Eva Charlotte Hesse

STEREOTYPICALLY AUTISTIC?

Autism Portrayals in Young Adult Fiction

[transcript] + Medical Humanities

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Editorial

Human beings are more than the sum of their organs and body parts: their roles in society, their (hi)stories, their living and economic conditions, but also their dreams, fears, and inventions impact their health.
The inter- and transdisciplinary edited series **Medical Humanities** will connect the perspectives of medicine, the humanities, and social sciences to gain new insights about how society, health, and the environment interact. Focusing on the living human body, the **Medical Humanities** series raises urgent questions on gender politics and bioethics, and mediates between care and health policies, technology and body images.

Eva Charlotte Hesse, born in 1993, studied English, history, and philosophy at Universität Kassel. In 2024 she finished her doctoral thesis on autism stereotypes in Young Adult fiction, which has been rewarded the Alfred Röver-Dissertationspreis.

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Autism Portrayals in Young Adult Fiction

[transcript]

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List of Abbreviations

APA: American Psychiatric Association
AS: Asperger's Syndrome
ASD: Autism Spectrum Disorder
CP: Cooperative Principle
DSM: Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders
ICD: International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems
ToM: Theory of Mind
YA: Young Adult

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Introduction

That there is such a thing as a general perception of autism, perhaps best thought of as a set of stereotypes, is graphically brought out by what movies need or need not show to explain the autistic condition. (Draaisma 1476)

Autism awareness has increased rapidly over the last two decades, not least because of portrayals in novels, TV series, or movies, as well as (self-) advocacy on social media. However, what appears to be a single label or diagnosis hides a multifaceted picture. The autism community even has a saying: "If you know one child with autism, you know one child with autism" (Rozema 27). Behaviour, abilities, and perception of the world are likely to differ vastly from one autistic individual to the next, while still being encompassed by the umbrella term Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Moreover, knowledge on autism is changing and growing to this day, having long become too complex to be broken down into a simple definition. The symptomatic picture autism paints is simply too diversified to be reduced to a few select characteristics, and yet something akin to a public understanding of autism has developed, as indicated by the fact that most people no longer seem to require an explanation of this term. What psychologist Douwe Draaisma describes as a 'set of stereotypes' might merely be a hazy concept purporting the wrong ideas. Generally, stereotypes serve us well in categorising and simplifying our surroundings, but they can tilt towards the negative, thus becoming prejudices. The media, including literature, movies, or TV series produced for entertainment, have contributed their fair share to 'educating' the public

and creating awareness for the term – though not necessarily for its complexity. More people have heard or read of an autistic character, or seen one on TV than met an autist in real life. Their idea of autism builds upon the information distributed through the media – including fictional portrayals. However, what is purported in the media influences the public opinion and thus reality. According to the Thomas theorem, situations become real in their consequences, if men define them as real (Chandler and Munday 433), and fictional representations of autism have very real consequences.

In my study, I wish to explore the stereotypes commonly portrayed in young adult (YA) fiction, as well as their implications for autists in real life. On a theoretical level, one must ask to what extent characters can be representative of a diagnosis. Indeed, it is a longstanding debate in literary theory, whether characters actually 'exist', after all, they might simply be accumulations of words. The debate not only shines light on the theoretical framework of characters but also on those aspects in which they fundamentally diverge from real human beings. Baruch Hochman gives an account of it in his book *Character in Literature* (1985), defending characters as human-like against the formalist and structuralist schools of thought. Seymour Chatman (*Story and Discourse*, 1978), especially, theorised that readers are aware that fictional characters are concepts, ideas, or creations of their imaginations, but they still attribute traits to them and frame their movements the same way they do with people in real-life to best explain their course of action. This theory is still applied to this day: in fiction, readers engage the same labels and stereotypes that they use to understand reality. Thus, why not attribute their traits and actions to a diagnosis?

In order to better understand how characters can become representative of a concept, further elaboration of character theory is required. James Phelan emphasised the three different components of literary characters, i.e. their thematic, synthetic, and mimetic dimensions and functions (*Reading People, Reading Plots*, 1989). For example, a character that is thematically representative of autism loses much of its mimetic components and thus its individuality. It is less human and can easily be replaced. Vice versa, a character with an emphasised mimetic

component is as close to a real person as a literary portrayal can get but generates less information that will educate a reader on autism and could subsequently be applied to other autists. This is not to say that readers will dismiss such portrayals as purely fictional since literary characters tend to be symbolically heightened. Additionally, such characters tend to have more pronounced features due to stylisation, sometimes resulting in stock characters or types which have recurring attributes, making them recognisable across different novels, genres, or even media. Indeed, it is here where stereotypes come into play. Draaisma's 'set of stereotypes' could very well refer to a stock character or a literary type; 'the Autist' would thus be the distillation of fictional autism portrayals.

However, the question of what counts as 'autism portrayal' is difficult to answer, since it is impossible to diagnose characters through questionnaires, medical consultations, bloodwork, tests, background stories etc.. The closest one gets to an actual diagnosis for a fictional portrayal is an explicitly mentioned one. In that case, the author assumedly had the intention to make the character representative of autism. And yet it seems as if characters are increasingly often 'diagnosed' by the public, i.e. readers, journalists, activists, or fans, for whatever reason. Autistic fans have even coined a term for those characters that resonate with their understanding of autism but are not officially labelled: 'autistic-coded' (Mullis 150).

One can only assume that such retrospectively labelled – as opposed to intentionally created – characters have certain characteristics which justify a 'diagnosis'. These characteristics must relate to what Draaisma calls a 'set of stereotypes', except neither have so far been identified. Instead, they remain discursively hazy, mostly referencing isolated examples. Since my study is not meant to be a discourse analysis, I will base my analysis on intentional portrayals. All of them were written by non-autistic authors, which, I believe, supports my aim of identifying public stereotypes. After all, these authors can be considered laypeople and therefore part of the public. I have extracted common conjectures about autism from philosophical and sociological works concerned with autism stereotypes in general. While the fringes of these stereotypes

remain in flux, I assume that at their core public stereotypes of autism are much more stable, therefore allowing laypeople to recognise them in different settings.

This very form of recognition is what happens when characters (and sometimes historical figures) are 'diagnosed' by the public.[1] I am reluctant to use the word 'diagnosis' for this since it is usually associated with medical expertise. I therefore suggest that these characters are publicly *associated* with medical disorders and (re-)categorised through labelling. Such labels insinuate a better understanding of the characters and further insights into their motifs or behaviour. However, labelling is also a form of stigmatisation, causing the subject at hand to become deviant in the eyes of others and subsequently ostracised. On a general note, literary scholars have not been too concerned with detecting hysteria, madness, or other mental illnesses in Victorian fiction. But the Victorian Era is long gone and fictional characters usually do not mind allegations. Moreover, hysteria has been abolished as a diagnosis, thus whenever somebody is described as 'hysterical', it usually refers to a temporary state of emotionality. Autism, on the other hand, encompasses the life experience of actual human beings and the diagnosis Autism Spectrum Disorder will likely not be discarded any time soon. Hence, when characters such as Sherlock Holmes are proclaimed autistic, real human beings have to live with the consequences of such associations. Whenever such connections are reinforced, public stereotypes are also affected and may even turn into self-fulfilling prophecies. Therefore, representations are both a boon and a bane to the autism community, at once educating and misleading the public.

Despite or because of such public stereotypes, autism narratives remain in flux. Just as awareness has spread to a wider public, the very stereotypes become contested. In the past decade or so, autism activists have found their voice, mainly through the web and social media platforms. The neurodiversity movement, having originated from autism activism and the field of disability studies, advocates for autism pride and

1 The identification of 'autistic-coded' characters by autistic fans poses an exemption to this rule, since the latter cannot be considered laypeople.

against the idea that autism is a disability or disease. It is in fierce competition with the original narrative of autists as "tragic figures" (Duffy and Dorner 202) and Simon Baron-Cohen's theory of 'mind-blindness'. Literary portrayals, but especially that of Christopher in *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* (Mark Haddon, 2003), which is often considered the first of autism narratives in YA fiction, have become highly contested in terms of their representativeness and accuracy. The understanding and perception of autism are not only negotiated within the public but in literature, too. However, as of yet, it has not piqued any significant interest in literary scholars. Few literary studies exist on autism fiction and most tend to focus on the educational purpose of such characters in regard to diagnostic criteria while criticising the lack of diversity in symptoms portrayed (cf. Kelley, "DSM-5 Autism Spectrum Disorder Symptomology in Award-Winning Narrative Fiction" 2018). I believe it to be more blinding than helpful to consult diagnostic criteria when searching for stereotypes. Not only are most people outside the medical field woefully unequipped to interpret diagnostic manuals, but the diagnosis itself remains in motion, feeding off constant new research. Moreover, symptoms may vary from individual to individual and manifest differently over time, therefore a mere list is misleading. Nevertheless, autism is first and foremost considered a medical disorder and thus I have included a chapter on what I deem the medical discourse surrounding it.

In literature, such 'symptoms' may present themselves as narratological features, amongst others. Since autism is usually associated with difficulties in social interaction and communication, I pay special attention to pragmatics. Not only is this the easiest way to trip up conversations and introduce comical aspects into the story, but it also signifies a character's flawed social abilities. Elena Semino wrote an article on "Pragmatic failure, mind style and characterisation in fiction about autism" (2014), bridging the gap between narratology and autism narratives. Still, pragmatic competence or lack thereof should neither be considered necessary nor sufficient to 'prove' autism. In fact, pragmatic competence in autists is the subject of a plethora of medical studies. Here, older participants tend to perform similarly to their peers, another

indication of how the phenotype may change with age. For example, autism in adults or females – or adult females – is less well explored than in young boys. An exaggeration of pragmatic difficulties could be idiosyncratic to literary portrayals, hinting at the stylised nature of fictional characters or simply having become a custom in autism narrative.

There is a simple premise on which I base this study: characters that are representative of autism are different. In some form or other, they deviate from the expectations of the audience as well as their fictional surroundings. I will therefore also explore ideas of normality, deviance, and stigmatisation. Autism and its implications have close ties to contemporary society, therefore even fictional representations have a political impact. At no point, autism narrative is a mere literary matter, and thus my study is bound to venture into bordering fields of sociology and psychology, autism activism, and medical science. Most studies on autism portrayals are located at these intersections. At times it even seems as if scientists accidentally ventured into the field of literature. I therefore wish to take the opposite approach, expanding the focus outward, from literary and character theory to media reception studies and discourse theory. My aim is to not only increase awareness of autism stereotypes in literature but also explore their origins and consequences. Perhaps, this study might even help to disentangle prejudices from stereotypes and stereotypes from knowledge, so that readers are enabled to recognise underlying structures in autism portrayals. Meanwhile, this study is not intended to make any scientific claims about autism and autistic individuals in general; its focus lies on literary stereotypes and fictional representation, both of which imply a fantastic element and therefore also the possibility of change.

In **Chapter 1**, I have included some general thoughts on character theory in the light of applying diagnoses to them, including the impact readers have on the conceptualisation of portrayals. This chapter is mostly concerned with the theoretical groundwork I base my study on, and thus ideas that could be applied to any form of (retrospective) construction of literary meaning.

Since it is closely related to reader-response theory, **Chapter 2** is dedicated to exploring the impact of stereotypes on literature. Although this study is not intended as a discourse analysis, for this would be altogether too large, I believe that discourse theory is the best way to envisage the relationship between knowledge, stereotypes, and reading. I then focused on five stereotypes that were consistently mentioned in philosophical or sociological but non-medical papers, reasoning that those would be representative of publicly held assumptions about autism. A statistical analysis proved the presence of four out of five stereotypes across all novels examined.

Based on my premises, I return to the concept of normality in **Chapter 3**. In this chapter, I further explore the impact of discourses on the idea of public, as well as normality and deviance. This naturally leads to the concept of labelling and stigmatisation, which complements the theory of stereotypes. I also use the portrayal of Ted in *The London Eye Mystery* to demonstrate the impact of these discourses on everyday interaction.

Chapter 4 investigates the impact of the genre of young adult fiction and autism narratives. Not only is it concerned with the quality of representation but also with the underlying power structures that dictate how autism is portrayed in the first place. I theorise that there are two main currents, namely the neurodiversity movement and the conservative movement, which fight over the definition of autism and subsequently the way it should be portrayed.

Only in **Chapter 5** do I concern myself with the medical criteria of an autism diagnosis, mostly to demonstrate the vast array of symptoms that were combined under the umbrella term of ASD. I discuss the risks associated with conceptualising autism as a spectrum, as well as symptomatology related to cognitive abilities.

As a nod toward linguistic studies on autism portrayals, **Chapter 6** is about some of the narratological peculiarities of autism portrayals, although I believe these not to be idiosyncratic. This chapter relates to visual rhetoric, and pragmatics, before returning to literary aspects, including unreliable narrators and stereotypical roles.

Short Summaries

The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time (2003) by Mark Haddon

15-year-old Christopher Boone lives with his single father in Swindon and attends a special needs school. When the neighbour's dog is stabbed to death, he decides to investigate the case. During his investigations he discovers that his mother, who supposedly 'died' two years ago, is in fact still alive. It turns out that she moved to London with her lover, even though Christopher's father told him that she had died. Christopher also discovers that his father killed the dog and subsequently decides to run away and live with his mother. He overcomes several obstacles, including travelling alone for the first time and taking the tube, before arriving at his mother's new apartment. Christopher's mother admits that she could not cope with a disabled child and that it eventually drove a wedge between her and her husband. However, when her lover refuses to let Christopher stay with them, she decides to move back to Swindon and resumes her caretaker role. The novel ends with Christopher moving in with his mother and his father apologising for his lies.

Autism: Christopher is portrayed as having the mind of a child but the body of a 15-year-old. Those aware of his intellectual deficits tend to be either kind and understanding or patronising, whereas outsiders often react with incredulity or hostility, of which Christopher mostly seems to remain unaware. In fact, throughout the novel, Christopher shows a very limited range of emotions, i.e. he is either happy, sad, or scared/angry. His matter-of-fact way of reporting events contributes to the idea that he simply does not have a 'thick' layer of emotions. Although Christopher is highly mathematically gifted, it is unlikely that he will ever be able to care for himself, including making his own food, changing clothes, or doing the laundry, thus fulfilling the criteria of a savant. More than once, Christopher's parents are shown to be struggling with their son's behaviour, which is also hinted to be the main cause for their separation. By the end of the novel, Christopher has neither changed nor grown, despite his adventurous trip to London.

The London Eye Mystery (2007) by Siobhan Dowd

12-year-old Ted lives with his parents and his sister Kat in London. During the holidays, his aunt Gloria and his cousin Salim are visiting for a few days. When his cousin disappears during a ride on the London Eye, Kat and Ted begin to investigate. With the family being in a state of emergency, Ted struggles to cope with the changed atmosphere and the rising tension and emotions. During the course of the novel, he is also met with several challenges such as navigating the London underground on his own, going to a motorcycle convention, and having to learn how to tell lies. Ted eventually cracks the case, and it turns out that Salim had run away to evade having to move to New York.

Autism: Ted struggles to read body language and express his own emotions. He pointedly refers to his brain as a computer, running on a different operating system, thus somewhat alluding to the stereotype of autists as robotic. Although the novel centres around Ted and his sister trying to solve the mystery of their cousin's disappearance, one characteristic of Ted is his loneliness and his wish to make new friends (as of the beginning of his novel, he only lists his parents and his teacher). Because of this, Ted is constantly trying to be 'more normal', by following rules others explained to him, e.g. looking somebody in the eye, laughing when others laugh, etc. Ted is not contrasted with any children his own age; most characters are adults who tend to be both patronising and impressed by his exceptional memory. Although Ted's abilities help solve the case, they are also hinted to be an obstacle to finding friends at school, because he is called a nerd and a geek.

By the end of the novel, Ted has self-reportedly made new friends, including his cousin and his aunt. Moreover, he has learned some new skills, such as navigating the London underground and lying, as well as improved his ability to understand body language. Although Ted does at times struggle with pragmatic competency and shows some naivety, the stereotype 'Childlike' only partly applies due to his age.

Marcelo in the Real World (2010) by Francisco X. Stork

17-year-old Marcelo has lived a sheltered life when his father decides that he should take a summer job. Having previously attended a special needs school, Marcelo is thrown in at the deep end when he starts at his father's law firm where the colleagues are ruthlessly competitive. However, when Marcelo discovers a conspiracy, he takes action, even against his own father. With the help of his co-worker, Marcelo uncovers the truth. He befriends Jasmine and gains a new perspective on life when she takes him on a trip to her family. In the end, Marcelo decides to attend mainstream school so that he can become a nurse.

Autism: Marcelo fulfils the criteria of the stereotype 'Childlike', having led a sheltered life between his family and his special needs schooling environment, which did not provide opportunities to learn skills such as riding the train or navigating town on his own. While his father insists that 'nothing is wrong' with his son, he nonetheless tells his colleagues about Marcelo's 'cognitive disorder'. Consequently, Marcelo encounters curious questions (to the point of harassment) when he joins his father's workplace for a summer job. However, not only does Marcelo quickly develop new skills when confronted with new expectations, he overcomes his fear in several instances, takes a stand against his father, and makes plans for his future, including wilfully forfeiting the opportunity of returning to his old school in order to help the victim of a corporate lawsuit. Several characters remain ignorant of his intellectual abilities and are blinded by the fact that Marcelo tends to refer to himself in the third person, while also being baffled by his literalness and honesty. Only when it is too late, do these characters realise that they underestimated his abilities.

Marcelo is a dynamic character who shows a lot of growth during the novel. Although he would still be considered naïve by the standards of other 17-year-olds, his transition from special needs education to mainstream school marks his progressive participation in society.

Mockingbird (2010) by Kathryn Erskine

11-year-old Caitlin has lost her brother and best friend Devon in a school shooting. Without Devon's help she is feeling alone and struggling to fit in. With the help of her new friend Michael, lost his mother in the same shooting, and the school counsellor Mrs. Brook, Caitlin begins to understand the rules of friendship. She also convinces her father to finish Devon's scout project with her, which becomes the centrepiece of a dedication ceremony that brings some closure to the whole community.

Autism: When it comes to participation, Caitlin's biggest obstacle is her communication barrier. Although she does have feelings and emotions, she cannot communicate them in a way that others easily recognise. Consequently, she is often perceived as rude, ignorant, or cold. At times, her literalness or honesty causes offence to others. Because her brother and only friend Devon recently died in a school shooting, she now experiences loneliness and has to interact more with other children. Additionally, she heavily relied on Devon to explain the implicit rules of social interaction. Caitlin is contrasted with another child from school, Michael, who is several years younger but has a better understanding of social conventions. He teaches Caitlin new skills in a non-patronising way and thus becomes her first new friend. However, apart from difficulties in social interaction, Caitlin displays the same developmental level as her peers and insists that she is not 'autistic', since she does not have the same deficits as a classmate of hers. Although the stereotype 'Childlike' does apply, it must be taken into account that she is only 10 years old and has recently lost her brother. For example, while she insists that she 'can read anything', she also claims to attend a 'fun raiser' instead of a fundraiser.

Because of her brother's death, Caitlin is forced to change and adapt; she learns to express sympathy and her grief over her brother's death. What appears as indifference to others is in fact her inability to express her emotions and read those of others.

Trueman Bradley (2011) by Alexei Maxim Russell

This novel tells the story of Trueman Bradley who wants to be a detective like his comic hero Slam Bradley. Having inherited several million dollars, Trueman moves to New York and quickly fiends several friends that help him start a detective agency. His genius mathematical abilities allow him to invent several gadgets that help solve several murders and a large conspiracy that involves the mafia and the NYC chief of police. Trueman successfully solves the cases and becomes a famous detective that consults with the NYPD.

Autism: Trueman fulfils the criteria of a genius detective, to the point where his memory and his abilities are superhuman. During the course of the novel, he invents a 'crime-fighting equation', a mathematical equation which leads directly to the perpetrator, as well as several other equations that power technical devices which help him navigate his surroundings, predict probabilities, etc. Upon moving to New York, to fulfil his dream of becoming a detective, he quickly finds people who help him found a detective agency and who will continue to mother him throughout the novel. Trueman is treated like a child prodigy, with everybody indulging his whims. He does succeed as a detective, not because he adapts and changes but because his mathematical abilities and his money allow him to adapt his surroundings to his own needs, thus creating his own niche. Throughout the novel, Trueman shows little emotional depth, except for being happy, sad, scared, or angry. Conversations tend to be repetitive, as he reprimands everyone for using figurative speech. His main characteristics are his naivety, his genius abilities, and his lack of pragmatic competence.

Although Trueman successfully solves several crimes and invents new equations, he is a static character. Interactions with others tend to amount to others being shown up as lacking compassion. He cannot be considered a stepping-stone, however, since all characters that act understanding of him also benefit from his money, his influence, or his reputation.

The State of Grace (2017) by Rachel Lucas

15-year-old Grace struggles when her father has to go abroad for work for several months. Additionally, her mother decides to take up a new job and rekindles an old friendship from college. Meanwhile, Grace is struggling with being a teenager and with her increasing feelings for classmate Gabe. When the old routines fall apart, Grace becomes increasingly anxious. After an accident with her horse, Grace takes a break from everything at her grandmother's house. Upon returning, she finds most of the routines re-established and her friends and family still waiting for her. This novel focuses on the everyday struggles of being a teenager and autistic, but it also defies common assumptions about autistic people.

