

Presentations of autism in literature

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1. Background

Autism spectrum disorder is a lifelong condition defined by:

- Difficulties in social communication and social interaction
- Restricted repetitive behaviours and/or interests
- Onset during early development
- Symptoms affecting significant areas of day to day life¹

3. Findings

- Characters with autism are all presented as good people
- Stereotypes such as savantism and superpowers were present in 7 of the 15 novels that I read
- Frequent failure to reflect autism as a lifelong condition
- Lack of depictions of comorbidity
- Several good representations, the best (*M is for Autism* and *Queens of Geek*) were written by those with autism

2. Year one objectives

- Identify and read a number of novels with a character explicitly identified as having autism
- Analyse the representations for accuracy and recurring stereotypes

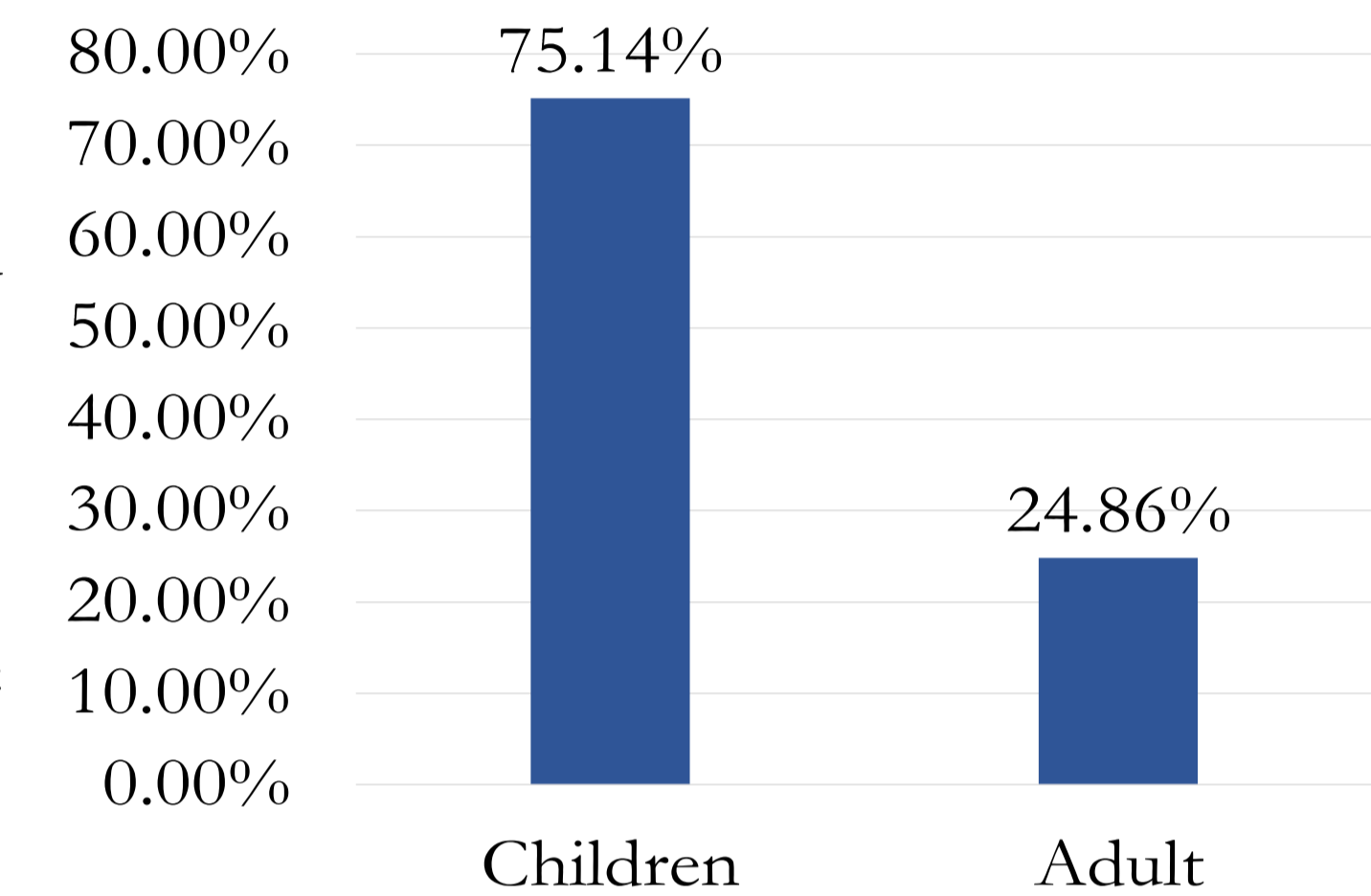
Year two objectives

- See how useful representations of autism are for educating and informing people
- Organise talks at the University of York on the subject

