

A novel approach: autism in books

Matthew Bantick is a Laidlaw Scholar researching depictions of autism in literature at the University of York, under the supervision of Professor Helen Smith. His younger brother is autistic. Here, he writes about his findings so far

A popular message within the autistic community is that 'once you've met one autistic person, you've met one autistic person'. This mantra encourages people to abandon the idea of a typical person on the spectrum: everyone on the autism spectrum is unique.

So, how well is this message expressed in literature featuring autistic characters?

In a novel, anything is possible. This should lead to an incredibly diverse range of characters with and without autism; representations should include

every kind of character in every setting. The sad reality, however, is that they don't. All the autistic characters I have encountered are ultimately good people, such as Caitlin in Kathryn Erskine's *Mockingbird* and Jacob in Jodi Picoult's *House Rules*. They do their best and, more often than not, they achieve their goals.

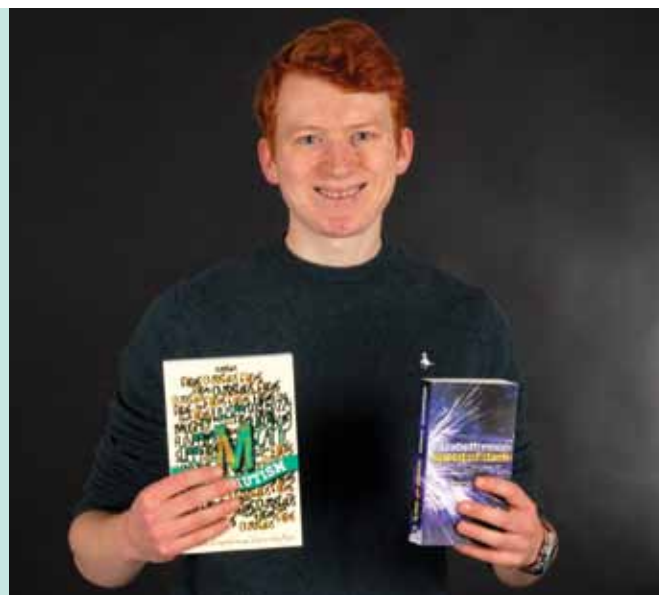
There is nothing wrong with such representations, of course. In fiction as in life, there are good people, and people who succeed. But there are also bad people, and people everywhere in between.

If popular culture repeatedly typecasts a group, it not only runs the risk of appearing patronising, but it also fails to adequately represent the group.

At the same time, while autism is an important part of a character's identity, some novels risk making it the sum total of their identity. Autistic characters need to be more than just 'the character with autism'.

Current representations

Over the summer, I read 15 novels featuring characters explicitly



Less than **a quarter**
of the characters **were adults**

50% of the novels had an
autistic character
with **savant level abilities** or
superpowers

Only **two characters**
had other conditions



ABOVE: Matthew Bantick analysed 15 books with autistic characters

described as having autism, and analysed them for accuracy. Next summer I will return to those 15 books to see whether they can be of use in educating and informing people about autism, and the experience of those on the spectrum. Only four novels featured representations of autism in a primary character that were largely realistic: *M is for Autism*, *Queens of Geek*, *Speed of Dark* and *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*.

I was struck by a handful of recurring stereotypes. Four of the 15 novels featured an autistic character with savant-level abilities, including Robert Ludlum and Gayle Lynd's *The Hades Factor*. Three others had superpowers, as in Michael Grant's *Gone*.

Age is another factor. To decide which novels I would study in detail, I identified 174 novels with a character who explicitly had autism: incredibly, less than a quarter of those characters

were adults. Autism is a lifelong condition, so where are the representations of adults on the spectrum?

Other conditions

Another interesting absence are other conditions occurring alongside autism. Those on the autism spectrum have a higher than average chance of also being diagnosed with conditions such as a learning disability and epilepsy. However, only two of the 15 books had any explicit related condition. Both of those portrayed anxiety conditions.

Those two books were far and away the best representations of autism I read. And both were written by autistic people - this is not a coincidence. With even the best books I read written by neurotypicals, I always felt there was some flaw or lack. However, Jen Wilde's *Queens of Geek* and *M is for Autism* by students of Limpsfield Grange School with Vicky Martin are the kinds of

“Where are the representations of adults on the spectrum?”

representation that I would like to see more of.

These two novels presented their characters as real, everyday people: they weren't savants, they didn't have superpowers. They had hopes, dreams and fears. They understood romantic love and had crushes and relationships. The characters had autism, but were not defined by it. And that is the fundamental strength of these books.

Characters with autism are being featured more in literature. The next steps must be to ensure that those characters are not misrepresenting autism; as well as ensuring that they form a diverse cast. We need good autistic characters and bad autistic characters, successful and failed autistic people, elderly people and children on the spectrum - and everything in between.

Life is a spectrum, too, and fiction needs to represent the diversity of reality to ensure that it does not patronise. More importantly, it needs to ensure that the representation is not token or partial, but complete and sometimes challenging.



What's the best depiction of autism you've read? Let us know at YourAutismMagazine@nas.org.uk