Autism: Grace is a non-stereotypical portrayal. Her main difficulty poses the fact that there is no rulebook for 'being human', i.e. for social interactions and being a 'normal' teenager, as well as her hypersensitivity. Both lead to a high level of anxiety, which intertwines with teenage angst. Grace emphasises that she has neither special abilities, nor an exceptional memory or a love for order. Her preference for routines is linked to her heightened senses which make navigating new surroundings stressful for her and hinder her participation in society. She also tends to overthink in social situations but has otherwise a good grasp of pragmatic force and will occasionally play the 'disability card', as she calls it, by pretending to be unaware of her surroundings. Although her hypersensitivity is technically linked to the stereotypical genius, it does not fit in this instance, since her abilities are not linked to the progression of the novel, such as a detective story would provide.

Grace's character is dynamic as she finds new friends, falls in love, and comes to new realisations about herself and her family.

What to Say Next (2017) by Julie Buxbaum

This novel is told from two perspectives in alternating chapters.

16-year-old David has no friends, and his sister Miney has gone to college. He spends most of his days at school alone, listening to music. Kat, on the other hand, has recently lost her father to a car accident and

struggles to keep her life together. One day, Kat sits down next to David and the two strike up an unlikely friendship. David, who has a crush on Kat, constantly fears that she will turn away from him. Meanwhile, Kat is grieving her father and discovers that her parents had been close to a divorce because her mother had had an affair with Kat's uncle. By befriending Kat and defying the school bullies, David rises through the social ranks of his high school, but then he finds out that Kat has been omitting the whole truth of the accident: it was her who had been driving the car. David accidentally makes her secret public and their friendship suffers. When he realises that he has made a mistake he begins to atone and they grow close once more.

Autism: David has resigned himself to his socially isolated outsider role by following a strict routine throughout his school day, including a playlist that is linked to the time it takes him to navigate between classrooms or have lunch. Both staff and students seem to assume that he prefers loneliness and routine due to a lack of emotions, thus fulfilling the stereotype of a robot. His outstanding IQ and his abilities in maths and physics make him a genius and consequently change the course of events. David's characteristics, e.g. his tendency to talk to himself, also fit the stock character of the absent-minded professor. However, when David acts in self-defence, the headmaster suggests that he has criminal tendencies and should not attend a mainstream school, thus alluding to the mad scientist who turns against humanity. Because of his isolation, David has not had as many opportunities to improve his social skills. Thus, at times, he has an innocent and naïve view of things, as well as being very honest, but his quick thinking allows him to analyse social situations (and jokes) and navigate them successfully most of the time. Moreover, since many students know him from middle school, he already holds a certain reputation for being different, which contrasts starkly with his older sister's popularity. Once given the opportunity, David demonstrates that he has improved his social skills and is able to befriend others, as well as navigate the social aspects of school life. However, although David has not been labelled officially, i.e. has not received an 'official' diagnosis, he belatedly realises that his family and his teachers/headmaster have categorised him under 'special needs'.

It remains unclear why nobody talks about this, but his parents have secretly hired a social skills tutor disguised as a guitar teacher, thus obviously realising David's deficits.

Can You See Me (2019) by Libby Scott and Rebecca Westcott

This novel is interspersed with diary entries written by autist Libby Scott.

11-year-old Tally mostly struggles with her Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA), which leads to her becoming anxious whenever demands are placed on her. When she starts at a new school, she fails to fit in, which increasingly burdens her friendships. Luckily, her new teacher is willing to learn about autism. For example, Tally prefers to wear a tiger mask in public because it makes her feel stronger, but when her mask is stolen and made fun of by her classmates, Tally flees school. Her teacher holds an intervention with the class and Tally's friends and classmates apologise. By the end of the novel, Tally's autism diagnosis has become public knowledge and she no longer has to hide behind her (tiger) mask.

Autism: Much of the novel's events focus on Tally's PDA. Because on the outside her behaviour is perceived as defiance, she tends to be judged as an unruly child, with even her parents struggling to differentiate cause and effect. Although the PDA should be considered an obstacle when it comes to participation in society, the general assumption that Tally lacks self-control reinforces the stereotype 'childlike'. Moreover, Tally has an honest and naïve perspective which sets her apart from her classmates, as well as difficulty understanding pragmatic force and figurative language. Consequently, her behaviour often leads to situations of othering, especially since Tally tends to be impulsive. Obviously, Tally is still a child, considering her age. However, her family is shown as struggling to deal with her defiance and being somewhat socially isolated, e.g. leaving social gatherings early, not being allowed in a restaurant, etc.

Tally prefers certain routines but not rules, which may at times interfere. She certainly does not lack emotions but often runs into a communication barrier, mostly created by a lack of understanding for her PDA. Her ability to reflect on the feelings of others is portrayed in her relation-

ship with the dog whom she treats like she prefers to be treated herself, however, she often appears selfish to others. Although Tally realises that others may struggle to fit in as well, she mostly serves as a stepping-stone for her family, teachers, and friends to become more understanding of Tally's situation. Her progress is somewhat limited; while she does resolve to be more 'herself' in the future, she also gives up trying to fit in and relies on the accommodation of her surroundings instead.

A Theory on Characters

Whenever people talk of 'autistic characters', they refer to fictional portrayals that are representative of their (the people's) understanding of autism. It is not particularly catchy, but accurate. 'Autistic characters' implies that characters can actually be 'autistic', insinuating a paradigmatic nature. However, this study is first and foremostly concerned with literary characters and with stereotypes, i.e. fictional portrayals of autists and stereotypical assumptions about this condition. Characters that feature in narratives are always artificial given that we define artificiality in relation to living beings. They are textual structures without consciousness, a heartbeat, or flesh and blood bodies; they are not officially registered in a country, and they will not move in next door or drop by for a cup of tea. As such, (generalised) statements made about autism pertaining to literary characters can naturally not be simply transferred to autists in real life. Still, stereotypical assumptions can cross the lines of reality and fiction. Thus, the first two chapters of this study are concerned with the nature of literary characters and how they become associated with diagnoses, as well as the reading process and stereotypes.

Starting with characters, readers should bear in mind that they are always made to fit the narrative, thus

> Barthes, in 1966, insisted that character must be subordinated to plot; that the notion that characters possess a 'psychological essence' must be totally eschewed; and that we must view characters exclusively as participants in spheres of actions. (Hochman 22)

Traditionally, formalists and structuralists alike argued

> that characters are products of plots, that their status is "functional," that they are, in short, participants or *actants* rather than *personnages*, that it is erroneous to consider them as real beings. (Chatman 111, original highlighting)

With the emergence of the modern novel featuring highly individual characters, this theory became much disputed (Chatman 112–113). Unsurprisingly, Barthes himself later discarded his original theory (Hochman 22), and I will do so, too. Literary characters are more than a collection of words – or verbs – but less than the people that surround us.

In *Character in Literature*, Baruch Hochman gives a good introduction to this debate. I wish to use his insights as a guide to steer through the highly contested waters of defining literary characters. This chapter focuses on the theory behind characters, with a generalised view of how readers potentially conceptualise them, how our own ideas shape them, and whether one can 'diagnose' disorders in fictional portrayals. Since it is concerned with general aspects of portraying 'diagnoses' in literature rather than focusing on autism alone, this chapter can be considered a broad theoretical introduction.

Larger and Lesser Than Life

Baruch Hochman conceptualises characters as images the author encoded in a text, later to be decoded by the reader. He further argues that literature encodes characters similar to how the reader perceives people in real life (Hochman 38).

> A … crucial point is that the means of generating images of characters do not in themselves constitute character; they signify it. Character in itself does not exist unless it is retrieved from the text by our consciousness, together with everything else in the text. But it can be

> retrieved, provisionally and for the sake of pleasure or understanding. … Characters do not "live" between the covers of a book; Constantine Levin and Othello are not homunculi contained in the works they figure in. They, like everything else in the text, exist meaningfully only insofar as they come to exist in our consciousness. (Hochman 32)

According to Hochman, fiction creates an 'unreality' (Hochman 25), making characters come alive in the readers' heads. Because they have a concept of what constitutes a person (7), they are able to decode and conceptualise literary characters. Similarly, James Phelan wrote that "the description [of a character] creates its effect by playing off—and with—the way characters are images of possible people" (Phelan, *Reading People, Reading Plots* 2). I believe, this theory can be extended by assuming that readers apply the same concepts to the 'unreality' of fiction which they use to understand reality in the first place. It is, in essence, based on the Ancient Greek concept of mimesis, where art is always an imitation of nature and thus cannot possibly be understood without considering nature first.

Based on this premise, Hochman suggests that readers attribute psychological functions to literary characters:

> [I]f we read characters, like people, as fields on which values enact themselves in both conscious and unconscious ways, we easily convert "values" into categories such as "motives' [sic] and "impulses" and consider ways in which values are embedded in the deeper structures of motivation as well as the most manifest level of behavior. (Hochman 52)

By attributing motifs and impulses to characters the reader also grants them a consciousness and a will of their own, considering their actions as self-motivated and not merely the pulling of strings by a puppeteer. Here, Hochman assumes that readers rely on their own experience when it comes to explaining behaviour.

> Harvey holds that the process of retrieving character from fiction involves acts of reconstruction on the part of readers (or spectators), and that such reconstruction draws on readers' own experiences not only of people and the language in which we talk about people but of themselves. (Hochman 38–39)

I believe this is also the moment a character becomes real; by paralleling them with living beings and granting them motifs and free will, their behaviour becomes facetted, and their teleology resolves into existence. As a reader, I may still be aware of the character's narratological purpose, but it will only become pronounced once I revoke my willing suspension of disbelief.

The problem is that the exchange of information between text and reader is not straightforward. This phenomenon is what Chatman refers to as the 'aesthetic object', i.e. the form characters and the worlds they inhibit take in the readers' heads independently of the aesthetics of the text (Chatman 27). Harvey puts it more lyrically when he states that

> a fictional character lives in two dimensions of freedom where we live in only one; the character's freedom exists in relation to the author and in relation to the quality of the imagined fictional world. (Harvey 133)

In essence, a character that does come alive in the reader's head is never the same exact image the writer had in mind. This further complicates matters when it comes to retrospectively applied concepts since it widens the leeway of subjective interpretation. Thus, there are two antagonistic forces when statements are made about fictional portrayals. One of them is the everchanging nature of concepts which all of us use to describe and construct reality, while the other is a distortion in communication between writer and reader. Arguably, explicit labels such as 'autistic' will help with the latter, especially since "we reduce characters, as we reduce plots (or sequences of events), to what we take to be their essential meaning or their animating principle" (Hochman 41). In other words, because as readers we are (at times subconsciously) aware of a character's teleological purpose, we attribute some kind of essential

meaning to them. Perhaps the most obvious answer to the question of whether one can 'diagnose' characters, would then be 'No because they are not human.' After all, diagnostic criteria were made for actual human beings on whom one can run tests, do bloodwork, ask questions, etc. In literature, these characters are but words on paper, essentially an incomplete evidence file. Moreover, they are fictional and as such will always be artificial – thus why bother 'diagnosing' something that is not real? And yet they are, in fact, alive in the readers' minds.

Ironically, there is a longstanding debate in literary theory about whether fictional characters are larger or lesser than life. Both sides base their arguments on four commonly cited aspects; a character's unity, their teleology, their purposiveness (determination), and the amount of information the reader receives about them. On one hand, characters seem larger than life when it comes to understanding them and their purpose. E.M. Forster argued that "in the novel we can know people perfectly, and, apart from the general pleasure of reading, we can find here a compensation for their dimness in life" (Forster 46). Hochman, agreeing with Forster, states that because as readers we can know characters perfectly, they are more interesting to us, since we are also aware of their secrets and motifs. Their purpose within the narrative further heightens the fascination since their teleology "charges characters with a vividness and intensity that rarely inform the personalities that we deal with in life" (Hochman 69). In a combination of all three aspects, it is the narrative that simultaneously generates the character's determination and the possibility of teleological interpretation, while the reader is provided with relevant information only (61). Additionally, the relevant information is neatly organised and highly coherent (65). Here, the character's artificiality arises from the fact that the information given is too organised and too coherent (61) since it is commonly understood that no living being has a teleological determination. On this side of the debate, it is also argued that our abilities to interpret actions and recognise motifs tend to be clouded when it comes to real persons. In real life, Hochman suggests, we not only

> tend to be submerged … in data but in experience as well, experience of ourselves, of others, and of the world. Most of us, even when we can gather and process the requisite data about others and arrive at a crystallized and clear consciousness of them, do not do so for long enough to form coherent and stable images of them or coherent accounts of their lives. (Hochman 63)

In other words, according to Hochman humans are too caught up in the moment to consider other people's lives while also lacking the data to interpret them teleologically. Rawdon Wilson even remarked that actual persons "never do [have motifs and values] in any clear sense" (747) and thus remain 'opaque' (747).

Contrary to that, and leaning towards the structuralist side, the very same arguments are used to justify why a character will always remain lesser than a human being. Thus, it can also be said that one will always know people better than characters, since first and foremost, there is a "potentially endless amount of information that we can gather about a person" (Hochman 61), whereas the information given about a certain character will always be limited. It is a main argument when it comes to 'diagnosing' characters that there is only a limited amount of information and the fact that no more can be generated. One can, arguably, question the author on the character, given they are still alive, but in terms of data, as opposed to interpretation, we will never have any more than written evidence. This, then, leads to a second aspect of why one will never know characters as well as people:

> Characters in literature, moreover, often lack even the appearance of unity that people in life ordinarily have. Characters cannot, of course, have real life histories, and they need not have imagined ones either. And they need not be unified. This is not so with people. Within the central philosophic and psychological tradition of the West, we tend to assume that people in life have such histories and that they evolve within them as unified, and possibly unique, beings. (Hochman 60)

Here Hochman argues that a character's unity is *lacking* since as a reader I will never perceive more of them than glimpses with large gaps in between, whereas I can assume that my neighbour next door did continue to exist and lead a life between the two times I greeted them.

Indeed, the teleology of living people lies within their uninterrupted history of being. They exist for the sole purpose of existing and by doing so create their own determination. As a reader, I may not know whether a character was invented to fit the plot or vice versa, but I can say for sure that the history of a living being always presupposes their existence. Thus, characters are simultaneously lesser than life in that they lack unity, but also larger than life for they are teleologically embedded in a narrative that justifies their purpose.

Diagnosing Characters?

The limited data in combination with their heightened teleological determination leads to the phenomenon that we tend to remember a character "long after we have forgotten everything else about the texts that generate them" (Hochman 35). In other words, one retains an image or a concept of a character (35). Ironically, characters may thus become representative of ideas, emotions, or concepts, or what Chatman calls the paradigm of traits.

> … Chatman makes an elaborate case for the affinity between characters in literature and people in life, and for the similarity between the way we retrieve them, conceptualize them, and respond to them. He goes further in this direction, in fact, than I have so far indicated. Chatman holds that retrieval and imaginative reconstruction of character permit and even mandate speculation on the past, present, and future of each character. His grounds for doing so are the "openness," as he terms it, that is made possible by the extrapolation of a paradigm of traits for the character – a paradigm that exists in the spatial dimension that we abstract from the temporal sequence of the action. (Hochman 35–36)

Hochman disagrees, taking a stance toward dynamic characters:

> Such a view not only defines character in life as an emergent structure arising from a complex play of conflict in the individual; it also conceives of character in literature as part of a highly dynamic, if also stabilized, structure. That structure presents us with the process of coming into being at two levels. First there is the text itself, which generates images of characters by unfolding the materials of which we constitute them. Second there is the character, which as an imagined entity comes into being and falls out of being as it responds to the circumstances – to events and to other characters – delineated in the text. (Hochman 141)

In other words, living beings are too complex to be reduced to a single image or concept, especially since one tends to encounter them in different situations. However, literary characters consist of both, a textual level which provides the skeleton of a character, so to speak, and the outline a reader constructs for this character based on their imagination, or what Chatman calls the paradigm of traits.

Generally speaking, during reading the "incoming discourse is automatically mapped onto general world knowledge" (Ferguson et al. 103). Since such 'world knowledge' differs from individual to individual, I do not believe that a reader necessarily attributes the same meaning or force to a character as the author did – or any other reader, for that matter. Consequently, readers create meanings to a character, i.e., more than one, but each within the reader's respective imagination. Thus, even though the textual 'skeleton' does not change, the character's outline does. Through discursive practices, readers may agree upon one or more 'general' meanings, and sometimes the meaning of a character becomes detached from the original text. However, what if the character were modelled after an actual human being? On a physical level, it is easy enough to distinguish them. After all, a character's storyline is created while a human being creates its own history by living. Borrowing from biologists Humberto Maturana and Francisco Valera, I will call this process autopoiesis, the ability to *self-create*. However, once we enter

the metaphysical level, the lines are blurred once again. For example, how should one categorise characters in novels that feature historical figures, or, indeed, autobiographies? E.M. Forster argued:

> If a character in a novel is exactly like Queen Victoria—not rather like but exactly like—then it actually is Queen Victoria, and the novel, or all of it that the character touches, becomes a memoir. A memoir is history, it is based on evidence. A novel is based on evidence + or – x, the unknown quantity being the temperament of the novelist, and the unknown quantity always modifies the effect of the evidence, and sometimes transforms it entirely. (Forster 34)

Here, I disagree with Forster. There is no difference between characters in novels, memoirs, or autobiographies, for the simple reason that the acting figures were created by someone else, albeit after the model of a living being. The fact that somebody decided on what information to keep and what to leave out, how to put this information into words, and when to write it down (e.g. in the case of a memoir), makes these portrayals artificial. Even in the case of memoirs the author's unity and self-understanding cater to the unity of the character formed after them. The retrospective construction of events will always introduce an element of storytelling, thus the author of a memoir simultaneously writes themselves and about themselves. As for the 'evidence' in history on which Forster bases his argument – in the 1970s, Hayden White caused an upheaval amongst historians when he suggested they, too, write stories. Although Forster could not have anticipated the linguistic turn, I must discard his argument; while history might be based on evidence, it is not free of narrative, or 'the author's temperament'. However, I will keep the example of Queen Victoria for a little longer.

Assuming that a character always presupposes its creator for every word that is written about it, no character can ever be *exactly* like its human model. Even if the author could create the highest possible congruency, the character would lack the autopoietic abilities of the original. One could, arguably, treat it as a doppelganger, but this would kill the original:

> the double has come to be a portent of death once the second self is no longer protected by primary narcissism: duplication, the multiplication of selves, becomes the splitting of the self, no longer overcoming but rather confirming its non-identity and mortality. (Weber 1114)

The memoir, as Forster defines it, is both an attempt to make Queen Victoria immortal and the reason for the loss of her (unique) identity. Of course, if she were still alive, this would not affect her autopoietic abilities. However, upon dying, living beings lose this distinguishing mark. Consequently, with their death, humans pass on into the same realm as literary characters, i.e. they become agents in narratives. Hochman approaches the same thought from the opposite direction:

> Indeed, if the characters in literature are like people at all, in the ordinary sense, they are like dead people. The characters in literature, once they are "written," are finished like the dead. We can manipulate them only to the extent that we respond to the signs that generate them in our imaginations and, beyond this, only to the extent that we "liberate" them utterly from the texts that generate them and allow them to inhabit our thoughts, our fantasies, and our dreams. (Hochman 60)

Any memories of Queen Victoria, if we were to have any, would thus have the same status as the information a reader gathered from her memoir. '*But,*' someone might argue, '*memories of Queen Victoria would be memories of the original*.' Yes and no. The Queen Victoria that is featured in my memory and the Queen Victoria featured in the memoir have the same doppelganger-status. One could go as far as to say that any memory features a doppelganger of somebody if one defined memory as a disconnected narrative.[1]

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1 Memories in general pose a curious case, since one might remember a person as a child even though they are an adult by now. Technically, the child featured in the memory would be a doppelganger, too, but is arguably too far removed from the original.

> Repetition, duplication, recurrence are inherently ambiguous, even ambivalent processes: they seem to confirm, even to increase the "original" identity, and yet even more they crease it as its problematical and paradoxical precondition. (Weber 1114)

Copying the original, however exact, will not destroy the original but it will warp it by pluralising ('creasing') the information that circulates. An original, then, might die in two ways: either a living being ceases to exist, in which case its death occurs at the point where its autopoiesis stops, or it might die while its autopoietic abilities are still functioning, while it is still very much alive, by passing on into the collective memory as a symbol.[2] Symbolic heightening requires 'creasing', by which a living being becomes artificial, or, as Gilbert and Gubar expressed it, it is "killed into art" (17). The difference between these two cases is the 'ideal unification'. In the first case, "[t]he fragmented materiality remains ideally unified" (Woodward 44) by the original, and in the second case by the symbol. Yet, the ideal unification of Queen Victoria is arguably represented in the symbolic heightening of her name when a whole era was designated Victorian.