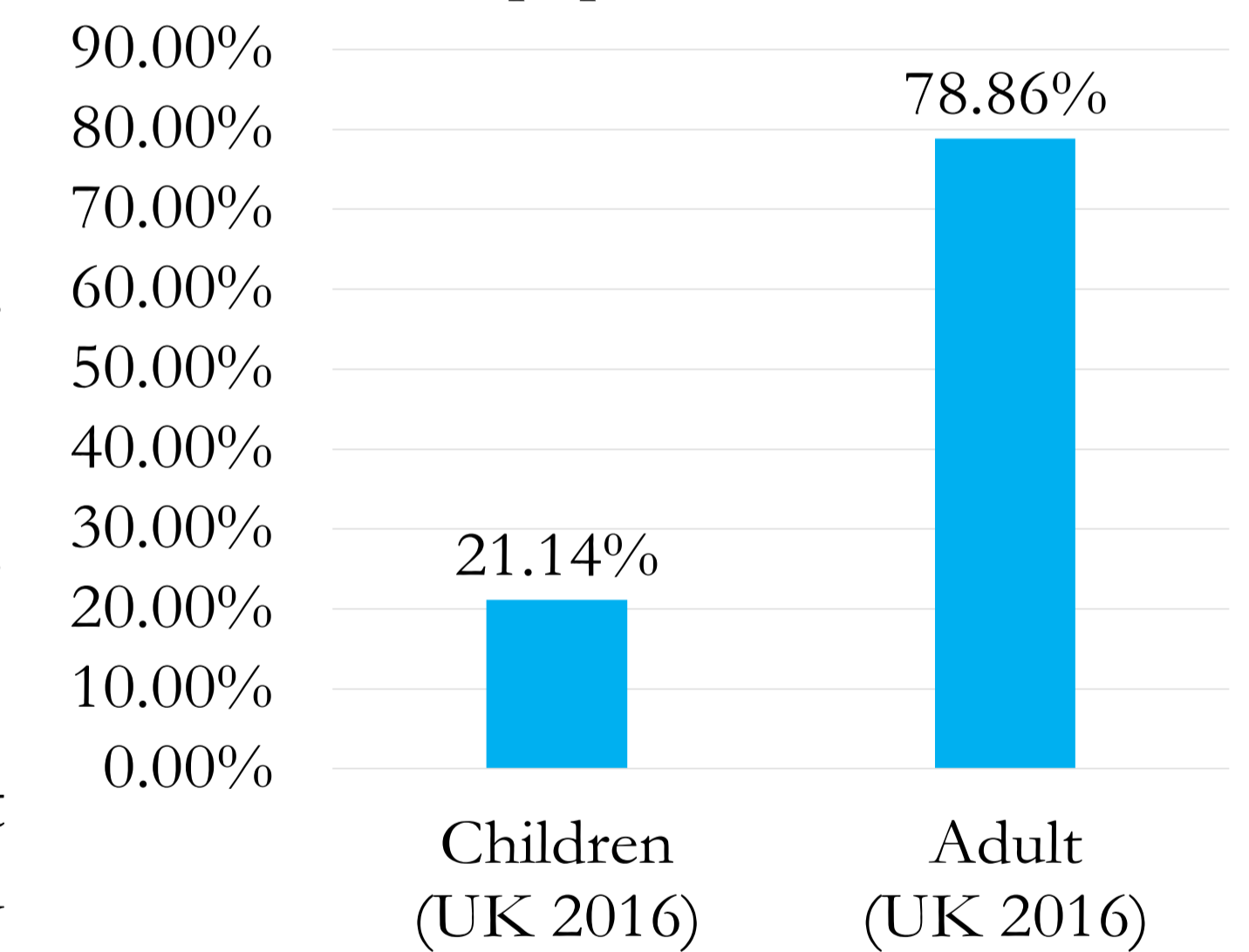
4. Conclusions

- Future portrayals should aim not to misrepresent autism in stereotypes
- A more diverse representation of autism is preferable to avoid patronising
- To truly represent those with autism, we must “give them more than one role to play. They can be heroes, villains, winners, losers, angels, demons, and everything in between”² (Professor Robert Rozema)

