonists, secondary, and tertiary characters. Furthermore, I encourage the publication of books such as *Mockingbird* and *Marcelo in the Real World*, where characters' existence on the autism spectrum does not constitute the central conflict of the novel but is rather just one element of the plot or characterization—and perhaps the key to finding resolution.

As the number of individuals affected by ASD grows, so should our awareness of the disorder's various manifestations in different people. Through understanding we can promote a society that celebrates differences in ability and perspective, a society that gains by adopting an inclusive attitude



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MANIFESTATIONS OF ASD IN FIVE YA NOVELS					
	Hyper- and/or hyposensitivity	Patterning	Language barriers	Social barriers	Mind-blindness
<i>Mockingbird</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Overwhelmed when colors mix Must wear a particular type of clothing Dislikes noise Displays hyposensitivity in moments of emotional frustration 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Dislikes changes to her schedule Compulsively sucks on her sleeve Needs to record her progress toward goals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Has trouble understanding metaphoric language Doesn't understand the rules of capitalization 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cannot make eye contact Doesn't engage with peers Needs to be drilled on social decorum 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Has trouble showing empathy Doesn't comprehend the motivations of others Is confused by the universality of concepts such as having good manners
<i>Rules</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Dislikes noise and being wet Attends occupational therapy to deal with sensory issues 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enjoys the structure his sister's rules create for him Listens to his favorite cassette tape repeatedly Puts puzzles together line by line 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Can't find the right words to use, instead he "borrows someone else's" Interprets language literally 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Looks through other people's houses Undresses at inappropriate times 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is intolerant of tardiness Often oblivious to his sister's embarrassment or frustration
<i>Marcelo in the Real World</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Frustrated when asked to multitask Gets overwhelmed in new situations Likes to learn at his own pace 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Calms himself by repeating religious texts and prayers Prefers predictability Creates daily itineraries 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Often drifts into third person Has trouble understanding metaphoric language Uses elevated language to make simple statements, often to an awkward effect 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Has trouble understanding implied messages Can't always discern meaning behind certain facial expressions Has trouble providing scripted social responses and making small talk 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Must be told not to talk about his pervasive interest (religion) at work Sees all ethical/moral issues as black and white Always speaks frankly, even when advisable not to do so
<i>Anything but Typical</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Doesn't like to be touched Dislikes noisy environments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sticks to a daily schedule Is upset when asked to sit at a different computer 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Has trouble speaking aloud and speaks infrequently Cannot express desires to others 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Doesn't make eye contact Has trouble connecting with others in person 	This text seems too intuitive about emotions and motivations of others to make an argument for mind-blindness
<i>The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Doesn't like to be touched Has a strong aversion to certain colors and foods "Sees everything" and is overwhelmed by sensory data 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Uses patterns and logic to interact with the world around him Establishes arbitrary rituals to provide order Memorizes train schedules and other data 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Dislikes metaphors Understands jokes that use a play-on-words, but does not find them funny 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Can't discern meaning of facial expressions or body language Doesn't understand the difference between a neighbor and a stranger Doesn't pick up on emotional cues 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cannot predict how his behaviors will affect others emotionally Makes no exceptions for the immoral behavior of others

toward the unique cognitive and physical needs of these individuals. Many among the ASD community are already calling autism acceptance “the next civil rights frontier” (Harmon 20). This call for “neurodiversity” is a call for society to accept and appreciate the unique perspective of the autistic mind, not only for the sake of those with ASD but also for the general betterment of society. As Christopher Renino so eloquently put it in his September 2009 *English Journal* article titled “‘Who’s There?’: Shakespeare and the Dragon of Autism”: “We are all on the autism spectrum The most socially related among us, the most gifted speaker, the golden boy, the charming one—all of us have our moments that, were they to go on long enough, could earn us a diagnosis on the spectrum” (54). Fortunately for the development of our own understanding and that of our students, where there is a marginalized group, there, too, is young adult literature.² 

Notes

1. An explanation from Benjamin on review of this statement: “When I was young, I felt that using academic or high-leveled words would make me sound intelligent. However, I sometimes used them in an unusual context, which confuses people. I find it to be an issue in communicating clearly with others, which is what those with Asperger’s sometimes experience.”

2. I would like to thank Dr. Leila Christenbury for her encouragement of this project; she is a motivational teacher, dedicated mentor, and extraordinary person.

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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

According to the National Public Radio website, the “This I Believe” series is “a national media project engaging people in writing, sharing, and discussing the core values and beliefs that guide their daily lives.” In the ReadWriteThink.org lesson plan “Giving Voice to Students through ‘This I Believe’ Podcasts,” students participate by writing and recording their own essays. Students first complete a series of activities designed to get them thinking and writing about their experiences. They then write, read, and record their essays for a class blog. For the final activity, students comment on each other’s work. The lesson also includes suggestions for use in inclusion classes. <http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/giving-voice-students-through-1096.html>