I do not wish to proceed on the topic of ideal unification, nor am I able to pinpoint the exact moment when the scale tips from 'original' to 'symbol' (possibly the transition from individual to collective memory). However, all this taken together, one should consider literary doppelgangers – assuming they could actually be created – as unreal or artificial as any other character. Consequently, characters featured in autism autobiographies may be treated similarly to those featured in novels. For example, in *Odd Girl Out* (2017) Laura James explores her own story in light of her autism diagnosis in adulthood. Surely, the fact that an autistic individual wrote about their own experiences is sufficient ground to base a 'diagnosis' on. Unfortunately, the protagonist is still only a teleologically repurposed embodiment of her life story. Thus, although I know that this character is 'as similar as possible' to how a

2 To give an example: Many people curiously believed that Nelson Mandela had died in prison when he actually lived another 23 years after his release.

living being with autism views themselves, I cannot diagnose it. And thus, I believe we should finally bid farewell to the idea of 'diagnosing' characters, in the sense that we could potentially gather information and use it as evidence for new findings on them, especially if such 'diagnoses' are made by laypeople.

Casting terminology aside, characters are still interpreted in light of certain concepts. I am here referring to concepts as "the building blocks of thoughts[, which are] crucial to such psychological processes as categorization, inference, memory, learning, and decision-making" (Margolis and Laurence). There has been much debate over the exact nature of these entities, but for my study I will assume that concepts are representative of the knowledge an individual holds in relation to an object or word. I am therefore also assuming that concepts differ from individual to individual, based on their ideas, experiences, and knowledge. Thus, they should be understood as signifiers rather than signified. Consequently, individuals hold different understandings of autism, too.

If the diagnosis of autism is explicitly mentioned in the text, it directly alludes to the concept and turns the story into an *autism narrative*. Here, the character might be considered the symbolic heightening of a diagnosis, i.e. its fictionalised version. As long as such a portrayal coincides with the reader's understanding of autism, it will be considered reliable. Otherwise, it will turn into an unreliable or 'unrealistic' portrayal. On the other hand, one could argue that a character's story can also be retold in terms of a concept. Similar to White's historical storytelling, which creates one of many narratives, such retellings are one of many interpretations. Such reinterpretations are closely linked to the reader's concept and will thus remain fleeting.

Taken together, characters can be created to intentionally embody a concept, or they could be reinterpreted in light of a (new) concept. Both instances are representative of a particular understanding of a concept at a certain point in time, but one must not consider them irrefutable or defining, since they are mere snapshots of a discourse. To the point these concepts overlap, they can be understood as 'public knowledge'. Nevertheless, concepts will evolve and change over time, thus ultimately also changing what the character embodies. Some sig-

nifiers persist longer than others, such as fundamental ideas of love, war, power, etc. Contrary to that, medical diagnoses are much more fleeting and may even be overturned within the course of a generation. Here, the change is much more obvious because it usually coincides with the change or abandoning of a label. For example, when autism was first diagnosed, it was defined as a symptom of schizophrenia. The term itself was coined by Swiss psychiatrist Eugen Bleuler in 1911 and became interchangeable with Freud's *Narzissmus* (Narcissism), the opposite of being social towards others (Sinzig 2). The label has since undergone several changes (and still does), such as the introduction of a spectrum in 2013 (see Chapter 6.1). When comparing retrospective interpretations and intentional embodiments, one should find the most congruence in contemporary portrayals. Yet even a century later, a fictional embodiment can tell readers much about society, although they will not be able to apprehend it as fully as a contemporary reader would. Retrospectively applied, new concepts can help readers understand a character in an equally new way. However, they carry with them the fallacy of truth, i.e. a reader might believe their interpretation to hold more truth than others before because they fail to take into account that their understanding of reality is equally as fleeting. Again, even if I interpret a character as being representative of autism, it ultimately only throws light on my current understanding of this concept, not on the character itself. Reinterpretations of existing characters can go as far as narratives being 'rewritten' when the collective memory assumes a disposition towards a certain interpretation, such as Sherlock Holmes being autistic. Such interpretations are not 'diagnoses', nor should those characters be considered 'autistic', but readers might still consider them the best, i.e. most comprehensive, explanation possible. However, what appears to be a mere conflict of interpretation can actually become harmful if it perpetuates misconceptions, an issue I return to in Chapter 3.3.

How Readers Recognise Concepts in Literature

In 1972 structuralist Propp (*Morphologie des Märchens*) identified different kinds of agents in the folktale, many of which are interchangeable.

> What matters, for example, is that the hero vanquish his enemy, not who the enemy is, or who – a bear, and old woman, a princess – gives him the winged horse, the magic ring, or the enchanted spear. (Hochman 20)

Here, the essence of a character (hero and enemy), as well as their course of action (fight or die) are so clearly identifiable and repetitive that they become interchangeable; they become the embodiment of a concept. Portrayals of single concepts are very limited compared to portrayals in modern novels, which usually feature more complex and individual characters (Hochman 29). While contemporary narratives still engage heroes and villains, they are less interchangeable. Nevertheless, I suggest that humans are prone to simplifying and categorising their reality (see also Chapter 3.1). Based on their real-life experience and knowledge, readers tend to recognise patterns in characters and draw parallels to their own realities, thus even complex portrayals are simplified. Moreover, characters are categorised in relation to other characters or even human beings. For example, a reader who encounters several autism portrayals will compare them to each other. Additionally, these characters likely share aspects that allow readers to recognise patterns based on the concept they have of this diagnosis. Thus, with every portrayal, a reader updates their concept of autism. This can be likened to Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Familienähnlichkeit* (family resemblance)[3], which suggests that at times we do not have a fixed definition of something but rather a working concept that is consistently modified and extended. Wittgenstein famously used 'games' as his example to denote a group of things with overlapping essences.

3 Whose flaws Maurice Mandelbaum (1965) precisely pointed out.

I also suggest that if a reader attributes the concept 'autism' to other characters that do not feature an explicit diagnosis, it may be assumed that these portrayals have indicative characteristics that correspond with the criteria a reader attaches to their concept. Such 'characteristics' may be based on family resemblance and the reader's working concept of autism, thus characters are associated with autism by close proximity with other characters previously classified. Any resemblance remains open for debate and when some readers find that 'autism' is the best concept to reinterpret the portrayal of Sherlock Holmes, others are bound to disagree. Still, a reader who learns about Holmes's alleged autism has a disposition when it comes to the interpretation. This effect is called the 'primacy effect'. It emphasises the order in which information is given, for most people have a "tendency to persist in the direction wherein they embarked on any activity" (M. Perry 53). For example, "the first character to be introduced by a text [will be set] as the protagonist for as long as it has not been displaced in the center by another character" (53). More often than not, the primacy effect will cause tension at a later stage for new information may not be compatible with set expectations (57). The primacy effect can also be observed in the way readers apply their pre-existing knowledge to the text:

> First, people try to assimilate inconsistent information into the established impression, and second, people tend to focus on consistent information while simultaneously ignoring inconsistent information. Evidence has been found to suggest that both strategies are applied to maintain attitudes, expectations, and stereotypes. (Auracher and Hirose 803)

Thus, a reader who expects Holmes to share the characteristics of an autism portrayal will find evidence for their assumptions. Psychologists call this phenomenon 'confirmation bias':

> Our natural tendency seems to be to look for evidence that is directly supportive of hypotheses we favor and even, in some instances,

> of those we are entertaining but about which [sic.] are indifferent. (Nickerson 211)

Moreover, "people do not naturally adopt a falsifying strategy of hypothesis testing" (Nickerson 211). Both, the primacy effect and the confirmation bias are likely to firmly pull the wool over our eyes when it comes to recognising recurring structures in literature, even if the text suggests otherwise.

There is a second aspect that comes into play when literary characters are simplified to become representative of a concept. I have already stated that mimesis is the idea that art imitates nature. It is most likely the process by which autism seeped into fiction, but it nevertheless warped its appearance. Hochman introduced the term 'stylisation' to refer to the artificiality of characters, which the reader simultaneously remains aware of and chooses to ignore (90). Interestingly, the term is nowadays used in game design to denote a certain style of game art as opposed to realism:

> Stylization refers to a visual depiction, which represents an object without a full attempt and accurate representation of an object's realistic appearance. This can include simplifications in shape, lines, color, pattern, surface details, functionality and relationship to other objects in a scene. Which is why stylization is most commonly used to describe an art style that has more cartoony features than a semi-realistic style that usually adheres to realism in details rather than simplifications. (Aava)

Hochman, on the other hand, defines it as follows:

> … [S]tylization has to do with some model or norm from which stylized characterizations deviate. The norm […] is clearly resemblance to real people, which means some form of realism or naturalism of representation. After all, when we say that something is stylized, we mean that we can define the original, or the raw material, or the norm that is deformed or reformed in the course of its creation. That something

> must be there before it can be shaped to a greater or lesser degree in its presentation. (Hochman 90)

There is an inherent degree of stylisation to all fictional portrayals, but the theory itself implies two further aspects. Firstly, as a reader, I am only able to perceive the abstraction when I know the original. Thus, I must have some concept of autism[4]. Secondly, literary portrayals must not necessarily be realistic to convey a certain image. Consequently, autism portrayals must not tally with the way autism presents itself in humans.

Fiction will always be stylised to a certain degree, thus Hochman introduced a scale from minimal to maximal stylisation:

> More accurately, minimal stylization involves the depiction of characters in more or less normative terms and in terms of the way we naturally might perceive them if they really existed. (Hochman 93)

According to Hochman, highly stylised characters are also easier to decipher in terms of motifs than minimally stylised ones, since they usually do not have contradictory traits (128).[5] Finally, there are borderline cases of highly stylised characters that "nonetheless strike us as possible, if borderline, representations of "real" people who are dominated by one particular characteristic" (97).

The degree of stylisation in a character might be better understood by James Phelan's theory that "[c]haracter consists of three components – the mimetic (character as person), the thematic (character as idea), and the synthetic (character as artificial construct)" (Phelan, *Narrative as*

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4 In fact, I believe, one must have an understanding of normality and deviance, a theory I will follow up in Chapter 4.

5 Indeed, this relates to Forster's distinction of 'flat' and 'round' characters. Forster is still quoted on character classification because his system is convincingly easy – easy to understand and if one does not give it too much thought, one may play the classification part by ear. However, there are some flaws to Forster's theory, and it consequently needs further discussion (see for example Pickrel/Fishelov), which I do not believe to be beneficial to this work.

rhetoric 29). Before I can extend this concept to autism portrayals, I must examine these components further.

First and foremostly, Phelan differentiates dimensions and functions:

> A dimension is any attribute a character may be said to possess when that character is considered in isolation from the work in which he or she appears. A function is a particular application of that attribute made by the text through its developing structure. In other words, dimensions are converted into functions by the progression of the work. Thus, every function depends upon a dimension but not every dimension will necessarily correspond to a function. (Phelan, *Reading People, Reading Plots* 9)

In essence, then, characters have one or more dimensions which signify a mimetic component (traits), a thematic component (concepts they embody), as well as a synthetic component (their narratological function). Chatman's paradigm of traits merely encompasses the mimetic dimension, whereas Phelan's concept of character also extends to their thematic and synthetic components. This allows me to unite previous considerations into one theory: the teleological determination of a character is their synthetic component, their mimetic component is what allows a reader to imagine them as potential human beings and their thematic component is the embodiment of a concept. For example, the folktale agents Propp identified had pronounced thematic and synthetic components, but little to no mimetic relevance, since all traits of the mimetic dimension are

> used together in creating the illusion of a plausible person and, for works depicting actions, in making particular traits relevant to later actions, including of course the development of new traits. In works where the traits fail to coalesce into the portrait of a possible person, … a particular trait might serve only to identify that character, e.g., the detective who always eats junk food, and the trait might not (though it often will) have any consequences for his later actions—or for our understanding of them. (Phelan, *Reading People, Reading Plots* 11)

Presumably, then, more traits equal more plausible portrayals, unless, of course, these traits contradict each other. Finally, some traits may supersede human abilities, such as magical or superhuman powers. These are justified by the unreality they are contained within.

Thematic dimensions

> are attributes, taken individually or collectively, and viewed as vehicles to express ideas or as representative of a larger class than the individual character (in the case of satire the attributes will be representative of a person, group, or institution external to the work). (Phelan, *Reading People, Reading Plots* 12–13)

Phelan remarks that characters with an emphasis on their thematic dimension become "themes with legs" (Phelan, *Reading People, Reading Plots* 9) as opposed to actual persons. Consequently, these characters are mere personifications of an idea or a concept. In terms of autism portrayals, I assume the following: Due to family resemblance, autism portrayals with an explicitly mentioned diagnosis will likely share characteristics. I should subsequently be able to identify at least some of them. Additionally, the more of these characteristics a character features, the more pronounced their thematic component becomes. I will therefore focus on the similarities of these characters, but their stylised nature allows no inferences about autists in real life.

Finally, the synthetic component of a character is its artificiality (Phelan, *Reading People, Reading Plots* 2), i.e. the fact that they are fictional characters and not people. The authorial audience will always remain aware of this, contrary to the narrative audience (91). The author may try to keep the synthetic component as minimal as possible, or they might emphasise it for artistic purposes, e.g. drawing attention to it by using aptronyms (70). This again touches upon the fact that fictional autism portrayals are stylised. I further suggest that although a reader's knowledge of autism is gathered under the same concept – if only for the label – they make excuses for literary derivations thereof. In other words, because a reader is aware of the fact that fictional portrayals are synthetic, they factor in a certain degree of stylisation that comes

with the medium. If not, fictional portrayals will create unrealistic expectations.

Concluding this chapter, I can state that characters are artificial because they are both larger and lesser than life. The limited data available is combined with teleological determination, thus making images of characters easier to retain than images of other people. Moreover, because of the limited data, readers tend to attribute more meaning to these characters. Additionally, literary characters tend to have a thematic component which makes them representative of an idea, a concept, or a class of people. Associations with a certain concept (idea, class of people) can be intentionally encoded into the text by the author, to the point where characters are explicitly labelled, or they may be interpretations of a reader. Either way, readers tend to categorise characters according to their meaning, so that by proximity, i.e. 'family resemblance', those characters define and redefine the concept they were deemed representative of. Generally speaking, the reader's understanding of reality affects how they interpret a character. Any interpretation is, however, more indicative of the reader's understanding of a concept at a certain point in time. If such interpretations coincide with those of others, they may even denote the public's understanding of this concept.

Because characters will always remain artificial, it is impossible to 'diagnose' them. Thus, while characters can be representative of the (a) concept of autism, they are not 'autistic'. Moreover, applying a concept to a character will necessarily distort the reader's interpretation. Due to the primacy effect and the confirmation bias, readers might then be liable to discard textual evidence that would disprove their theory. However, if a reader is unable to reconcile a character with the concept they applied, they might consider it an unrealistic portrayal. This will most likely happen if a character was explicitly linked to a concept but subsequently featured different characteristics than they expected them to. If necessary, readers will then discard one concept and apply a different one. As long as a character is not explicitly labelled, e.g. as being representative of autism, interpretations remain subject to debate. Characters are usually representative of several concepts and have therefore more than one meaning, even though their 'textual skeleton' remains the same.

Chasing a Phantom

When reading, we tend to categorise literary characters according to our own understanding of reality. Due to the limited data available and the characters' teleological determination, readers are then more likely to attribute meaning to these characters, making them representative of a concept. It is theorised that in reality we often operate with stereotypes to simplify our surroundings. Thus, we apply condensed versions of our concepts rather than consider all our knowledge, memories, and experiences that we associate with something. Stylised characters that are representative of the essence of a concept do not necessarily bear much resemblance to a living person anymore. These characters can also be considered stereotypical because they have been symbolically heightened and exaggerated. Such stereotypical portrayals can even become literary conventions, i.e. types or stock characters. However, not only have characters in novels become more complex as opposed to folktales, but concepts vary from individual to individual. On the other hand, to keep this study from drifting towards deconstruction, I suggest that there are consensuses when it comes to signifiers such as 'heroes' or 'villains', simply because we are (re-)institutionalised by our own culture. Moreover, the continuous use of the same signifiers turns them into working concepts. In other words, although two individuals will not have the exact same concept of a hero, they are likely to agree on certain characteristics, such as 'somebody who performs a brave and noble act for society'. Here, I believe that such simplified consensuses overlap significantly with stereotypes, or rather, that stereotypes signify consensus.

I have already stated that 'autistic' characters do not exist, but characters may still be representative of 'autism', either because the reader attributes it to them, or the text directly alludes to it. Each portrayal then updates the reader's understanding of this concept. The consensuses of autism portrayals would signify such a concept. However, because this requires a discourse analysis, I will select a set of stereotypes in regard to which I will analyse the novels. The existence of stereotypical characteristics in autism portrayals would suggest a certain degree of stylisation, which might even point toward a literary type or stock character.

Before doing so, however, I wish to demonstrate how stereotypes affect our understanding of reality and subsequently our reading-process. I will then examine stereotypes associated with autism, before analysing eight novels regarding stereotypical portrayals.

Stereotypes and Knowledge

In his book *Public Opinion*[1], Walter Lippmann stated that "(f)or the most part we do not first see, and then define, we define first and then see." (Lippmann, Public Opinion, 81). Coinciding with the primacy effect, our expectations change our perception. However, Lippmann took this theory one step further, by coining the term 'stereotype' in the modern sense Because our surroundings are too complex, we consciously and unconsciously engage in stereotyping to reduce our environment and especially human beings into patterns, since "we are not equipped to deal with so much subtlety, so much variety" (Lippmann 11). Consequently, stereotypes are everywhere; "public or private, negative or positive, favorable or unfavorable in regard to any person, place, or thing" (McIlrath 2–3). They can be considered automatic responses and thus "nothing more unusual and dangerous than common-sense judgment" (McIlrath 3). On the other hand, stereotypes are mostly discussed when applied to groups or classes of people. As such, they are not only primarily negative but usually seen as untrustworthy (Amossy and Heidingsfeld 690) and

1 I am returning to the concept of 'public opinions' in Chapter 4.1.

compared to prejudices. In such cases, stereotypes may mislead us and cause us to arrive at a false conclusion, with the pitfall that we do not typically "become aware that we have made these demands or aware of what they are until an active question arises as to whether or not they will be fulfilled" (Goffman 10). Due to the confirmation bias, we also tend to cling to our preconceived opinions and will not question these stereotypes until we cannot deny their incompatibility with the incoming information.

I previously stated that readers interpret characters according to their own knowledge, which in turn is organised in concepts. I now suggest that stereotypes are condensed concepts. As such, they will never be completely accurate, since they carry reduced information. Sometimes, stereotypes might more or less equal the whole knowledge a person holds on a certain topic.[2] In this case, a person cannot come to an informed opinion but will necessarily rely on their stereotypes. Unfortunately, stereotypes are also often linked to an emotional response since they usually "gather around strongly disliked attitudes" (McIlrath 3). Thus, the inability to make an informed opinion tends to coincide with strong (negative) emotions. Again, not all stereotypes are false, but they also do not usually equal knowledge; and knowledge does not equal truth.

Michel Foucault's concept of knowledge and power is certainly one of the most prominent discourse theories. Reality is set within the borders of the discourse, i.e. the ineffable, and its centre, where it is turning around the notion of truth (Foucault 55–56). Consequently, "discourses determine reality, always of course via intervening active subjects in their societal contexts as (co-)producers and (co-)agents of discourse" (Wodak and Meyer 36). For Foucault, a discourse is "a limited number of statements for which a group of conditions can be defined" (Merk-Carinci 10). These conditions are generated by society itself so that "the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organised and redistributed by a certain number of procedures" (Foucault 52). As such, some statements will stay within the discourse while others will be

2 I cannot speak of prejudice, however, for it may be accurate even if starkly limited.

eliminated (Merk-Carinci 10). Consequently, discourses are socially, and by extension culturally, bound. According to Jäger and Zimmermann, all statements belonging to one discourse are thus within a 'Sagbarkeitsfeld' (field of sayability), which at the same time represents "the totality of statements considered to be true by society at a certain point in time" (10, own translation)[3]. Thus, discourses are anchored both in time and space.

I suggest that stereotypes are lodged between our perception and knowledge, as they are "a psychical-physical function, a gestalt, which motivates semiautomatic, noncognitive behavior toward the object in life" (McIlrath 3). This contrasts with 'knowledge' in the sense of an informed opinion. Not only is our perception usually tainted by what we want or expect to see, but we also tend to take a shortcut when it comes to classifying it. As such, stereotypes are always somewhat subjective, although they may become public in the same sense that signifiers are consensually used within societies. In this case, they tend to become conscious.

> We see, therefore, that people recognize and name stereotypes only when they become public instead of private, and usually not until the direction is unfavorable rather than favorable. (McIlrath 3)

Yet, only when a stereotype becomes conscious are we able to counteract it by changing our automatic responses to reality. Furthermore, one must assume that different groups hold different stereotypes of the same topic. For example, psychologists will hold different stereotypes (in the sense of abbreviated concepts and semi-automated reactions) towards autism than an autistic person. However, both can be considered experts who utilise their knowledge to update their stereotypes, whereas a layperson's knowledge of autism is naturally limited, perhaps even to the point where it cannot possibly counteract any stereotypes.

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3 "alle zulässigen Äußerungen, die zu einem Zeitpunkt in einer Gesellschaft zirkulieren" (Merk-Carinci 10) *Note from author:* For better readability I have provided in-text translations and original quotes in the footnotes.