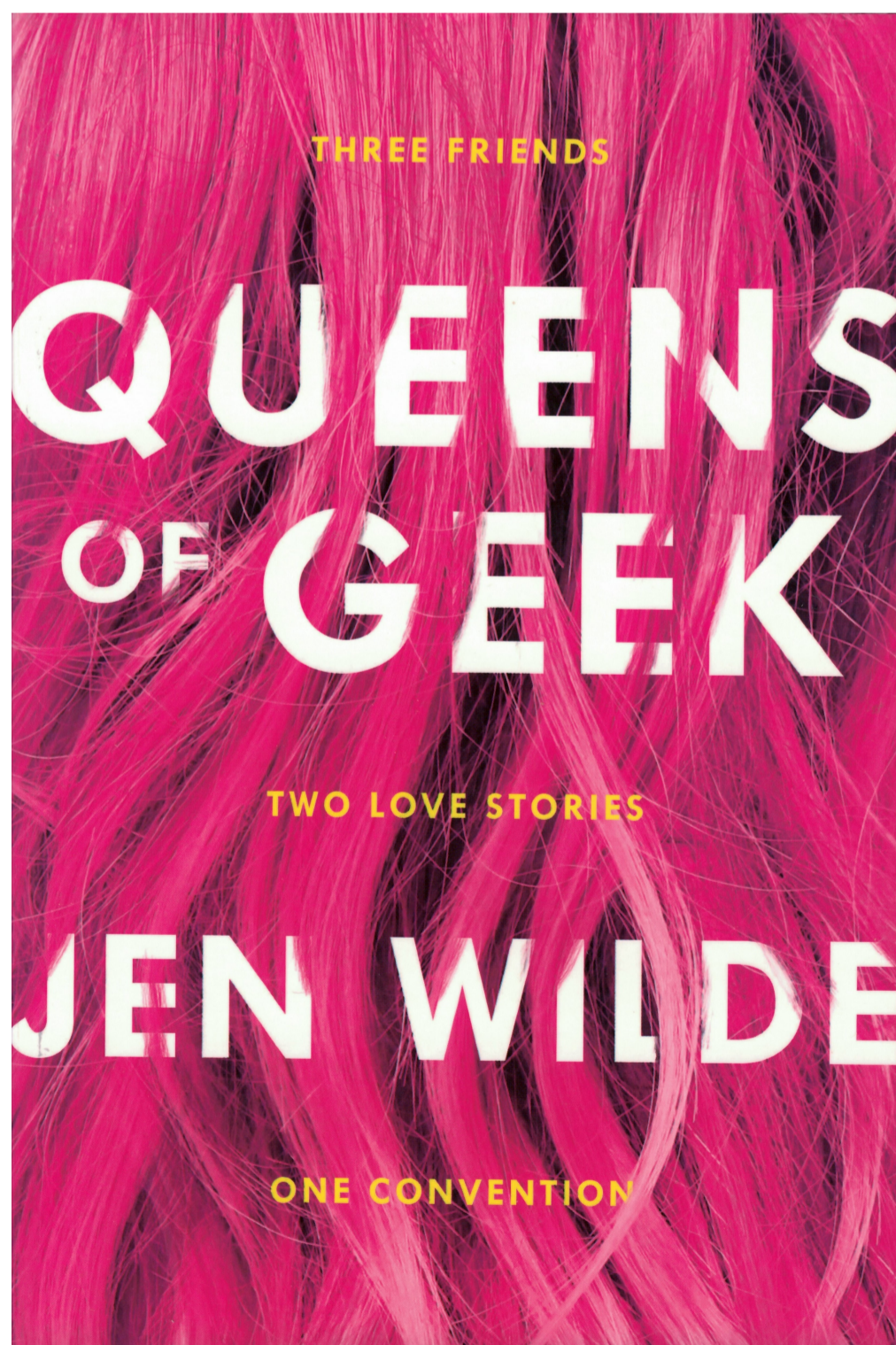
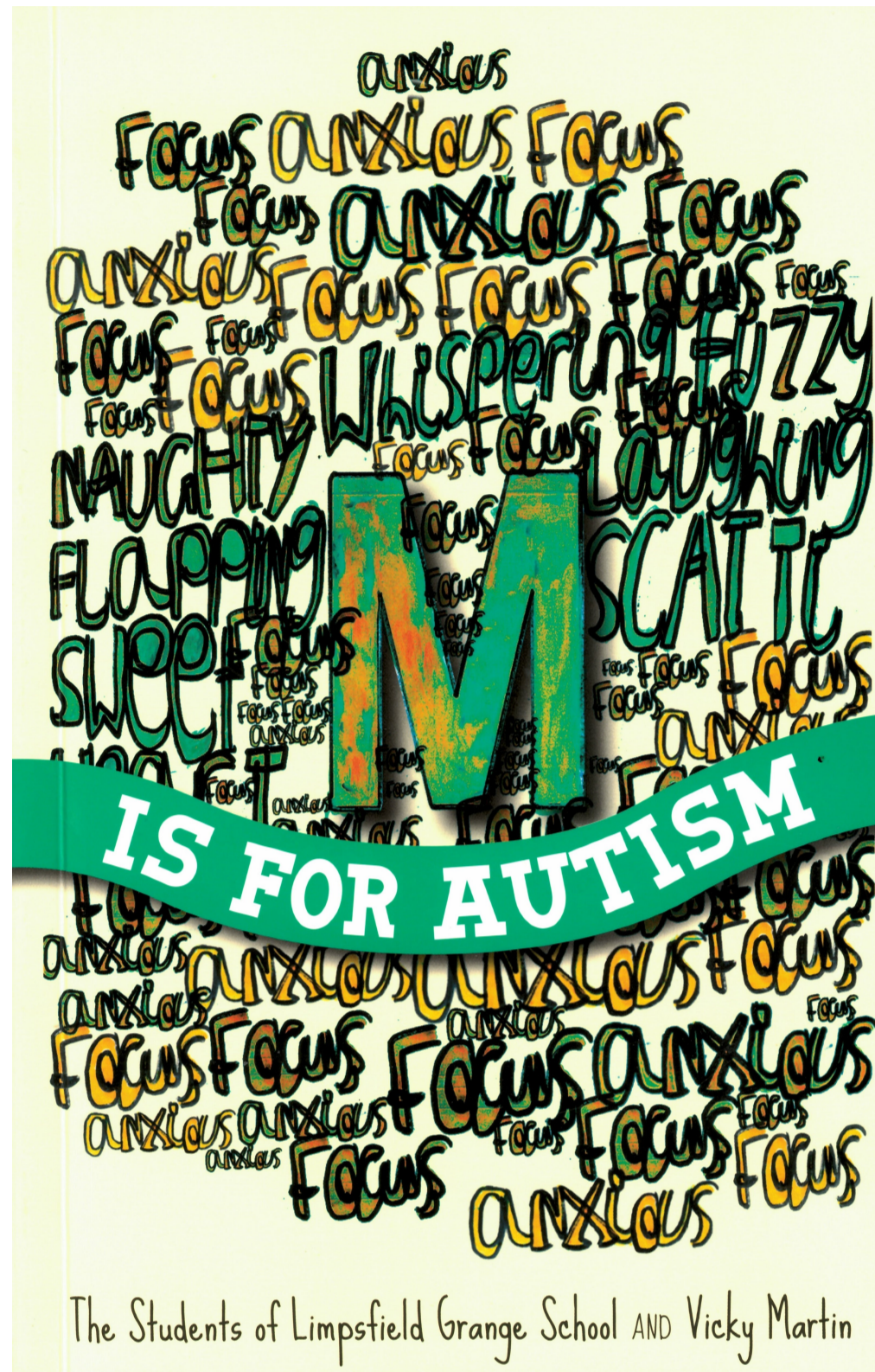
The depiction of children vs adults with autism in 181 novels



Children vs adults in the UK population



Above: The proportion of adults to children with autism should roughly correspond to the ratio of adults to children in the population. However, adults with autism were significantly underrepresented in literature.



¹ Symptoms as given by the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition* (2013) and the World Health Organisation's *International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems, Eleventh Revision* (2018)

² Robert Rozema, "The Problem of Autism in Young Adult Fiction," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan* 30, no. 1 (2014): 30.