Furthermore, these stereotypes might encompass most or all knowledge a person holds on this topic. Although Hacking argues that today most people have at least *some* understanding of autism ("Humans, Aliens & Autism" 46), their conception might be false or merely stereotypical. If so, a person is prone to overestimating their knowledge in this particular area. In other words, because they lack further knowledge, they cannot critically apprehend their stereotypes, which may even turn out to be prejudiced if false. This, of course, also applies to novels.

Stereotypes in Reading

I assume that literature is more than aesthetics or a cultural by-product, even more than knowledge made accessible to the subject. According to Pierre Legendre, literature is essential to the production and reproduction of our existence (Becker 180), since, as he theorises, it is Lacan's metaphorical mirror in our culture and thus the constitutive momentum for both, the subject and culture itself (174). Consequently, the subject is – at least in parts – institutionalised through literature (173). Unsurprisingly, then, society's understanding of reality is reflected in literature, which happens to include stereotypes. Thus, not only will authors more or less overtly encode stereotypes into their novels, but readers generally rely on their real-world knowledge to decipher fictional characters. Again, stereotypes are not necessarily negative. According to Hochman, we commonly typify people in real life, i.e. we categorise them according to our established (cultural and individual) stereotypes (46–47). By doing so, we do not necessarily strip them of their individuality; rather, we remain aware of them being individuals while also classifying them (122–23), so as to easily make assumptions about them. Although this process sounds condescending, this automatism helps us to quickly predict the actions and reactions of others. As mentioned above, stereotypes are both private and public, thus I will assume that culturally bound stereotypes exist within the collective memory. Hence, it is not surprising that readers also apply stereotypes in the process of understanding a novel (Auracher and Hi-

rose 796). Although one might think of stereotypical characters as trite and boring, portrayals that trigger stereotypes are not necessarily bad. In fact, it might be argued that all characters allude to stereotypes if one considered the latter abbreviated knowledge that is used for classification. Stereotypical portrayals are not necessarily false but tend to be one-sided and exaggerated, i.e. stylised, where some traits are overrepresented, while others are not represented at all. Obviously, negative stereotypes can and will distort the information conveyed. Consequently, portrayals that incorporate these stereotypes or do not actively oppose them, may contribute to the propagation of prejudices. When discussing autism portrayals, any representation fosters awareness. However, stereotypical portrayals that emphasise certain characteristics will shift the public's perception towards a few select characteristics of autism. Thus, even positive but one-sided representation distorts the public perception of autism. Unfortunately, stereotypes can only be overruled by knowledge. If the information given in a novel strongly contradicts a reader's understanding, there is a good chance that they will disregard the text as a 'bad' or 'unrealistic' portrayal. Nevertheless, positive and negative portrayals can change readers' assumptions about autists. Misinformation or stereotypes can only be identified as such if they clash with the reader's previous knowledge or experience. In other words, readers are only able to recognise negative stereotypes in characters, if they have formed positive assumptions about autists. Otherwise, these negative portrayals will shape the reader's conception of autists and thus perpetuate prejudices.

In fiction, stereotyped characters, i.e. characters that mostly or solely allude to the reader's stereotypes, are called *types*. Some of these stereotypical characterisations in literature have become ends in themselves, as the stylistic device of a *stock character*. Types and stock characters are often used interchangeably, and my own differentiation yields rather easily, too. For better understanding, I propose to use 'types' for all kinds of stereotyped characters, and stock characters to emphasise their canonical origin. Thus, all stock characters are literary types but not the other way around.

Phelan defines types as stylised characters with a strong thematic component (Phelan, *Reading People, Reading Plots* 13). He theorises that

> the link through character to the general cultural codes ought to be considered as an extrapolation of the thematic function proceeding by analogy rather than as an interpretation uncovering the basic codes of the text. (Phelan, *Reading People, Reading Plots* 78–79)

Because types are in essence personifications of stereotypes, Phelan suggests that a reader does not decipher their traits from the text but makes automated assumptions about them. To quote Lippmann again, we define first and then we see. Thus, the more pronounced the thematic function of a character is, the more likely a reader is to attribute stereotypical traits to the character rather than rely on the information given in the text. Phelan defines thematic dimensions of a character as representative of classes of people, thus essentially stereotypes (see above). According to him, not all dimensions of a character are turned into functions within the course of the story. However, although he only mentions their thematic function when talking about cultural codes, I believe these are interchangeable here. After all, one also makes stereotypical assumptions about names, class, age, or profession, i.e. encompassing thematic dimensions that are not necessarily turned into functions. Consequently, stereotypes can overrule much of the character's dimensions once a reader has 'recognised' (classified) them as a type.

On the other hand, stock characters (per my definition) emerge in literature, drama, or film. For example, the Holmesian detective is not a person readers have met in real life; likely they came in touch with Arthur Conan Doyle's work or a remake thereof. Yet the Holmesian detective is a stock character that a reader can recognise once they are familiar with it because they have memorised a certain combination or pattern of attributes. The character has thus become a literary convention that is held within the collective memory. However, recognisability comes at a cost since the character also loses its individuality. Consequently, the mimetic component is less pronounced. Paradoxically, characters require a certain loss of individuality to become stock characters, because

they first need to achieve a certain level of recognisability. By nature of the cause, the Holmesian detective became a stock character when other authors (or film makers, for that part) modelled characters after the original by Doyle.

While I might categorise people in real life according to (stereo-)types, I am less likely to compare them to stock characters, and if I do so, it is metaphorically speaking, for they do not exist outside of literature.[4] However, the 'evil stepmother' still shares a family resemblance with stepmothers in real life, for the mere reason that the same terminology is used. It would be more precise to refer to the 'evil fictional stepmother', which is a stylised exaggeration of an evil stepmother, but within novels, they are all images on the carrier paper of literature:

> Literature, like psychology and history, can stabilize and articulate such images [of other people] and sustain consciousness of them. It can also make such images enduringly memorable because of the way it crystallizes them, facets them, and embeds them in words. (Hochman 63)

Obviously, differentiating stock characters and types becomes meaningless once they are both considered thematic personifications of stereotypes, but I will stick with the distinction to emphasise the fact that stock characters are canonical literary conventions, and I may only learn about them if I read or watch movies. On the other hand, we all tend to categorise real human beings according to (stereo-)types. I further suggest that personifications of stereotypes in literature are in fact symbolically heightened due to their artistic origin. For one thing, I am more likely to recognise them because of the limited data and the teleological determination. On the other hand, I am also more likely to attribute meaning to these portrayals. For example, a character that is a grumpy old veteran may be associated with stereotypical assumptions about old people, male persons, or former military, but because of the unique combi-

4 Although one may of course argue whether 'types' exist.

nation, it becomes representative of something more (e.g. the memory of war).

In the introduction to this study, I referred to Draaisma's idea of a 'set of stereotypes', which could also be understood as a type. What I have dubbed 'the Autist' would therefore be the quintessential personification of this set. 'The Autist' as a stock character, on the other hand, would require a literary convention.[5] While I cannot rule out the possibility that such a stock character exists, I suggest that it would require an analysis of novels, movies, and tv series across different genres to generate a sample of adequate size. Any findings would then also have to considerably diverge from autists in real life. In other words, the stock character 'the Autist', per my definition, would necessarily incorporate a fictional element that makes it inherently literary while still alluding to autism stereotypes.

Autism Stereotypes

Autism activist Sonya Freeman Loftis explored the negative consequences of autism stereotypes based on the public assumption that Sherlock Holmes is on the spectrum.

> The claim that Conan Doyle's famous detective has Asperger's Syndrome is ubiquitous enough to appear in a variety of popular venues, and his diagnosis has been pursued by both fans and professionals; unfortunately, most of the discussions of Holmes's autistic traits present negative stereotypes as a part of their analysis, offering an extremely superficial and one-sided view of autism. (Loftis)

While I do not agree with this 'diagnosis', it is a prime example of how retrospective interpretation will make it come 'true' and textual evidence

5 Technically, this refers to 'the fictional Autist', so as to emphasise their artificial nature.

is being overruled. Presently, the perception of Holmes as autistic is indicative of the public's understanding of autism. Loftis criticises that a large part of this 'diagnosis' is the attribution of negative stereotypes, such as autists being "emotionless, lacking in empathy, and [being] incapable of love" (Loftis). She also names characteristics of Holmes that supposedly justify his diagnosis, including him "having intense interests, struggling in the social sphere, and displaying unusual body language" (Loftis), which is indicative of her (stereotypical) understanding of autism.

However, she is most concerned with the implied criminality of Holmes:

> While these crime fighters and mystery-solvers may reassure majority audiences that the stereotypical autistic savant works for law and order rather than against it, many of these television shows maintain an ambiguous liminality between criminal and crime solver and develop an aura of mystery around characters with autistic traits. (Loftis)

This paints the following picture: autists are extraordinarily intelligent with specialised interests but unusual body language and social inabilities. Because they lack emotion, which makes them incapable of loving and being emphatic towards others, they could easily become criminal masterminds. Interestingly, Loftis cites instances that supposedly prove Holmes 'autism' but does not focus on contraindicative passages, thus reinforcing the idea. However, she does criticise how

> [a]mateur diagnoses based on popular stereotypes foster a one-dimensional way of thinking about people on the spectrum. In addition, such informal diagnosis may lead people to think that the experience of being autistic can be reduced to a list of criteria in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. For those who self-identify as autistic, being on the spectrum is not just a list of traits, but an entire person, an entire life experience. (Loftis, original highlighting)

I understand that Loftis is trying to make a point, however, the fact that being autistic is more than (or different from) a list of criteria in the DSM is simply stating that stereotypes are not accurate. Yet, everybody's lives are encompassed of more than the generalised assumptions others make about us; it is the pitfall of stereotypes. Secondly, the 'autistic detective' may have become a stock character, but it is certainly not a type, and it is also not the only way autists are represented in fiction. Stereotypes not only serve as 'sets of attributes' associated with a class of people, but they also make actions predictable. In fictional representations, there will necessarily be some hyperbole once a character's thematic components are foregrounded, because those characters are stylised. For example, I believe that this particular set of attributes to which Loftis referred, is closely linked to the character's function as a detective. Consequently, the cold-hearted and unapologetically reasonable (borderline criminal) character is a thematic exaggeration of the detective, not the autist. However, I understand her worries that such portrayals will be associated with autists by proxy (i.e. through family resemblance), which is why I believe it is important to create awareness for stereotypes and educate people on them.

That is not to say that stereotypes can simply be talked away. Other scholars have written about autism stereotypes (cf. Yergeau, Hacking, Bumiller) and identified five common characteristics attributed to autism portrayals:

i. The autist as a *disabled person*
ii. The autist as a *genius*
iii. The autist as *childlike*
iv. The autist as a *robot/computer/machine*
v. The autist as an *alien*

Perhaps these five stereotypes do not necessarily all have to be present. For example, Loftis's description would suggest a combination of 'genius' and 'robot'. On the other hand, they cannot exist on their own, or else the character would be representative of something else. I thus argue that these stereotypes form a set of characteristics that are presented in

the media and thus cause a character to be recognised as 'autistic' by the public discourse, independently of diagnostic criteria (cf. Chapter 6.1). While the 'Holmesian detective' is certainly more like a stock character, I am unsure whether the type 'autist' has already become canonical. For this to be true, it would have to be inherently stereotypical, i.e. hyperbolic in their teleological determination. In the end, this might be impossible to tell, especially without a discourse analysis.

A type is derived from real-world stereotypes but in literature, I expect stereotypes to manifest themselves in particular narratological features idiosyncratic to these portrayals, which also leaves room for interpretation. While the stereotypical assumptions selected are those commonly identified, I do not claim comprehensiveness. Contrary to Loftis, however, I do not expect the majority of laypeople to be acquainted with the diagnostic criteria given by the DSM. While stereotypes may be related to medical criteria, such as the above-mentioned characteristics 'intense interests', 'social difficulties', and 'unusual body language', I believe most people do not check their stereotypes against the DSM.

In the following, I will explore all five commonly found characteristics and identify aspects that allude to a certain stereotypical assumption. I will point out common associations, as well as consequences. These may, at times, appear superficial or uncritical. However, aspects such as one-dimensionality, stigmata, pragmatic competency, or a lack of Theory of Mind should be considered part of a brief sketch, an overview so to speak, of a larger picture that I will try to paint with my study. Therefore, the descriptions of these stereotypes will necessarily read more like bullet point lists rather than critical discussions.

i. *Portraying Autism as a Disability*

Arguably, the term 'disability' is rather loaded and I am aware that autism is not so much considered a handicap within the autism community[6] (Hacking, "Humans, Aliens & Autism" 47). However, for some

6 I will further discuss this notion in Chapter 5.3, under the aspects of normality and deviance, as well as disability studies.

individuals, autism presents itself as a serious obstacle to participating in society. While 'disabled' may be a generalised assumption made about all autists, it is the quintessential stereotype. Consequently, portraying autism makes it impossible to escape the legacy of 'disabled' characters. The latter has historically had a difficult standing. Disability studies have tried to create awareness of the fact that "disabled people are portrayed as 'other' against normative culture" (Donnelly). However, wholesome portrayals of disabilities remain rare and are "largely one dimensional" (Barnes 37). Instead, "(developmental) disabilities and other exceptionalities are often included in the larger sweep of multiculturalism" (Rozema 27). Put starkly, characters with disabilities are but means to an end of fulfilling a quota of political correctness. Ironically, studies have shown that "[m]ost of the portrayals were male and all of the illustrations depicted characters as European-American" (Dyches et al. 307). Researchers also found that "particular disabilities are considered more 'appropriate' for inclusion in children's picture books than other disabilities, just as polio and blindness were common disabilities included in classic texts" (Brenna 518). Currently, these include "autism, intellectual disability, Down syndrome, and Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder" (517).

When it comes to portraying disabilities, researchers criticised how often these portrayals feature static characters that "show no growth" (Dyches 313). Those with mental disabilities especially are usually not the main characters, do not develop, and only serve "as a catalyst for another character to change" (305), when "main or supporting characters without disabilities (learn) to accept or understand the individual with DD [Developmental Disability]" (315). Even if characters with disabilities contribute to their communities, they usually do so unintentionally (313). The same goes for special strengths, i.e. even if a character is mentioned to have a special strength, it is rarely used by the author "to contribute to the plot" (311). Vice versa, these abilities are sometimes used to 'justify' the worth of a character. Nevertheless, the character remains one-dimensional, its function is the allusion to political correctness. Visible physical handicaps are also often associated with crookedness, e.g. the one-legged pirate, the criminal who had his hand chopped off, or the

burnt supervillain. On the other hand, disabled characters are also portrayed as the victim of their own body, mind or surroundings, presenting "disability as stereotypically tragic and medicalized" (Woiak and Lang). Follow-up studies into young adult fiction have shown that nearly half of the portrayed characters with disabilities were victims of harassment (Dyches et al. 317) and "most were shown being dependent upon others" (315). As a reason for this, scholars suggested that "authors have not been able to envision a positive future for someone with a disability" (Brenna 515). The solution is often either 'cure' or 'kill' (515).

Autism, too, is presented as a family tragedy between the lines, or at the very least a burden to the parents whose child will never be 'normal' and possibly never live an independent life. This narrative reaches even further back than the beginnings of autism research; it is "the ancient myth of the changeling, the troll child substituted in the dead of night for an infant sleeping in his cot at home" (Hacking, "Humans, Aliens & Autism" 45). This coincides with developmental regression in autism, which occurs in about one-third of children with autism, causing them to lose previously acquired skills (Al Backer 23). Here, the story implies that parents had a normal child until it was 'stolen' away from them (50), leaving them with

> children who refuse to hug their parents, of children whose worlds are supposedly so impoverished that they spend their days spinning in circles, or flapping their hands, or screaming or self-injuring or resisting … . (Yergeau 3)

These children do not look different but have become "feral children" (Hacking 57). Consequently, the family is to be pitied, for they have lost their child and are now forced to spend an extraordinary amount of resources and strength on a child that may never grow up to live an independent life. This motif, of course, can be transferred to all parents/families living with a disabled relative. It is a sad reality that filicide occurs more often in families with disabled children, sometimes even considered 'altruistic' (Palermo 47).

The following aspects allude to the stereotype *'Disabled'* in autism portrayals:

- **Othering**: Characters are portrayed as differing from the norm in their ability to fit in and participate in society. Their ostracization often leads to instances of harassment and bullying.
- **Dependency**: Characters are portrayed as dependent on others for everyday tasks while their peers are self-reliant.
- **One-Dimensional**: Characters are static, and their thematic compound is more pronounced while their mimetic dimension is neglected. These characters mostly function as stepping-stones for others.
- **Tragic**: Here, disability is portrayed as a burden to the family or even a tragedy from which they can only escape if the disabled member is 'cured' or 'killed'.

ii. *Portraying Autists as Geniuses*

The term genius is nowadays usually equated to extraordinary cognitive abilities in the fields of science or art, yet it remains a contested concept. In the context of autism stereotypes, however, it is associated with giftedness, e.g. mathematical abilities, playing an instrument virtuously, exceptional memory, etc. If a character solves mysteries or crimes, they are also usually associated with hyper-attentiveness and attention to detail, seeing clues that others miss. Here, the genial traits carry much of the synthetic dimensions, naturally contributing to the association of autism and crime-solving.

While genius is sometimes linked to high intelligence, it is also at times associated with mental illness. In literature, especially, it seems as if such abilities must necessarily be balanced out, with characters such as Dr. Jekyll, Frankenstein, Dupin, and of course, Sherlock Holmes pay-

ing a high price: Only Holmes is not killed by his genius[7], but they are all driven by their pursuits, ultimately becoming lonely workaholics. Arguably, there already exist literary conventions when it comes to pairing genius with flaws, such as a general association with eccentricity (the absent-minded professor, e.g. Jacques Paganel), criminal behaviour (the criminal mastermind, e.g. Moriarty), or simply madness (the mad scientist, e.g. Dr. Moreau). These individuals have in common that their genius and its associated downside bars them from participating in society. In autism portrayals, this genius could be seen as a counterbalance to the difficulties autistic individuals are faced with.

However, when considering the spectrum of autism as a whole, special abilities are an exception, not the rule. Interestingly, Draaisma found that in media portrayals "[t]here are two options for an autistic person; "[i]t is either diminished capacity or superhuman capacity, but nothing in between" (1478). This stereotypical assumption leads to autists being associated with genial abilities in real life, even to the point where their diagnosis is questioned if they do not meet these expectations (1478). Portraying autists as stereotypically gifted is therefore "a harmful divergence between the general image of autism and the clinical reality" (1476). This stereotype can be considered a form of literary stylisation of autism portrayals and could hint toward the formation of a type or a stock character. Here, portrayals have created unrealistic expectations because readers are unable to differentiate the thematic and synthetic (or perhaps mimetic) components of a character, thus equating autism with giftedness.

> In shutting out low-functioning adolescents, young adult fiction fails to recognize that many of the millions affected by ASD will never live independently, never memorize vast quantities of information, never look up words in the dictionary, never solve crimes or sleuth their way through elaborate puzzles. (Rozema 29)

7 Although technically only because Doyle revived him when pressured by fans. Otherwise, he would have died to vanquish Moriarty, his intellectual equal but also a criminal mastermind.

Arguably, these 'low-functioning'[8] characters could not fulfil the same function in a plot as an (autistic) genius but would be somewhat interchangeable with any character that portrays a mental disability (Draaisma 1478).

The following aspects allude to the stereotype '*Genius*' in autism portrayals:

- **Gifted**: Characters are portrayed as having extraordinary abilities which 'prove their worth' and balance out any shortcomings their autism may cause.
- **Hyperattentive**: Especially within the detective genre, autists are portrayed as having excellent memory, attention to detail, and heightened senses, which allows them to solve crimes and mysteries better than others do.

This stereotype is often combined with the stereotypes 'Disabled' and 'Robot'. Moreover, characters with extraordinary talents are also sometimes referred to as 'savants', however, this may be misleading.[9]

8 See also Chapter 6.3.

9 The combination of autism and genius is sometimes referred to as 'savant'. However, this may be misleading. The savant is a distinct overlap of the stereotypes 'Disabled' and 'Genius'. The savant-syndrome is a "condition in which people with various developmental disabilities, including autism, possess astonishing islands of ability and brilliance […]" (Treffert and Wallace 78). It is commonly associated with autism since it is "seen in about one in 10 people with autism" (78). Savants usually have narrow skills, e.g. calendar calculating or playing the piano, in combination "with IQs between 40 and 70" (78). Similarly, a savant "may have extensive language ability – that is, the capacity to memorize many languages but not to understand them" (80) because their skills are often linked to outstanding memory but lack further comprehension. Thus, while savants are considered to be on a spectrum of ability, too (80), they are also more likely to depend on others for their basic daily needs (78).

iii. *Portraying Autists as Childlike*

What I am referring to as 'childlike' essentially relates to inexperience, i.e. a lack of experience associated with innocence, naivety, and lack of knowledge when it comes to 'the real world'. In fact, the child narrator is a distinct stylistic device (see Chapter 7.4); however, the stereotype 'Childlike' refers to a set of associations that may also be linked to adult characters. In other words, while I expect a child to be childlike, such behaviour in adults leads to dissonance between my expectations and reality. Associations that I have subsumed under this stereotype, include truthfulness, literalness, a naïve approach to social interactions, and dependency on others. These are, of course, hyperbolic assumptions.[10]

A common saying assures that children tell the truth. Their literalness and their unawareness of social conventions allow for a greater degree of honesty than in any adult who has learned to 'deceive' others for the sake of politeness or conventional gestures. Since many autistics are portrayed with an inability to lie (Draaisma 1479) – and equally, an inability to detect lies – they are commonly associated with naivety. However, there is also a fine line between honesty and (perceived) rudeness; "opinions may be expressed forthrightly rather than in more subtle, socially acceptable indirect ways, leading to impressions of impoliteness, … or insensitivity" (Semino 151).

Closely linked to their honesty is their literalness, since for example irony can be considered a 'lie' if taken literally. This causes difficulties in "understanding irony, sarcasm, metaphor, and deceit" (Boorse et al.), much of which is used in everyday interaction (Draaisma 1479). Here, stereotypical expectations range from individuals being "terribly literal" (1478) to autism precluding them "from being rhetorical, much less a rhetorician" (Yergeau 5). However, aside from an assumed inability to converse, literalness and the inability to perceive pragmatic force make a person appear naïve and at times exasperating partners in conversation,

10 One might argue, portrayals used for this work range in age from 11 to 16, thus there is a degree of immaturity that I would naturally expect in a character, given their age. I return to this conflict in Chapter 7.3.

for they will correct others, need more explanations, take jokes literally, etc. Reactions by others may be patronising if the character appears too innocent, naïve, and gullible 'for their age'. Quite often, these individuals will then also be considered either less mentally capable or pedantic. The former, especially, contrasts starkly with the genial traits, thus again balancing out abilities with flaws.

In reality, many autistic individuals can learn to compensate for or camouflage one or more of their deficits, both consciously and unconsciously (Hull, Petrides, and Mandy 309). In fact, autistic individuals may have different symptoms at different stages of their lives (Kissgen and Schleiffer 37) and even 'outgrow' their diagnosis (35) in that they no longer fulfil (current) diagnostic criteria. Therefore, change and progression should be considered part of this stereotype, even though it is counteractive.

The following aspects allude to the stereotype '*Childlike*' in autism portrayals:

- **Naivety**: Characters are portrayed as having an innocent perspective which puts them at a disadvantage. They lack 'street smart' and social finesse, as well as essential skills for navigating society, such as riding a bus or making a phone call.
- **Honesty**: These characters are very honest, to the point where they are unable to lie, which will cause difficulties in relationships.
- **Literalness**: Because characters lack pragmatic competence, they are often unable to grasp the full meaning of utterances, especially where sarcasm, irony, or metaphors are deployed.
- **Patronising**: Characters tend to be patronised by others because they are perceived as (socially) incompetent or naïve.

In some cases, characters are portrayed as dynamic. They grow by overcoming some of their difficulties, e.g. by learning how to navigate social situations and developing new skills. In doing so, characters will actively reflect and change their standing in life and towards others, consequently forming new relationships or changing their future perspec-

tives. Here, the stereotype 'Childlike' is most pronounced at the beginning of the novel but its impact decreases.

iv. *Portraying Autistics as Robots/Computers/Machines*

This last stereotype is perhaps the most commonly portrayed. It is linked to the "assumption that these individuals are closed off or devoid of emotions" (Van Hart 33) as well as their stereotypically assumed abilities (solving equations in their heads, reciting lists and numbers, remembering facts, etc.). The stereotype is another metaphor for explaining how the autistic brain apparently works.

As of now, robots, machines, and computers have no concept of emotions, language, or their own existence for that matter. Comparing autists to machines thus not only suggests that they have no emotions but also that they lack an understanding thereof. The idea is rooted in the concept of 'mind-blindness', a term that was coined by Simon Baron-Cohen. It is the theory that autists lack a Theory of Mind (ToM):

> Theory-of-mind refers to the ability to perceive mental functions in others. Mental functions include, on the one hand, products of thought (beliefs) such as views, opinions, convictions, and knowledge. On the other hand, these mental functions also refer to driving factors for action (desires) such as needs, wishes and intentions. (Kissgen and Schleiffer 30, own translation)[11]

Because it was theorised that autists lack a Theory of Mind completely, researchers have gone as far as to suggest that autists themselves do not have beliefs and desires. Furthermore, the term 'mind-blindness' implies a complete lack of awareness rather than a mere deficit, thus radicalising

11 Als Theory-of-Mind wird die Fähigkeit, mentale Funktionen bei anderen wahrzunehmen, bezeichnet. Zu den mentalen Funktionen zählen einerseits Produkte des Denkens (beliefs) wie Ansichten, Meinungen, Überzeugungen und Wissensbestände. Andererseits beziehen sich diese mentalen Funktionen auch auf Antriebsfaktoren für das Handeln (desires) wie Bedürfnisse, Wünsche und Intentionen. (Kissgen and Schleiffer 30)

the diagnosis. It is more than 'being blind' since the mind – our cognitive, emotional, and emphatic abilities – renders us human. Taking this away gives rise to the 'alien'- or 'robot'-theory. However, when German researchers replicated Baron-Cohen et al.'s study in 2002, they were unable to confirm the original results (Kissgen and Schleiffer 31). Other researchers, too, have found that although it may "not kick in as early, or as well, for most autistic children" (54), those with a normal IQ are likely to develop a Theory of Mind at some stage. Testing for Theory of Mind deficits, as well as explaining autism symptoms by it, is highly contested in the autism community since it is historically loaded. Autism activists especially emphasise the damage done by insinuating that autistic individuals may be "mindblind egocentrists" (Yergeau 16).

On the other hand, it has been argued that "ordinary people cannot see what an autistic boy is doing when […] he is furiously flapping his hands" (Hacking, "Humans, Aliens & Autism" 56). Here, the "instinctive neurotypical ways of interacting with other people do not enable us to look and see what the child is feeling" (56).

> At best, the feelings and emotions of the severely autistic must be inferred. We are not even confident of our inferences, not because we lack enough evidence, but because we may doubt that the concepts that have evolved over millennia for the description of neurotypicals are apt for the autistic life. (Hacking, "Humans, Aliens & Autism" 56)

The idea of 'mind-blindness' thus also fails to acknowledge that one does not actually know how the autistic brain works. What could be looked at as a fundamental communication barrier, where both sides struggle to understand each other, is all too often interpreted as a lack of understanding. Moreover, it has led to the notion of autistic individuals as rather shallow. Because they do not express emotions the same way neurotypicals might, it is assumed that they lack them altogether. Thus, they are "emotionally 'thin' children, who grow up to be 'thin' men and women, lacking a 'thick' emotional life" (Hacking, "Humans, Aliens & Autism" 56). These individuals, it appears, have no concept of deep emotions such as love. Thus, "[o]ther fictional personas appear, even when processing

emotions, to occupy a remarkably machine-like rather than human body (such as Commander Data from Star Trek)" (Bumiller 970). Computers and Robots were programmed to understand verbal or non-verbal input and process it by rules, which brings to mind the behaviouristic training programs that were developed for autistic individuals on the basis of conditioning (e.g. Applied Behaviour Analysis, see Chapter 6.4). Put starkly, their goal is to make autistic children appear 'normal'.

Another aspect commonly associated with robots is their predictability. If told to, a computer or a machine will repeat the same process over and over again, producing the same results without becoming bored or tired. Similarly, characters are often portrayed as having strict routines and patterns, dressing the same every day, eating the same food, etc.[12] This, too, makes them appear predictable and boring, if not limited in their ability to adapt to change. What partly feeds into this stereotype is their hypersensitivity (see stereotype 'Genius'). Autists tend to favour routines and order to keep the incoming information at bay, thus preventing sensitive overload. However, if this is not stated as a reason, the reader will more likely conclude that the character is single-minded, obsessive, and as such rather boring. The same effect is created if a character is portrayed as emotionless, with the reader assuming a lack of empathy.

On a related note, comparing autists to humanoid robots also carries an eerie notion. Machines coming alive is an idea that was already featured in ancient Greek mythology (Pygmalion), and of course as a gothic element. Sigmund Freud uses E.T.A. Hoffmann to explain the uncanniness of the automaton Olympia, "who is to all appearances a living being" (Freud 5). Once a machine evolves a consciousness, emotions, and desires, it becomes unpredictable, ruthless, and by common lore, hostile towards humans. This links back to Loftis's critique of associating autism portrayals with criminal tendencies due to the combination of a genial brain and lack of conscience, morale, and emotion.

12 I do not wish to make generalised statements about autists, however, restricted and repetitive behaviours are part of the diagnostic criteria in the ICD and DSM (see Chapter 6.1).

Of course, autists are not machines in the first place. However, the metaphor reinforces the idea that they are caught up in ever same routines to the point of obsession and that they have no concept of emotion or how to be human. As such, they are boring, predictable, and unable to return feelings.

The following aspects allude to the stereotype *'Robot'* in autism portrayals:

- **Routine and Order:** These characters have strict routines in their everyday lives, to the point where they become compulsive. Consequently, surprise or change may cause emotional distress. Routines may include food, clothes, reciting facts, or daily schedules.
- **Devoid of emotions**: To others, these characters appear to lack emotions, especially 'deep' ones. Social interactions seem rehearsed, attributing to the impression that emotions do not come naturally to these characters.
- **Communication barrier**: Misunderstandings frequently arise because characters have difficulties expressing their thoughts and emotions, thus failing to communicate successfully with others.
- **Mind-blind:** Although this idea remains contested, some novels explicitly allude to it. Here, characters are portrayed as being incapable of attributing desires, needs, and wishes to others, thus making them appear rather egocentric.

v. *Portraying Autists as Aliens*

This trope is settled somewhere between a metaphor and a joke. Being alien attests to several things simultaneously; being different, not being human, being an imposter pretending to be human, being unable to ever grasp fully what it means to be human, etc. It also implies that autistic individuals are of a non-human origin but have an obligation to fit in, since they are 'living amongst us'. Obviously, this stereotype is not referring to Martians but to somebody who appears to be fully human but communicates differently and thus gives the impression of being 'not hu-

man' but in a human body. However, "(current) portrayals of aliens may show more about who we, the humans, are than they do about our extragalactic contraries" (Hacking, "Humans, Aliens & Autism" p. 45). Consequently, the idea of autistic individuals as aliens implies the incompatibility with any notions (stereotypes) a person might have concerning *humans*. Yet it does not, for we cannot fathom anything outside the concepts we are familiar with. It is a stereotype that was created by the scientific discourse on autism and intertwined with the metaphorical notion of autistic individuals as aliens that are unable to 'read' human beings, to understand their desires, beliefs, or emotions, which emerged in the media (see Chapter 5.4). The idea is used in fictional and nonfictional contexts, and across different autism communities (cf. *An Anthropologist on Mars* by Oliver Sacks, *Through the Eyes of Aliens* by Jasmine Lee O'Neill, *Women from Another Planet?* by Jean Kearns Miller, *Of Mice and Aliens* by Kathy Hoopmann). Although controversially discussed, some autists picked up the metaphor to describe their struggles. Activist Jim Sinclair once stated:

> Each of us [autistic people] who does learn to talk to you, each of us who manages to function at all in your society, each of us who manages to reach out and make a connection with you, is operating in alien territory, making contact with alien beings. We spend our entire lives doing this. And then you tell us that we can't relate. (qtd. in Hacking, "Humans, Aliens & Autism" 50–51)

Since the alien metaphor is often used in a joking way, it is more of a trope than a stereotype. Nevertheless, it carries with it the idea that autists are not fully human, which could trigger a series of negative stereotypes. Therefore, I will not define any criteria but will mention instances where it is alluded to.

Autism Stereotypes Portrayed in Fiction

In the previous chapter, some criteria were established to identify stereotypes portrayed in novels. These criteria remain contestable, as does the selection of stereotypes. However, I believe that, based on the criteria, readers will get a good idea of which characteristics are commonly portrayed. The following analysis mostly serves to demonstrate whether these stereotypes are portrayed in fiction, and if so, in what combination. Beforehand, I wish to briefly comment on dynamic characters in relation to stereotypes. Characters can be considered dynamic if they change and develop over the course of the story. In this case, I used the criteria of the stereotypes as indicators. For example, a character that finds friends when previously they had none and were lonely, has made a significant step towards being more included and less ostracised, thus lessening the defining impact of the stereotype 'Disabled'. Equally, a character that learns how to deceive others – even if it would only be considered a white lie – has improved their conversation skills. However, because it can be argued that all characters undergo some form of change or are faced with new situations, I have only concentrated on the most-defining stereotype. If by the end of the story this stereotype had arguably less impact on the character's outline, i.e. their self-understanding as well as their standing in society, then I considered the character dynamic. The following table is based on a close reading of the novels concerning the representation of stereotypes. The data suggest that further evaluation could be promising.

Table 1: Representation of stereotypes from strongest (1) to least (5)

	Disabled	Genius	Childlike	Robot	Alien	Dynamic
Curious Incident	2	3	1	4	n/a	No
London Eye Mystery	4	2	(3)	1	n/a	Yes
Marcelo	2	4	1	3	Yes	Yes
Mockingbird	3	4	(2)	1	n/a	Yes
Trueman	4	2	1	3	n/a	No
State of Grace	2	5	4	3	Yes	Yes
What to Say Next	4	2	3	1	n/a	Yes
Can You See Me	2	4	1	3	Yes	Yes

Source: Own work.

The fact that all novels featured all four stereotypes indicates that they are indeed commonly portrayed in autism narratives. Three novels even alluded to the alien trope. However, stereotypes are used to varying degrees and thus allow for more variation, making these characters appear more mimetic and less thematic. On the other hand, these characters were explicitly labelled, which reinforced their thematic components.

There are already some observations to be made but also some limits to be kept in mind. First of all, the stereotype 'Childlike' is somewhat misleading if one analyses young adult fiction with protagonists ranging from ten to seventeen years of age. In the depictions of Trueman (*Trueman Bradley*) or Christopher (*Curious Incident*), the dissonance of this stereotype is captured in full force, whereas Caitlin simply *is* a child. Thus, this particular stereotype gains exponentially in effect, the higher the discrepancy between expected and perceived age-related behaviour, an aspect considered for the evaluation. Trueman and Christopher also show no progress, nor do they seem to have the urge to fit in and the reader may envision these characters as 'forever children' and forever dependent on others for everyday tasks.

Secondly, genial abilities may be less pronounced due to the genre. Apart from Trueman, these characters do not allude to the stock character 'Holmesian detective'. Christopher, Marcelo (*Marcelo*), and David (*What to Say Next*) are all portrayed as having extraordinary scientific abilities, but these are for the most part negligible as synthetic functions. For example, David makes some complicated calculations concerning a car accident and finds inconsistencies, only to figure out that Kat had been lying to him. However, the novel is not concerned with David's genius. Whereas crime-solving is the Holmesian detective's raison d'être, David's portrayal leans towards its mimetic components. In other words, David is first and foremost human, not a genius or a detective.

Finally, three novels allude to the 'alien' trope. While it is only hinted at in *Marcelo in the Real World* and *Can You See Me*, *The State of Grace* explicitly toys with the idea. The novel starts with "Being a human is a complicated game – like seeing a ghost in the mirror and trying to echo everything they do" (*State of Grace* 1). Grace does not refer to 'being human'

but to imitating a human being. Here, the alien trope allows her to explore the fine line between trying to fit in and not losing her own (autistic) identity since it metaphorically suggests that 'being human' does not come naturally to Grace. Her everyday struggles are mainly due to the fact that she is constantly trying to fit in, as well as her anxiety over being 'found out' and consequently losing her friends. This ongoing panic mode combined with her hypersensitivity causes her to be easily overwhelmed. However, it is not unlike portrayals of anxiety, such as Aza in *Turtles All The Way Down* by John Green. Interestingly, Grace's portrayal contrasts with the others in that it does not fit certain stereotypical assumptions. In fact, she even calls them out:

> I do sometimes wonder whether I sneezed one day and she caught Asperger's from me, or at least the bits everyone reads about, because unlike her I've never written a list in my life, and I'm hopeless at maths, and I don't have a special superpower like drawing entire cityscapes from memory. (State of Grace 43)

Thus, while *The State of Grace* emphasises the alien trope, it deliberately defies other common stereotypes.

I consider nearly all characters dynamic, with the exception of Christopher (*Curious Incident*) and Trueman (*Trueman Bradley*). It can be argued that Christopher ventured out to look for his mother, travelling for the first time and on his own, and learning new things such as riding the tube. However, at the end of the novel, Christopher's outlook on life has not changed and he is still highly dependent on his parents. His relationship with his father was severed but it did not affect Christopher's black-and-white thinking, nor does Christopher reflect on the fact that his mother simply left. Christopher remains childlike naïve in his perspective on the world. As for Trueman, he manages to build a detective agency and find friends and thus could be considered a dynamic character. Yet I remain reluctant to do so because he has not truly changed but rather carved out a niche for himself, not least thanks to the several million dollars he inherited. The obvious message of the novel is that autists are loveable the way they are and that they do not have to change

just to fit into society's understanding of normal. In reality, however, this form of radical acceptance does not work, neither for autists nor for neurotypicals. Indeed, young adult fiction in particular tends to portray the tension that arises from social expectations placed on adolescents and their subsequent journey of finding their place in life (cf. Chapter 5.1). Similar to Christopher, Trueman has not gained any independence by the end of the story that could be traced back to self-growth and would have helped lessen the impact of the stereotype 'Childlike'. Again, I do not wish to oppose the idea of acceptance as a solution, but neither should the growth of characters be neglected.

Evaluation by Stereotype

For this evaluation, the criteria from the previous chapter were used to identify relevant text passages that relate to the four stereotypes (see Appendix A for data). The mean average was established by and for comparing these eight novels only and has no significance beyond that. However, the evaluation demonstrates how some novels lean more heavily towards stereotyped portrayals and what criteria appear to be most prevalent.

Key:
white: *not applicable/only hinted at*
light grey: *at least one instance but few compared to other characters*
dark grey: *several instances/recurring motif*

Table 2: Manifestation of the stereotype 'Disabled'

Stereotype Disabled	**Othering**	**Dependency**	**Harassment**	**One-Dimensional**	**Tragic**	**Comment**
Curious Incident						All characters experience othering in some form, i.e. obstacles when it comes to participating in society and generally being perceived as 'different'. Closely linked to this, these characters also experience harassment due to their differences. Although 'Dependency' seems another criterion at first glance, most characters are dependent because of their age (child/teenager).
London Eye Mystery						
Marcelo						
Mockingbird						
Trueman Bradley						
State of Grace						
What to Say Next						
Can You See Me						

Source: own work.

Table 3: Manifestation of the stereotype 'Genius'

Stereotype Genius	**Gifted**	**Hyper-attentive/ -sensitive**	**Combined with Loneliness**	**Comment**
Curious Incident				On the surface, this stereotype applies to all. However, it is in fact the hyper-attentiveness/-sensitivity that is characteristic of all portrayals examined. If the protagonist was determined to find friends, they were usually portrayed as (retrospectively) lonely. All characters are portrayed as having a special interest they are really good at/know much about, however, in Ted, Grace, Marcelo, and Tally it is not combined with an unusually high IQ
London Eye Mystery				
Marcelo				
Mockingbird				
Trueman Bradley				
State of Grace				
What to Say Next				
Can You See Me				

Source: own work.

Table 4: Manifestation of the stereotype 'Childlike'

Stereotype Childlike	**Naivety**	**Honesty**	**Literalness/ Pragmatics**	**Patronising**	**Dynamic**	**Comment**
Curious Incident						The majority of characters struggle with figurative language and pragmatic competence. Moreover, most of the characters are portrayed as being very honest (even if the situation requires more tact), which is closely linked to pragmatic competency. Finally, many of them tend to have a naïve view, including being oblivious to the intentions/power games of others. However, three of the characters are still children (Ted, Tally, and Caitlin).
London Eye Mystery						
Marcelo						
Mockingbird						
Trueman Bradley						
State of Grace						
What to Say Next						
Can You See Me						

Source: own work.

Table 5: Manifestation of the stereotype 'Robot'

Stereotype Robot/Computer/Machine	**Order/Routine**	**Lack of emotions**	**Communication Barrier**	**Mind-blindness**	**Comment**
Curious Incident					All characters show a need for routine and an aversion to surprises, however, in varying degrees. Some may wear the same clothes every day, eat the same foods, have strictly planned schedules, etc, whereas others are more spontaneous but become anxious if too many new sensations occur. Nearly all characters have difficulties communicating their feelings in a way that others understand and are consequently perceived as aloof or robotic. Mind-blindness: grey = alluded to but not portrayed
London Eye Mystery					
Marcelo					
Mockingbird					
Trueman Bradley					
State of Grace					
What to Say Next					
Can You See Me					

Source: own work.

Taken together, one may state that these portrayals share the following combination of characteristics: a need/love for routine, hyperattentiveness and/or -sensitivity, a barrier when it comes to communicating feelings, as well as a tendency to communicate very literally. Finally, most characters are also portrayed as being very honest. All this combined leads to instances of othering, with characters not being able to fully participate in society.

I would not want to base any statistical assumptions on this data, but I believe that it is safe to state that, except for the alien metaphor, these stereotypes are indeed portrayed in fiction. I have previously toyed with the idea of 'the Autist' as a literary type and it appears I have also found some common denominators, which frankly accumulate to a rather rigid character. At first glance, this might appear redundant, after all, I set out to find stereotypes in characters and now that I have found them, I declare them stereotypical. However, in theory, if 'the Autist' was an actual literary type, no explicit diagnosis would have to be mentioned in the text. Its implicit recognition value alone would trigger the association. Interestingly, Draaisma gives very similar examples for his stereotypes, i.e. literalness, aversion to touch, a love for order, and hyperattentiveness, before he ventures into the field of savantism (cf. 1476–77). His definition works the other way round, i.e. through an artistic device, usually a mentioned diagnosis, the author or filmmaker alludes to a character's autism, which subsequently triggers a set of stereotypical assumptions that supply the audience with enough information to understand the character's motifs and intentions. According to this theory, the explicit labelling within the text would result in the reinforcement of the stereotypes portrayed.[13]

However, several aspects limit my findings. For one thing, this analysis is biased, having only taken into consideration the stereotypes previously identified by other authors. There might be more stereotypes commonly associated with autism portrayals that have not yet been considered. Secondly, the sample size is equally limited. I have only focused my

13 On a related note, Draaisma's theory might not refer to first-person narrators in fiction, since he is mostly concerned with movies.

analysis on young adult fiction and adolescent protagonists, and thirdly, this study merely represents my own findings and interpretation of textual evidence. The instances I have identified may not all be conclusive evidence, and the possibility remains that I have overlooked other text passages. However, my findings are still relevant for they are representative of a tendency in each novel, even on the grounds that not all examples were identified or would have been identified by other readers. I am therefore confident that my data is sufficient to prove the presentation of these stereotypes in literary portrayals. Additionally, Draaisma's theory suggests that merely alluding to the label 'autism' or derivations thereof will trigger a set of stereotypes in the readers. Therefore, if the stereotypes I identified coincide with the reader's, they will necessarily reinforce each other. Vice versa, if the reader's stereotypes contradict my selection, the confirmation bias will overrule textual evidence to a certain extent. At this point, the study enters into reception theory and requires other methods to proceed.

Another aspect that limits my findings is the fact that most of the novels examined portray dynamic characters that are capable of changing and evolving, therefore losing some of their stereotypical rigidity. *The State of Grace*, especially, tries to defy common stereotypes such as extraordinary abilities or an inability to lie. Thus, the stereotypes alone do not serve as adequate characterisations of these protagonists. Vice versa, the protagonists are not ideal personifications of a type. However, literary types are per definition thematic, i.e. representative of a group of people, and stylised to the point where they become largely predictable. In the novels at hand, the mimetic component is too pronounced for those characters to be considered purely thematic.[14] Still, it is telling that all four stereotypes were present in all novels examined, testifying to their widespread acceptance (and perhaps my confirmation bias). Since this study aims at identifying stereotypes in literature, I do not wish to push the subject of a literary type. Any justifiable findings would require an extensive discourse analysis.

14 Although the 'autistic detective' might pose an exception to this rule, see Chapter 7.5.

What opposes my findings is the example of Sherlock Homes. The character is often labelled autistic, yet I would argue that in *A Study in Scarlet* (Arthur Conan Doyle, 1887) Holmes's characteristics only partly match the stereotypes 'Genius' and 'Robot'. He is of course hyperattentive when it comes to details, but he is not described as loving/needing routines, nor as having difficulties communicating his emotions or employing metaphors. Here, Draaisma's theory cannot be applied, because the label 'autistic' did not exist when the story was published. It was not the author who supplied this interpretation, but journalists or avid fans. Indeed, I believe two aspects came together. Firstly, the reinterpretations were based on a 'hunch' rather than fact. The character was checked against the individual's concept of autism. However, because the understanding of autism was limited – or perhaps even wrong – in the first place, there were too few criteria that could have counteracted such a reading. Quite likely, these readers applied concepts, i.e. stereotypes which were even more simplified than those I established. Afterwards, these readers fell prey to their own confirmation bias, subsequently neglecting to take into account any facts that would falsify their hypothesis.[15] Interestingly, it appears as if these reinterpretations were met with little resistance so one might ask why the original characterisations were so easily overruled. Likely, the confirmation bias was strong enough and the concept of autism unspecific enough to be applied to this character. Additionally, if the original text was not re-read, the memory of the character could have been too hazy, further blurring the lines. In the case of Sherlock Holmes, there are also many remakes that may have gradually shifted the character towards this particular interpretation. Perhaps knowledge could have prevented such errors, but the confirmation bias is quite strong. By spreading the opinion that Holmes appears autistic (e.g. journalists via newspaper articles), a snowball effect was created, causing first-time-readers to be biased,

15 There is, of course, the third option that I have failed to find the common denominator that links all these portraits together, but this would presuppose an ontological property that can be found.

too, due to the primacy effect, which then went hand in hand with the confirmation bias.

The example of Holmes demonstrates how intentional portrayals and those retrospectively reinterpreted need to be considered independently when it comes to stereotypes. In my opinion, there is a fundamental difference between an author intending to portray autism in a character, e.g. for educational purposes, and a fictional portrayal that was labelled 'autistic' by journalists or readers. Even though the first still leaves much room for interpretation, any evidence in the text may not simply be challenged by the confirmation bias. Moreover, these intentional portrayals can be considered the 'core' of stereotypical portrayals, whereas those associated through family resemblance might merely be distant relatives. Indeed, in some cases the 'resemblance' boils down to a common label, which might have been carelessly attached. Here, one would have to willingly succumb to the confirmation bias, further muddying the waters. However, it would certainly be interesting to conduct a thorough analysis of characters surmised to be on the spectrum, as it would reflect society's (laypeople's) current understanding of autism. Still, labels should not be affixed carelessly, and I wish to avoid contributing to that. My study is therefore based on intentional portrayals only, marked by an explicit mention of the diagnosis.

Taken together, there are four main stereotypes associated with autism: autists as disabled, childlike, gifted, and robotic. All four stereotypes have different implications, which I have matched to the criteria for my analysis. Not all criteria turned out to be relevant, e.g. mind-blindness was not commonly portrayed. However, at least two out of three criteria were fulfilled for every stereotype and in each novel respectively. Thus, it can be said that these four stereotypes are commonly portrayed in fiction, too. Vice versa, this set of stereotypes might be what Draaisma theorises to be the general understanding of autism. However, the labelling of Holmes as autistic shows that characters are associated with autism even if they only match very select criteria of the stereotypes. Secondly, intentional portrayals would dismiss these stereotypes as necessary conditions. Therefore, two possibilities remain: either these characters were labelled incorrectly, based on stereotypes

that were too vague to count as more than a hunch, or I have overlooked an essential characteristic that allows for identification. While I have identified the core of the stereotypes, it might turn out impossible to trace the outline. The core stereotypes carry with them the potential of 'the Autist' as a literary type, a working hypothesis that I have temporarily laid to rest on the basis of speculation. The fringe, however, carries with it the potential of deconstruction. I then might simply declare any character autistic if I only look hard enough for the evidence.

This is of course slightly exaggerated and yet I hope there is something that denotes these characters as different as opposed to 'normal' characters. Put starkly, if the core of autism portrayals perpetuates a certain set of stereotypes, then it must be opposed by its complete opposite: not disabled, not gifted, not overly childlike, and not robotic. A standard human being, which of course does not exist, but could maybe be grasped in terms of normality in deviance. After all, ideas of normality exist, whereas the characters mentioned appear to all be extraordinary in some way, making them stand out from the crowd. I will therefore continue my investigations by exploring the idea of normality and deviance.

Normality and Deviance

Most people have a good understanding of what is considered 'normal', even though they would struggle to establish rules for it. While we are quick to recognise derivations, everything else is processed subconsciously. One aspect that links together all stereotypical assumptions about autism, as identified in the previous chapter, is deviance. There is something different about them, if only because they were labelled autistic – by the author, the reader, the public – which consequently makes readers biased. They now expect this character to act in a way that justifies the label, and they are likely to find it because of the confirmation bias. This way, autism portrayals may turn into self-fulfilling prophecies.

Discourses of the Public

In 1962, Jürgen Habermas published his book *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* (The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere). In it, he coined the term 'Öffentlichkeit' ('public sphere'), a highly contested thesis that nevertheless provides a much-needed tool to deal with 'the public opinion'. So far, I used the terms public, public stereotypes, and public opinion without giving a definition of 'public'. "[T]he public sphere is constituted wherever and whenever any matter of living together with difference is debated" (Dahlberg 112). However, it is not the sum total of everyday communication but rather the social space that is created by assuming that 'the public' exists (Mein 14). Here, the

consistent usage of the term public is misleading; suggesting that it is a unified entity when it is in fact a signifier without a signified:

> When talking of *the* public sphere, Habermas is not talking about a homogenous, specific public, but about the whole array of complex networks of multiple and overlapping publics constituted through the critical communication of individuals, groups, associations, social movements, journalistic enterprises, and other civic institutions. (Dahlberg 112, original highlighting)

In other words, the public sphere is an overlapping array of discourses that negotiate our living together; a kaleidoscope of opinions, interests, and differences that remain separate in themselves.

> The public sphere cannot be conceived as an institution and certainly not as an organization. It is not even a framework of norms with differentiated competences and roles, membership regulations, and so on. Just as little does it represent a system; although it permits one to draw internal boundaries, outwardly it is characterized by open, permeable, and shifting horizons. The public sphere can best be described as a network for communicating information and points of view (i.e., opinions expressing affirmative or negative attitudes); the streams of communication are, in the process, filtered and synthesized in such a way that they coalesce into bundles of topically specified *public* opinions. (Habermas 360, original highlighting)

By implication, public opinions can form without actually unifying the public sphere. Instead, discourses may move into or out of the spotlight, i.e. their statements may be broadcasted or remain unheard, in the sense that they do or do not participate in the formation of public opinions (Mein 13). While knowledge and opinions are thus closely linked, they are not congruent. Rather, public opinions are the result of debated knowledge, yet an individual may pick up on this stance without being aware of any controversies, simply rendering it into a stereotype or prejudice. Consequently, private stereotypes may revolve around public opinions, and public opinions are a strong indicator for public stereotypes since

once a stereotype becomes public, they are debated publicly, which in turn generates public opinions, upon which subjects may act and thus alter or retain (public) stereotypes. Public stereotypes are thus a good indicator of society's attitude towards certain concepts or classes of people. The autism stereotypes that I have previously identified can be considered public because they are widespread enough to have manifested in novels. However, the exact outline of these stereotypes will vary, for each individual but also for each portrayal.

Literary scholar Jürgen Link considers normality a modern dispositive, which is established via discourses and poses a self-regulating factor for society. It is linked but not congruent with Habermas's theory of the public sphere as an array of discourses that negotiate our living together. According to Habermas, but heavily contested, public opinions form based on "communicative rationality":

> Such rationality, also referred to as rational-critical discourse or argumentation, is where participation is coordinated through acts of reaching understanding, rather than through egocentric calculations of success. (Dahlberg 111)

Consequently, a subject would form their opinion after equally evaluating all knowledge. Critics, however, argue that a subject's rationality stems from its situatedness within a discourse (Dahlberg 124–25), or even that rationality is completely overruled by power (114). In other words, the rationality of the public sphere may be as idealistic as democracy itself and "[f]alse consensus may arise from explicit coercion, domination, and exclusion" (126). Public opinions may therefore simply be the victory of the powerful, since, as Richard Rorty puts it, reason is "simply … the process of reaching agreement by persuasion" (120). Since I have already established that knowledge is linked to power, one may equally assume that stereotypes are linked to power, too, and consequently spread by similar means as consensuses. Put starkly, what is widely accepted, is likely grounded in power. Thus, power generates normality.

Link's theory distinguishes three forms of discourse, based on Michel Pêcheux's discourse analysis: *Spezialdiskurs* (specialised discourse), *Elementardiskurs* (elementary discourse), and *Interdiskurs* (intermediary discourse).[1]

> Specialised discourses are characterised by a maximum of immanent consistency and strict closure against external and non-related discourses. Scientific discourses are a typical example. Ideally, they tend towards unambiguous denotation, eliminating all ambiguities and connotations. (Link, *Versuch über den Normalismus* 42, own translation)[2]

This type of discourse is usually scientific in nature and its participants are considered experts. Consequently, laypeople cannot participate in specialised discourses. Quite often, these discourses distinguish themselves not only by their intention of producing 'universally valid' definitions but also by distinct terminologies, e.g. medical or technical (Mein 16–17). However, statements made by specialised discourses, i.e. knowledge items, may still change, e.g. through 'revolutionary' new insights. Thus, semantic approaches to terminology may be misleading as they forgo the specific statement within which a term was used, failing to acknowledge their historicity.

The elementary discourse is located opposite of specialised discourses.

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1 Since no fixed translation exists, I have provided my own. It must be noted that the term 'interdiscourse' is ambivalent, thus I opted for the bulky 'intermediary discourse'.

2 ***Spezialdiskurse*** zeichnen sich durch ein Maximum an immanenter Konsistenz und durch strikte Abschließung gegen arbeitsteilig externes Diskursmaterial aus. Das typische Beispiel sind die wissenschaftlichen Diskurse. Sie tendieren idealtypisch zur eindeutigen Denotation unter Ausschaltung aller Mehrdeutigkeiten und Konnotationen. (Link, *Versuch über den Normalismus* 42, original highlighting)

> Within the elementary discourse, so-called anthropological constants (such as love, enmity, struggle and death) are combined with dominant interdiscursive complexes and thus actualised and historicised. (Link, *Versuch über den Normalismus* 43, own translation)[3]

As such the elementary discourse is universal, and everybody participates. In fact, Link considers it to be everyday knowledge ("Kulturwissenschaftliche Orientierung" 72). I have referred to these 'constants' as fundamental ideas that change over time but are much less fleeting than contemporary concepts. However, because this discourse is at the roots of our society, it cannot be clearly distinguished from the intermediary discourse which generates public knowledge. In fact, it is the intermediary discourse's main function to reintegrate expert knowledge generated by specialised discourses, generalising it along the way and adapting it to culture (Link, *Versuch über den Normalismus* 42).

> If specialised discourses aim at unambiguity by attempting to restrict connotations and make denotation dominant, the intermediary discourse aims at ambiguity by expanding denotations towards rich connotations, thus enabling reciprocal bridging and cross-sections. (Mein 17–18, own translation)[4]

The intermediary discourse is technically an array of discourses, similar to how the public sphere is a network of communication:

> *Intermediary discourses* are distinct discourses that are constituted on the basis of interdiscursive material and serve the (always highly par-

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3 Im Elementardiskurs werden sogenannte anthropologischen Konstanten (wie Liebe, Feindschaft, Kampf und Tod) mit dominanten interdiskursiven Komplexen kombiniert und dadurch aktualisiert und historisiert. (Link, *Versuch über den Normalismus* 43)

4 Wenn also Spezialdiskurse auf Eindeutigkeit zielen, indem sie versuchen, Konnotationen einzuschränken und Denotation herrschend zu machen, so zielt der Interdiskurs genau umgekehrt auf Mehrdeutigkeit, indem Denotationen auf reiche Konnotationen hin erweitert und erst dadurch interferierende Brückenschläge und Querschnittsformen möglich werden. (Mein 17–18)

> tial and symbolic) reintegration of culture and subjects. (Link, *Versuch über den Normalismus* 43, own translation, original highlighting)[5]

Because expert knowledge is only partially reintegrated, the intermediary discourse is not comprised of the totality of all statements generated by the specialised discourses. Present-day knowledge has become too vast to be simply conglomerated (Link, "Kulturwissenschaftliche Orientierung" 73). Instead, society relies on the intermediary discourse(s) to reduce specialised knowledge to public knowledge. Thus, while specialised discourses strive towards selective definitions, the intermediary discourse will take these definitions, generalise them and weave them into a larger net of cross-references (Link, "Sprache, Diskurs, Interdiskurs und Literatur" 122). Here, one could argue that the intermediary discourses also create stereotypes. However, I believe that stereotypes are a form of abbreviated knowledge that exists across all discourses. Again, stereotypes can be considered automated responses. Therefore, while experts will hold different stereotypes of autism than laypeople, they will both engage in simplifying their surroundings. Interestingly, however, the public sphere debates our living together mostly based on conflicting statements within the intermediary discourse rather than knowledge produced by specialised ones (124).

Link positions the public in relation to 'discursive events' generated by the intermediary discourses ("Sprache, Diskurs, Interdiskurs und Literatur" 123–124). By definition, a discursive event is a debate around one topic with both a political and medial impact that subsequently changes the course of other discourses (Jäger and Maier 124). Consequently, the public sphere is not congruent with the intermediary discourse. Rather, it is generated by the process of forming public opinions. For Link, the public sphere is thus mostly comprised of journalistic discourses that generate political opinions (Link, "Sprache, Diskurs, Interdiskurs und

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5 Als ***Interdiskurse*** seien dann besondere Diskurse bezeichnet, die auf der Basis des interdiskursiven Materials konstituiert werden und der (immer höchst partiellen und symbolischen) Reintegration der Kultur und der Subjekte dienen. (Link, *Versuch über den Normalismus* 43)

Literatur" 124), whereas the intermediary discourses also include topics such as religion, philosophy, history, education, art, literature, and science (123). Habermas positioned his public sphere against a political backdrop as well. However, as opposed to Link, he did not focus on the media. Arguably, topics such as religion, philosophy, education, or science can be politicised, too; because they are woven into the fundaments of our culture, they also pertain to questions of our living together. Even if these topics have no obvious or unified political agenda, they may result in discursive events. However, I believe that conceptualising 'public opinions' as something that manifests itself within the media, is indeed helpful to my cause. For example, a journalist of a renowned newspaper publishing an article about novels that feature autism portrayals yields some power over the public opinion and can subsequently bias people towards (re-)interpreting characters as autistic. What is less obvious in such a case is the fact that the journalist themselves likely reiterated their privately held stereotypes.

Similar to the public sphere, literature plays an important role in giving the intermediary discourse a voice. Link, a literary critic himself, stated the following: "Literature[6] is the 'socially institutionalised processing of the intermediary discourse' while preserving and artificially heightening its ambivalences" (Mein 19, own translation)[7]. In a weird twist, literature thus forms its own specialised discourse (19), subjectifying knowledge. However, literature is also of relevance when exploring public opinions, as well as society's understanding of certain concepts.

Following Link, I suggest that the public sphere generally manifests itself within the media discourses, including mass media and media politics, while simultaneously being created by them. Since literature reflects on the intermediary discourse and impacts public opinion, I may assume a partial overlap of mass media and literature. However, I will also include non-journalistic debates, such as those occurring on social

6 The totality of written works produced by culture, including newspapers.

7 Literatur ist die 'gesellschaftlich institutionalisierte Verarbeitung des Interdiskurses' unter Bewahrung und künstlicher Steigerung seiner Ambivalenzen. (Mein 19)

media platforms, as well as all topics that are adversely discussed by the public, since metaphorically speaking, the public sphere is the voice of the intermediary discourses, uttering public opinions. Nevertheless, one has to bear in mind that 'the public' is comprised of heterogeneous individuals who participate in different intermediary discourses and with different interests. The public sphere, though not an institution, is institutionalised. While it may generate opinions, they are not free of power structures; and since subjects not only differ in opinions but more significantly in their intents and means of persuading others, one cannot possibly conclude that the outcome of a public debate equals 'communicative rationality'. Consequently, public opinions do not necessarily represent the majority, but the powerful. This will be of particular relevance in Chapter 5 when I explore the discourses surrounding autism. For now, however, I will focus on deviance.

Normality and Deviance

Perhaps stereotypes are inherently linked to normality and deviance, but especially those that tilt toward negativity and prejudices. As previously mentioned, autism stereotypes all allude to forms of deviance such as disability, extraordinary abilities, or even 'non-human' characteristics. In his book, Link uses statistics to establish what constitutes normality. For him the Gaussian distribution curve is a representation of what he calls *Normalfeld* (field of normality[8]) (Link, *Versuch über den Normalismus* 44):

> A field of normality homogenises and perpetuates a certain set of phenomena within a specialised or intermediary discourse, whereby these 'units of normality' become comparable among each other. (Link, *Versuch über den Normalismus* 51, own translation)[9]

8 Again, no fixed translation exists for this term, thus I have provided my own suggestion.

9 Ein Normalfeld homogenisiert und kontinuiert eine bestimmte Menge von Erscheinungen innerhalb des Spezial- oder Interdiskurses, wodurch diese Er-

A certain subset of phenomena is located within the same field where they can be arranged freely, e.g. along a gamut (Link, *Versuch über den Normalismus* 51). This, of course, also resembles the spectrum which was introduced in 2013 to redefine autism and which has since become highly contested (cf. Chapter 6.3). Not all phenomena can be recorded as statistics, thus Gaussian distribution curves and other data may generate false security as well as a tendency towards normativity. Consequently, Link defines normality – on a more abstract level – as a cross-section of partial normalities produced by specialised discourses and united by the intermediary discourse. Subjects will then use this conglomerate to self-regulate (*Versuch über den Normalismus* 20). Here, Link differentiates two strategies by which society handles normality. *Protonormalismus* (protonormality, own translation) describes a narrow set of rules which define normality. It is generally considered normative, i.e. once a subject violates the rules, it becomes deviant and is consequently unable to return to being normal (Preusser 101–102). On the other hand, *flexibler Normalismus* (flexible normalism, own translation) establishes a broad normality which strives to be inclusive towards the deviant (102). Both forms of normality are ideal-typical and coexist (Link, *Versuch über den Normalismus* 55–56), however, Rolf Parr states that modern society tends towards flexible normalism (Schlicht 87).

Because normality is established by discourses, it is also always time-bound (Link, *Versuch über den Normalismus* 109). Ironically, the term 'normality' itself first emerged in connection with modernity (Preusser 101). Although one might be tempted to consider knowledge such as gravity to be normative, even normalities produced by specialised discourses must be understood as fleeting. Link gives the example of cholesterol:

> Since the corresponding distribution of [cholesterol] values was probably already valid for the patriarch Abraham, it seems natural to grasp 'normal' on a biological basis as a supra-historical category and anthropological constant. However, this conclusion would be … premature.

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scheinungen als untereinander vergleichbare 'Normaleinheiten' konstituiert werden. (Link, *Versuch über den Normalismus* 51)

> For Abraham, the cholesterol value played no cultural role whatsoever, nor did any analogues, because data and statistics played no role in his culture. (Link, *Versuch über den Normalismus* 36, own translation)[10]

The concept of normality is not just a product of modernity, it is also something that we cannot apply retrospectively, for the simple reason that it did not constitute any normality for society at that time, even if we perceive it to be universally true and thus indisputable. Because we are unable to escape our own understanding of reality, it naturally appears to be the most logical explanation. Moreover, by doing so we overrule the 'other' normality. This is similar to instances of people blaming crop failure or infertility on an angry god rather than meteorological or biological circumstances. Even though historians might nowadays have scientific explanations for a drought, these facts were not part of the people's reality back then and consequently did not influence their actions, intentions, or self-understanding. It is the fallacy of truth when in reality it is just a constructed meaning.

However, normalities not merely affect our perspective but those of the surrounding people, too. For example, historical figures such as Isaac Newton or Michelangelo are sometimes theorised to have been autistic. By reinterpreting them as such, we create another explanation for their behaviour. However, neither they nor their surroundings were aware of such a diagnosis, simply because it did not exist at that time and therefore could not have possibly been part of their normality.

On a small scale, retrospectively applied normalities, e.g. the label 'autistic', allow for a limited explanation of behaviour, but they also imply that people did not, in fact, act on their own free will. By labelling a historical figure or a fictional character – they are technically one and the

10 Da die entsprechende Werteverteilung [von Cholesterin] auch schon für den Patriarchen Abraham gültig gewesen sein dürfte, liegt es nahe, das Normale auf biologischer Basis als eine überhistorische Kategorie und anthropologische Konstante aufzufassen. Dieser Schluß wäre jedoch … voreilig. Für Abraham spielte der Cholesterinwert kulturell eben keinerlei Rolle, ebenso wenig wie eventuelle Analoga, weil Verdatung und Statistik in seiner Kultur keinerlei Rolle spielten. (Link, *Versuch über den Normalismus* 36)

same – their actions are subordinated to their diagnosis. Their behaviour and decisions are now 'symptoms', essentially turning them into personifications of a diagnosis. However, because neither the character (or person) nor their surroundings are aware of such a diagnosis, they will attribute the same behaviours to other causes. Put starkly, any interpretation that fails to account for their respective normalities and self-understanding, strips these characters of their free will and reduces their behaviour to something akin to instincts. Therefore, some explanations are not merely a 'matter of opinion', but they come at a cost.

Either way, retrospectively 'diagnosing' characters only allows for a subjectively better understanding of a very limited set of characteristics, while simultaneously blurring timelines and ideas, i.e. normalities. Discursive statements that are part of our 'normality' appear less fleeting to us because they shape our perspective of reality and can become self-sustaining. However, such definitions and criteria are anchored in space and time and may therefore become outdated in the future, too. Thus, 'diagnosing' characters can be very limiting when it comes to comprehensive studies of literature.

Indeed, the power 'normality' has on a society should not be underestimated. I have already stated that normality can be understood as a cross-section of specialised normalities. This cross-section, I believe, represents a public understanding of normality which is broadcasted in the media and thus serves individuals as a reference. Mostly, however, the public debates normality by negotiating deviance. In other words, aspects of living together pertain to a certain cultural normality which borders normativity and is opposed by deviant behaviour. Subsequently, especially within flexible normalism, the question arises of how much variance poses abnormality. Considering the Gaussian distribution curve, the safest and 'most normal' place is in the middle. Yet, any deviation can be, in Link's words, 'fun' or 'thrilling' (*Versuch über den Normalismus* 44), thus a certain deviance is often perceived as exciting.

> Bettina Gruber states that the modern subject first asserts itself as an individual through occasional transgressions of the boundaries of nor-

> mality and by doing so attains the authenticity of its individual self. (Zeman 75, own translation)[11]

While self-regulation and fun-/thrill-seeking remain subjective, scholars have also identified three 'objective' ways by which individuals are steered towards normality: "per repression (Marcuse), dressage (Behaviourism, Foucault) and normativity (Durkheim)" (Link, *Versuch über den Normalismus* 407, own translation).[12] In other words, society is intentionally enforcing normality.

Establishing normality is obviously linked to power. This relationship becomes even clearer when Wolfgang Keckeisen's theory of negotiating deviance is applied. His work on normality and deviance precedes Link's theory on normality by nearly four decades. In it, Keckeisen examines the labelling approach which closes the gap between discourses and everyday communication. He, too, differentiates two forms of normality, resembling what Link called protonormality and flexible normalism. The aetiological paradigm[13] does not question the existence of normality and deviance but the cause for abnormal behaviour. Keckeisen suggests that both science and our everyday thinking are indebted to this worldview, thus presupposing the existence of deviance and focusing on analysing the causes (35).[14] Because the aetiological paradigm sees deviance as an ontological given, it sets strict boundaries for normality and

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11 Bettina Gruber stellt fest, das sich das moderne Subjekt durch gelegentliche Überschreitungen der Normalitätsgrenzen als Individuum allererst zur Geltung bringt und in dieser Transgression die Authentizität seines individuellen Selbst erlangt. (Zeman 75)

12 "per Repression (Marcuse), Dressur (Behaviourismus, Foucault) und Normativität (Durkheim)" (Link, *Versuch über den Normalismus* 407)

13 Originally called *ätiologisches Paradigma*.

14 "Das Grundproblem des ätiologischen Paradigmas, dem die vorherrschende Wissenschaft ebenso wie das Alltagsdenken immer noch verpflichtet sind, läßt sich in der Frage erfassen, welche *Bedingungen* einem vorfindlichen *Sachverhalt*, nämlich abweichendem Verhalten, ursächlich zuzurechnen seien. Das Merkmal, das den erklärungsbedürftigen Sachverhalt bestimmt, die Normwidrigkeit des Verhaltens, wird als 'Gegebenheit' den theoretischen und empirischen Bemühungen *logisch* vorausgesetzt." (Keckeisen 24)

therefore resembles protonormality. However, these boundaries are not questioned in themselves. Meanwhile, the control paradigm (originally called *Kontrollparadigma*) defines deviance as a particular type of social relationship (35–36).[15]

Both the control paradigm and flexible normalism conceive normality as a social construct that can be renegotiated. However, while Link anchors normality within a field of normality, i.e. an (ideal) Gaussian distribution curve generated by a discourse, Keckeisen assumes that normality (and deviance) is established in everyday communication. According to him, 'deviance' is an attribute ascribed by others. Both, a person or their behaviour, can be normatively (re-)defined as deviant, thus also undermining the idea of deviance as an ontological status (Keckeisen 28).[16]

Here, Link and Keckeisen diverge. For Link, normality must be ontological, or else no statistical data could be collected. Keckeisen's control paradigm, on the other hand, undermines the assumption that normality could be considered even roughly objective. In reality, both theories co-exist. For example, the medical discourse necessarily assumes ontological facts and thus an aetiological paradigm, whereas disability studies theorise that disability is a social construct. Here, two completely different assumptions about reality are made, which are in essence irreconcilable. Consequently, autism diagnoses remain disputed in terms of

15 "Ausgangspunkt aller Überlegungen, die sich am Kontrollparadigma ausrichten, ist die Feststellung, keinem Zustand oder Merkmal eines Individuums wohne die Eigenschaft der Abweichung inne, Abweichung bezeichne vielmehr als gesellschaftliche Kategorie die besondere Qualität einer sozialen Beziehung." (Keckeisen 35–36)

16 "Dieses Paradigma läßt Abweichung nicht als Eigenschaft erscheinen, die Personen bzw. ihren Entäußerungen in wie immer vorzustellender Weise innewohnt, ihnen in diesem gleichsam ontologischen Sinn eigen ist. Devianz wird vielmehr als ein gesellschaftliches Verhältnis, als *soziale Beziehung* aufgefaßt. Diese hat zum Inhalt die *Zuschreibung* einer normativ bestimmten Qualität, die einer Person bzw. ihrem Verhalten durch andere widerfährt und sie (bzw. das Verhalten) auf diesem Wege als abweichend definiert. Devianz erscheint durch sinnhaft strukturierte Interaktion konstituiert. Jeder 'ontologische' Status wird ihr abgesprochen." (Keckeisen 28)

normality. So far, no biological markers have been found and while diagnostic criteria exist, it is a matter of negotiation whether these criteria are sufficient for a diagnosis, i.e. if the symptomology fits the criteria (see also Chapter 6.4, Masking and Camouflaging). In other words, and rather oversimplified, someone without an autism diagnosis is technically normal since they are not part of these statistics (yet).[17] For Keckeisen, on the other hand, deviance can be established as soon as the subject enters into communication with someone else and sans any ontological indications. Here, deviance is not a question of statistical deviation, but of power. Keckeisen suggests that whenever the interpretations of 'what happened' contradict each other, they are negotiated in terms of *accusation* and *justification*. Individuals might even bargain and exchange offers and counter-offers, a metaphor that can also be applied to the exchange between prosecution and defence (40).[18]

Keckeisen's emphasis on controversial interpretations stresses the fact that ultimately one explanation will dominate all others; and since it is based on power rather than ontological entities or universal norms, these judgements can never be 'true' or 'false' (48). Instead, the inferior subject has to accept the accusation as reality. Consequently, power structures that also dominate public opinions are more imminent in Keckeisen's definition, whereas Link's theory suggests a certain extent of objectivity created by experts that generate partial normalities in specialised discourses. These theories also co-exist within the autism discourse, as I will show in Chapter 5.3. Diagnostic criteria for autism are generated by a specialised discourse and thus create a partial normality; however, the neurodiversity movement, as well as autism

17 If 'normal' is normatively derived from the statistically higher probability of being non-autistic versus being autistic.

18 "Unter dem Gesichtspunkt von Macht stellt sich die Frage, wie *kontroverse* Interpretationen dessen, 'was geschehen ist' oder 'was der Fall ist', in den praktischen Entscheidungsprozeß eingehen. Dessen Medium ist eine Verhandlung (negotiation, bargaining), der Austausch von Behauptungen und Deutungen, von Angebot und Gegenangebot oder, spezifischer, von Anschuldigung und Rechtfertigung." (Keckeisen 95, original highlighting)

activists, are renegotiating these criteria, as well as challenging the concept of 'normal' as opposed to 'autistic'.

In his study, Keckeisen is mostly concerned with criminal behaviour, which subsequently impacts his choice of words, as his terminology is borrowed from court hearings. Indeed, according to Keckeisen, the jurisdictive system is the ultimate embodiment of this form of negotiating deviance (62). He states that claiming the violation of a social norm will always result in accusation ('charge') and justification ('account') (45–46). If the justification fails, deviance is established, and the accusation is accepted as 'a fact'. This, of course, is completely arbitrary, in the sense that the powerful can define deviant behaviour (40). However, although Keckeisen's legal terminology at times sounds Kafkaesque, any aspect of our living together is negotiated, with only the most significant 'violations' being tried in court. For example, a fight between spouses over who forgot to take out the trash can be apprehended in terms of accusation and justification, too, but the outcome will likely only affect the relationship between these two individuals. In Kafka's *The Trial*, Josef K. is accused of and prosecuted for something that he does not understand, nor is he able to justify himself, since he is unaware of the rules by which his deviance is determined. Keckeisen therefore stresses that rationality stems from the extent to which an agent adapts their utterances to the situation as he understands it (100).[19] The reader considers K. rational for the most part. Yet the superior party, in this case the court, denies this rationality. Similarly, a schizophrenic may act according to their perception of reality but will be overruled by the superior majority who does not share their hallucinations. Here, 'truth' is established by power. One must thus bear in mind that power imbalances can be deliberately created and used to establish deviance through othering. Interestingly, this is usually not reflected in the final judgment, i.e. legal experts will judge a lay-person in a courtroom, independently of whether this person considers themselves guilty or not. According to Keckeisen, it is therefore not the actual

19 "Wenn der Akteur seine sprachlichen und nichtsprachlichen Äußerungen an der Situation, wie er sie versteht, orientiert, so sind sie rational in dem Maße, in dem sie der sozialen Situation adäquat sind." (Keckeisen 100)

change of perspective but the imputation of one, since it ultimately has to be plausible to third parties (e.g. the court) (58).[20]

Here, the power of specialised discourses becomes apparent. Because their participants are usually considered experts, they will join negotiations that pertain to their field of expertise with an advantage in credibility. Moreover, the power of definition lies with the superior, thus statements by specialised discourses are usually considered normative for the intermediary discourse. Keckeisen emphasises the fact that norms, particularly legal norms, are generally declared by the powerful and enforced with the help of sanctions. The interests and values of one group therefore gain dominance over others (109–110).[21] Thus, not even the law is free of power structures.

Of course, this assumes a status quo in which norms and laws, including a jurisdictive system, already exist, thus all participants have previously been institutionalised by culture. However, even if legal systems in democracies appear to be 'the will of the people', it is in fact the 'will of the powerful' and the normality society is trying to enforce was originally created by the powerful, too. On a related note, I believe that while the public cannot overrule statements made by specialised discourses as such, they may choose to ignore the 'facts', essentially muzzling the experts.

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20 "Der Kern der Sache ist … nicht das Gelingen des Perspektivwechsels, sondern dessen *Unterstellung*. Tatsächlich ist es … faktisch nicht so sehr von Bedeutung, daß der Proband seine Intentionen in den Interpretationen der ihn Kontrollierenden wiedererkennt, als vielmehr, daß diese Interpretationen Dritten (z.B. Kollegen, Vorgesetzten oder Gerichten) plausibel sind." (Keckeisen 58, original highlighting)

21 "Demnach gehören gesamtgesellschaftliche Normen, insbesondere Rechtsnormen, als Normen mit allgemeinem Geltungsanspruch genuin nicht der Gesamtgesellschaft zu, sondern werden von den Gruppen, die mächtig genug sind, zu allgemein gültigen erklärt und mit Hilfe eines Sanktionsapparats durchgesetzt. Im Inhalt von Gesetzen gewinnen dieser Auffassung zufolge die 'Werte' (Moral, Interessen, Einstellungen) einer Gruppe Dominanz über diejenigen der unterlegenen Gruppierungen." (Keckeisen 109–10)

Normality can be understood as a complex but fleeting construct of reintegrated specialised normalities. Because it influences our reality, it cannot be retrospectively applied to other societies. However, some 'anthropological constants' might be considered supra-historical. Attributing a person's or character's behaviour to such biological factors will overrule the respective normality, but only generate a very limited explanation, usually at the cost of free will.

Labelling

Wherever there is 'normality', there is also deviance. Yet, while high cholesterol may cause health issues, it does not usually result in social marginalisation, since it is mostly private and thus invisible. On the other hand, a mere rumour can result in social stigmatisation, a concept first coined by Erving Goffman: If a person possesses an attribute that makes them fall out of an expected social category in an undesirable way, this attribute is called a stigma (11). Even labels, including 'disabled', 'gifted', 'robotic', or indeed 'autistic', can signify such an attribute and thus deviance. While it is important to bear in mind that stigmata are arbitrary in the sense that they, too, are linked to power, labels can have very real consequences.

According to Goffman, there are three types of stigma; bodily marks, e.g. physical disabilities, 'blemishes of character', including a 'weak will', dishonesty or mental disorder, and what he calls 'tribal stigma', referring to race, nation, or religion. The latter he describes as a "stigma that can be transmitted through lineages and equally contaminate all members of a family" (12). Apart from his choice of words, Goffman's theory of stigma is still widely accepted. I thus suggest differentiating physical, mental, and class-related stigmata.

I also suggest differentiating visible and invisible deviance. Bodily marks are externally visible and may lead to instant stigmatisation. Here, 'obvious' ontological aspects are linked to assumptions made about an individual (see Chapter 3, Stereotypes). Mental stigmata, on the other hand, are per Keckeisen's definition negotiated and thus

'invisible'. However, a perceived mental stigma can become so widely known within a community that it turns into something akin to a bodily mark since the knowledge of the stigma will make people biased even before entering into a conversation with the individual. In other words, a perceived deviance can become as encompassing as a visible stigma, but with the twist that it could potentially be lost upon entering a different community, at least up until the point an individual's deviance is renegotiated.

Generally speaking, one can define stigmatisation as the ascription of deviance as an ontological status. Keckeisen calls this process labelling (49). Thus, labelling and stigmatisation technically refer to the same instance of ascribing deviance, with the difference that the first explicitly institutionalises the stigma in the form of a diagnosis, a criminal record, or some other form of bureaucratic categorisation. In a way, such a label makes the stigma 'official', i.e. indisputably normative.

Consequently, not all deviance results in stigmatisation. The difference between situational deviance and stigma lies in its significance for the subject. Temporary deviance will not necessarily result in stigmatisation and because most individuals deviate from the norm sometimes, these are insufficient grounds to base a stigma on. Contrary to that, a stigma will necessarily result in continued deviance since it is the consequence of labelling. For example, a person may be considered odd by their colleagues without actually being different. Here, their deviance is decided for them, and they have to accept it within the confines of the workspace. According to the Thomas theorem, "[i]f men define situations as real they are real in their consequences" (Chandler and Munday 433). This theory later became known as a self-fulfilling prophecy (433). In the example at hand, the label makes the colleagues biased, causing them to continually perceive the actions of this particular individual as deviant. However, although this may cause feelings of powerlessness or even result in instances of bullying, it is temporary and locally limited. Thus, the individual must accept the collegial judgment, for it metaphorically lost the negotiations, but it does not have to internalise the stigma.

While Goffman assumes an ontological basis for the stigma, Keckeisen emphasises the fact that labels, too, are negotiated by accusation

and justification, but within a wider community (Keckeisen 49). However, because the social impact is so strong, the repercussions of labelling force the 'defeated' individual to not only accept the accusation but to re-organise their selves. Since the accusation was deemed 'true' by those more powerful, it becomes a 'new truth' about this subject.[22] Even if the accused maintain their innocence ('their perspective of reality'), they will be overruled. Ultimately, then, although at times rather Kafkaesque, the individual will integrate their deviance into their self-perception, thus making it their own 'truth', too (39). Instances in which an individual's behaviour is negotiated and judged as deviant can thus become so-called self-defining memories:

> Similar to life-story memories [which are linked to long-term goals], self-defining memories are vivid, affectively intense, and well-rehearsed. They build on life-story memories by connecting to other significant memories across lifetime periods that share their themes and narrative sequences. They reflect individuals' most enduring concerns (e.g., achievement, intimacy, spirituality) and/or unresolved conflicts (e.g., sibling rivalry, ambivalence about a parental figure, addictive tendencies). (Singer et al. 572)

On a related note, self and identity are not considered to be the same:

> To the extent that a person's self-understanding is integrated synchronically and diachronically such that it situates him or her into a meaningful psychosocial niche and provides his or her life with some degree of unity and purpose, that person 'has' identity. (McAdams 102)

One can thus say that once the deviant status is integrated into the self, it becomes part of the identity. Technically, this turns a label into a stigma.

I believe, the term 'label' carries the notion of something externally applied and I will thus use it to emphasise the fact that deviance is negotiated. However, I will also continue to use the term 'stigma' to refer to

22 But again, there is no true or false, merely power.

the negative implications such deviance has for any individual labelled. Certainly, 'label' is more neutral than stigma in terms of their negative associations. Yet, both 'label' and 'stigma' may lead to stereotypical assumptions being made about the individual.

Upon being labelled, the subject becomes socially categorised which defines their field of action. Indeed, labelling never occurs simultaneously with deviance but is always a subsequent process (Keckeisen 49). Rather, there are two situations, that of deviant behaviour and that of labelling it as such (48–49). However, the label will activate the primacy effect as well as the confirmation bias, thus making it more likely that an individual's behaviour is perceived as deviant. The fact that people will judge a person's behaviour as 'symptomatic', either by generalisation (inferred from a singular event) or by assumption (hear-say) makes them biased and subsequently affects all interactions. Keckeisen theorises that the labelling and consequent sanctioning of 'deviant' behaviour creates general expectations towards such an individual. Subsequently, the whole individual is perceived as deviant, often resulting in exclusion and social isolation. Thus restricted in their movements, the individual's behaviour will necessarily become increasingly deviant. At this point, even 'normal' behaviour might be perceived as deviant. Keckeisen suggests that the agent will continue to adapt their behaviour to the situation to the best of their knowledge, therefore being able to rationally justify their actions. However, when denied the confirmation by others, the agent's identity will increasingly come under pressure, eventually leading to serious consequences (cf. Keckeisen 38–39).[23]

23 "Die Etikettierung und Sanktionierung einer (vielleicht unbeabsichtigten, vielleicht ephemeren) Verhaltensweise als 'deviant' wird zur Grundlage von Typisierungen und Erwartungen gegenüber dem so Definierten, die es diesem unmöglich machen, sich in der Interaktion mit anderen so zu verhalten, 'als ob nichts geschehen wäre'. … Die Generalisierung des diskreditierenden Urteils (des 'labels'), der Schluß von der abweichenden Verhaltensweise auf die ganze Person und in deren Gefolge die soziale Isolierung und Ausstoßung sowie die Einschränkung des materiellen Handlungsspielraums – alle diese Elemente der gesellschaftlichen Reaktion verändern das 'Symbol- und Aktionsfeld' … derart, daß 'normale' Verhaltensweisen zunehmend unmöglich werden. In diesem sich

I have already theorised that it is the label – intentionally alluded to or retrospectively applied by someone other than the author – that renders characters deviant. Characters that are labelled 'autistic' within the meta-discourse might be (re-)read differently but are otherwise not affected by such a label. However, autists in real life will suffer equally real consequences. In Chapter 3.3 I discussed Loftis's critique of negative stereotypes associated with Sherlock Holmes. Here, the retrospectively applied label 'autistic' led to autists being likened to Holmes. Thus, even labelling fictional characters may impact (public) stereotypes and therefore affect the treatment of autists. While a label might draw positive attention to a character and perhaps even educate people on a certain concept, this technique remains questionable. After all, it raises the question of who benefits from such ascriptions – will it foster awareness for autists in real life or does it boil down to sensational journalism?

Deviance in Fiction – *The London Eye Mystery*

Arguably, *The London Eye Mystery* portrays the least instances of othering and subsequent harassment of all novels examined. Yet, it becomes obvious that Ted is 'not normal' by the way other characters react to and interact with him. In this section, I wish to explore how normality and deviance are negotiated within the novel.

As a result of being deviant, Ted struggles to make friends among his classmates. Moreover, Ted's mother, as well as his sister and his teacher, tend to make up rules that are supposed to help him be 'more normal'. For example, Ted prefers to wear his school uniform even during the holidays, even though his sister advises him "to put on a T-shirt and jeans and be 'normal and chilled'" (*London Eye Mystery* 22).

The arrival of his aunt Gloria represents an instance of an outsider judging the family. Because she is very blunt and openly voices

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eskalierenden Wechselspiel gerät die Identität des Kontrollierten in dem Maße unter Druck, in dem ihr die Bestätigung durch andere verweigert wird." (Keckeisen 38–39)

her thoughts, she becomes something akin to a spokesperson for the 'public opinion'. On the other hand, Ted's cousin Salim approaches him seemingly without prejudice. His acceptance embodies a radically different way of 'dealing' with Ted's autism; one that resists the urge to change him. However, I shall expect his mother's, sister's, and teacher's intentions to be good, having at least somewhat Ted's best interests in mind.

I will focus this analysis on dialogues in which Ted's deviance is established, starting with Gloria's and Salim's arrival:

> 'God, Faith,' she [Gloria] went on. 'He's the spit of your father. D'you remember? Dad in his suit and tie, even on holiday? Ted's the image of him.'
> There was a silence. It was true that I wore my school trousers and shirt every day even if I wasn't going to school. It's what I liked to do. Kat was always on at me to put on a T-shirt and jeans and be 'normal and chilled' but that made me want to wear my uniform even more.
> Salim said, 'No, Mum. He looks a right cool dude. The formal look's all the rage again, didn't you know?'
> 'Hruum,' I said.
> 'The look's a disguise, Mum. It hides the rebel within – right, Ted?'
> I nodded. It felt good being called a rebel. (*London Eye Mystery* 21–22)

Using Keckeisen's terminology, the topic of negotiation is Ted's appearance, with Gloria making the accusation ('Ted is not dressed like 12-year-olds commonly dress during their holidays') and Ted justifying himself, albeit only to the reader ('I like to wear these clothes'). Gloria's accusation is followed by a silence for presumably two reasons: 1) Ted's family has been made (once more) aware of Ted's clothing preferences, thus they have to reconsider their judgement and whether they should defend him; 2) Gloria has changed the situation by not only registering Ted's look but making a remark on them, subsequently establishing deviance. Although the style of clothing is a rather subtle form of deviance, Gloria's reference to the grandfather 'in his suit and tie, even on holiday' implies that this behaviour was considered odd enough to have become a family

memory. Salim then joins the negotiations and comes to Ted's defence by stating (whether true or not) that Ted's clothes are 'all the rage again'. By doing so, Salim partially revokes Ted's deviance; Ted's clothes are different, but they are so *by choice*. Whereas Gloria operates with categories of protonormality ('even on holiday'), implying that there are norms for how to dress when you are off work, Salim applies flexible normalism to the situation. The brief dialogue already reflects the different roles, with Gloria voicing her thoughts openly, Salim renegotiating her accusations and Ted's family being embarrassed by the fact that Ted's deviance was recognised and is now openly discussed.

Ted himself, on the other hand, has already made the diagnosis part of his identity.

> 'I've heard of him [Andy Warhol],' said Kat. 'He was a weirdo.'
> 'He was a Cultural Icon,' said Aunt Gloria. 'I'd say he embodied the twentieth century. Some people even think he might have had' – she looked at Mum – 'you know. What Ted's got.'
> There was a silence.
> 'Like I said,' Kat said. 'A weirdo.'
> Mum's lips pressed up tight. I figured out that Kat had made her cross. But I didn't care. I know I'm a weirdo. My brain runs on a different operating system from other people's. I see things they don't and sometimes they see things I don't. As far as I'm concerned, if Andy Warhol was like me, then one day I'd be a cultural icon too. (*London Eye Mystery* 30–31)

Ted's diagnosis is ontological, in the sense that it relates to the aetiological paradigm. Moreover, because it has already been established, further negotiation is unnecessary. Ted's reaction to his sister's defamation ('I didn't care. I know I'm a weirdo') makes it evident that he has internalised the stigma; in other words, the label has become an ontological status through stigmatisation. Here, the consequences of his deviance are at stake, i.e. the effects his diagnosis has on his actions and his very being. While Kat calls him a 'weirdo', thus framing Ted's deviance decidedly negative, Gloria suggests that Andy Warhol might have been a

cultural icon because, or at the very least despite, his autism. From this, I can deduce, that Gloria does not necessarily link Ted's stigma to negative stereotypes. In other words, although she has accepted Ted's deviance as a fact, her expectations differ. Ted picks up on this and turns Gloria's comment into something positive, comparing himself to Andy Warhol as a cultural icon, thus re-integrating the stigma as part of his identity.

Gloria also states something the family is aware of but does not talk about freely. The silence that follows indicates that the conversation has at least temporarily been derailed. Based on Goffman's 'free' and 'non-free' goods, Lakoff stated that "[c]learly there are some topics that one may ask about freely and others that are 'none of your business'—that is, non-free goods" (qtd. in Thomas, "Cross-Cultural Pragmatic Failure" 105). While free and non-free topics may vary from individual to individual, taboos are culturally considered to be non-free (Thomas, "Cross-Cultural Pragmatic Failure" 105). I consider Ted's diagnosis a non-free topic; quite likely, the parents do not wish to discuss this topic with someone outside the family, especially if it is emotionally charged. Yet, Ted's diagnosis also seems to be a taboo of some sort, since even Gloria does not dare mention it to her sister more explicitly than alluding to it ('You know. What Ted's got'). In a sense, Ted's deviance is not open knowledge. However, because it also appears to be a non-free topic *within the family*, it implies that Ted's diagnosis is something undesirable and perhaps even tragic that should be ignored as best as possible. Ted's mother is obviously uncomfortable discussing her son's diagnosis and although Ted links his mother's reaction to Kat's words, it is likely that she is also offended by Gloria breaching a non-free topic.

However, Ted is acutely aware of his deviance and conflicted by it as becomes apparent in his dialogue with Salim:

> 'You know this – this syndrome thing you've got?' he said.
> 'Hrumm,' I said, wondering who had told him.
> 'Hope you don't mind me asking. But what is it? What's it like?'
> No one had ever asked me that before. I lay back on my pillow and thought. 'It's this thing in my brain,' I said.

'Yeah?'
'It's not that I'm sick.'
'No.'
'Or stupid.'
'I know that.'
'But I'm not normal either.'
'So? Who is?'
'It's like the brain is a computer,' I said. 'But mine works on a different operating system from other people's. And my wiring's different too.'
'Neat,' said Salim.
'It means I am very good at thinking about facts and how things work and the doctors say I am at the high functioning end of the spectrum.' I'd also once heard a doctor say to Mum that my developmental path was skewed. I didn't tell Salim this because I looked up 'skewed' in the dictionary and it said 'crooked', which makes it sound as if I am a criminal, which I am not. …
'You know an awful lot,' Salim said. 'I can tell from all these books.' He pointed at my shelves of encyclopaedias. 'Why bother trying to be something that you're not?'
'Mr Shepherd says if I learn how to be like other people, even just on the outside, not inside, then I'll make more friends.' Then I told him something I'd never told anyone before. 'I don't like being different. I don't like being in my brain. Sometimes it's like a big empty space where I'm all on my own. And there's nothing else, just me.' (*London Eye Mystery* 36–39)

Ted is characterised by his wish to make friends. In order to do so he has been taught that he needs to 'be like other people, even just on the outside'. Although Ted has internalised the stigma, he is determined to get rid of it. Furthermore, he has internalised that his diagnosis is a taboo, i.e. something that should be kept hidden or he will be stigmatised for it. For example, Ted anticipates Salim's assumptions by stating that he is neither sick nor stupid, thus he has presumably encountered these prejudices before. While Ted previously stated that he knows he is a 'weirdo' and does not care, this dialogue shows that he does indeed care, as he feels compelled to justify himself. Furthermore, when Salim suggests he

embrace his deviance, Ted explains that he wishes to find friends, implying that he cannot imagine people liking him for being different. Salim again applies flexible normalism to the situation ('Who is [normal]?'), thus blurring the lines, whereas Ted's teacher Mr Shepherd is contrasted as being normative, i.e. his goal is not to raise awareness and foster understanding for Ted's differences but to annihilate them as best as possible so as to make Ted 'more normal', i.e. normal to an acceptable degree. As such, both Salim and the teacher embody 'normality' that is contrasted with Ted's deviance. Interestingly, this dialogue also shows two more instances in which Ted's deviance is negotiated by others. First of all, Ted states that no one has ever asked him what the syndrome felt like (thus perhaps he did come up with the comparison himself). Secondly, he mentions how the doctor told his mother that his developmental path was 'skewed'. Ted cannot possibly be 'normal', because other groups, including his family, his teachers, doctors, classmates, etc, are more powerful and thus able to set the standards.

Again, Ted is the character encountering the least instances of othering or harassment, yet he is acutely aware of his deviance to the point that he has internalised the stigma. In fact, aside from Christopher in *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*, all characters have internalised their deviant status and are aware of the fact that they are 'not normal' but are also expected to fit in and will experience harassment if they do not. Because autism is no visible stigma, most characters opt to hide their deviance. On one hand, they are aware of the label they have received from medical experts, which is usually also common knowledge within the family. On the other hand, these characters choose not to make the diagnosis public, presumably because they reckon that a diagnosis would lead to instant stigmatisation, whereas otherwise, they can renegotiate their deviance (or normality) anew, every time they enter a new social setting. However, the fear of being 'found out' and the pressure to fit in usually take a toll on the mental health of these individuals.

I previously discussed retrospectively applied labels that are part of our normalities but were not, in fact, part of the normalities a historical figure lived in. The example of Ted demonstrates how deviance affects

the way his surroundings interact with and react towards him. Retrospectively labelling a character (or historical figure) will attribute them deviance but it cannot possibly affect them, their self-understanding, or their interaction with others. There are several aspects to be considered, such as whether the nature of deviance affects their social standing, however, for my study, I will simply retain that such retrospectively applied labels, which were not, in fact, part of their normalities, cannot possibly explain a character's intentions, self-understanding, and freely made choices.

Deviance and Mental Health

Although society creates its own normality (normalities), which is subsequently reflected in literature, there is not much flexibility involved. Indeed, the undertow of normality can be considered quite strong, given that it also manifests itself within institutions such as the judicial system. In reality, deviance can have devastating effects on an individual.

Put simply, there are two main factors that put autists at a higher risk of developing mental health issues: not fitting in and trying to fit in. Studies on autism stigmatisation differentiate between perceived, anticipated, experienced, and internalised stigma. Here, the label 'autistic' has become a defining ontological fact about the individual, thus not allowing the autist to renegotiate their status but leading to them being categorised by prejudice and stereotypical assumptions. The *perceived* stigma is "thought to be present against autistic people generally" (Han et al. 16), and decidedly negative, with the stereotypical assumption "of autistic people as [being] male, minimally verbal, infantile, or violent" (16). Interestingly, apart from Christopher (*Curious Incident*), this stigma does not fit any of the characters examined. It also does not coincide with the stereotypes Loftis mentioned, nor the portrayal of Sherlock Holmes(see Chapter 3). This could be explained by two things; either the perceived stigma is not actually as negative as described, or fictional portrayals of autism are based on a very different stereotype. Either way,

the perceived stigma will nevertheless have detrimental effects on the mental health of autists.

Based on the perceived stigma, autists formed expectations on how they would be stigmatised (*anticipated* stigma):

> Both autistic adolescents and adults expressed fears that having an ASD label meant that others would make prejudgments about them and treat them differently, even if they had not yet experienced such stigma directly. (Han et al. 16)

When it came to actual experiences with stigmatisation, participants "reported being misunderstood, teased, insulted, bullied, excluded, or rejected by peers, at different levels of severity and regularity" (Han et al. 16). They would frequently face prejudice and discrimination (16), or, vice versa, "receive unwanted help, [causing them to] feel patronized and be singled out as 'different'" (16). Even well-intended actions missed their mark because people were blinded by their stereotypes and thus unable to perceive the actual person behind them. In other words, stigmata will trigger certain unfavourable stereotypes. Unfortunately, it is true that

> [o]n a regular basis, people with autism are subject to individual harassment, expulsion from public schools, restrictions on using public space (including restaurants, stores, parks, and recreation centers), and surveillance and arrest by criminal justice authorities. (Bumiller 979)

All of these are forms of sanctioning deviance, thus pressuring the individual towards 'being normal'. Except for Christopher, all characters expressed the desire to somewhat fit in. This could be attributed to the fact that they all experienced instances of harassment, albeit some less than others. In many cases, difficulties in social interaction led to deviant behaviour and subsequent harassment. Usually, the opponents remained unaware of the protagonist's diagnosis, reasoning that they were, in fact, 'weird', 'stupid', or trying to be difficult (cf. Chapter 4.5).

If such a stigma is internalised, subjects even apply these negative assumptions to themselves. Autistic participants from several studies described "themselves as 'weird' or a 'misfit' …, 'not normal', a 'freak' or having a 'bad brain' …, [being] 'wrong', 'broken' or 'defective' …, a 'wimp', 'bad' or 'disgusting' …" (Han et al. 17). Unsurprisingly, stigmatisation and subsequent harassment will have adverse effects on the mental health of autists and may cause these individuals to develop techniques to 'hide' their autism stigma.

Several of the characters in the novels discussed make remarks that hint towards an internalised stigma, albeit with a positive twist. For example, in *Marcelo in the Real World*, Marcelo's internalised stigma is implied in the following sequence:

> Arturo is basically asking me to pretend that I am normal, according to his definition, for three months. This is an impossible task, as far as I can tell, especially since it is very difficult for me to feel that I am *not* normal. Why can't others think and see the world the way I see it? (*Marcelo* 23, original highlighting)

Marcelo states, ex negativo, that he is, in fact, normal, but proceeds to say that others do not think and see the world as he does. Thus, although he considers himself normal, he is aware that others do not. Interestingly, the phrasing 'according to his definition' refers to the fact that there are different normalities, in this case, the rules and norms of the law firm. Arguably, in the context of his school, Marcelo would be considered normal, yet because it is a special needs school, it has an inherently deviant status. It does demonstrate, however, that communities and institutions create their own normalities.

In *The London Eye Mystery*, Ted remembers one of his doctors using the word 'skewed' but chooses not to tell Salim about it, because he feels that it implies criminal tendencies (37). David (*What to Say Next*), on the other hand, calls himself 'good-weird' "when being just plain weird was too much of a burden to carry" (62), implying that he, too, has internalised the stigma but, in order to preserve his self-esteem, reframed it as 'good', i.e. possibly not harmful, beneficial to others, etc. Consequently, inter-

nalising a stigma can fundamentally affect a person's identity. In reality, individuals will quite often resort to 'hiding' their autism by pretending to be normal, learning to cover up any deviance and consequently wearing a mask. This effect is referred to as camouflaging or masking, a topic I will return to in Chapter 6.4. However, hiding one's autism is usually linked to anxiety over being found out as well as a feeling of not being true to one's own identity. Generally speaking, "higher levels of concealment of autism were associated with higher levels of internalized stigma and lower levels of social wellbeing in autistic adults" (Han et al. 18). Upon being asked,

> [m]any autistic individuals expressed a desire to show their true selves and recognized some benefits of disclosing, but feared that disclosure would attract more stigma, causing others to associate them with negative stereotypes and treat them differently. (Han et al. 18)

Disclosure can be a high-risk gamble for autists.

> Among autistic individuals who disclosed, some experienced positive relationship changes and improved understanding and acceptance, while others experienced unhelpful, dismissive, and patronizing reactions … . (Han et al. 19)

Participants of the study reported that reactions tended to be more negative than positive:

> … many interviewees described an unequal power dynamic between themselves and neurotypical individuals when they disclosed, including being told "you are not really autistic" … or "everyone's a bit like that" … . Participants expressed concern that such responses detract from their identity, erase their experience, and remove their need for support. (Han et al. 19)

In these instances, the individuals disclosed their deviant status but were met with dismissal, possibly caused by either incredulity ('you are not really autistic') or a well-meant but poorly executed application

of flexible normalism ('everyone's a bit like that'). Unfortunately, even well-meant flexible normalism becomes oppressing and disparaging if applied to an internalised stigma, since the latter has already become part of the individual's identity. Consequently, dismissing deviance had the opposite effect intended, with the individual being denied their deviance and the label on which they carefully crafted their identity. Thus, neither disclosure nor flexible normalism are easy fixes for harassment and marginalisation since a stigma needs to be acknowledged once internalised. It further demonstrates how a label can be reframed, consequently changing the stigma, but it cannot simply be abandoned.

Autistic adolescents in particular tend to report more positive self-perception the stronger they feel aligned with the non-autistic culture, which may be because they are particularly prone to encountering discrimination or marginalisation (Han et al. 21). For example, autistic adolescents are more likely to be "made fun of by other pupils compared to adolescents with intellectual disability" (16), albeit less so by "teachers, the public, and family members" (17). Thus, classmates and peers in particular reinforce the desire to 'be normal' in order to avoid harassment. Quite often, these participants also had bleak visions for their lives, expecting continued "autism-related stigma … [to] negatively affect them in the future" (16). However,

> [i]t is notable that many autistic adults who participated in the included studies described autism as a positive part of their identity, while many autistic adolescents did not. This may be due to the fact that adolescence is the stage at which individuals are just starting to explore their identity and may face more pressure to fit into their peer groups … , while the transition to adulthood is a time when autistic individuals may be more likely to develop self-acceptance and self-advocacy skills … . (Han et al. 21)

It seems, as if adolescence and young adulthood were particularly sensitive stages in which individuals would not only benefit from role models but also from general autism awareness. On the other hand, adults who were able to reconcile their identity with their autistic traits in a posi-

tive way were found to have "higher collective self-esteem and improved mental health" (Han et al. 21). In essence, positive representation is of key importance if it helps empower autistic adolescents to reframe their internalised stigma, in addition to educating non-autistic readers to prevent further discrimination. Moreover, representation should in theory generate application templates for life curves, thus helping adolescents and young adults envision a future for themselves, as well as embracing their autistic identity.

The evaluation of stereotypes in Chapter 3.4 also showed that all characters examined experienced instances of othering and harassment. Unfortunately, this seems to be part of a realistic portrayal. On a positive note, many characters received support, love, and acceptance from their families, and encountered instances of inclusion. Considering that these novels have an educational claim, such portrayals demonstrate how harassment and bullying are wrong but can also be overcome. However, we cannot simply escape society's pressure to be 'normal' and there are institutionalised as well as social instances that (re-) enforce normality. Labels, especially, are quick to produce normative realities, usually at the cost of free choice. Therefore, whenever a person is labelled deviant, their behaviour will subsequently be perceived as deviant, as well. Although labels may be anchored in space and time, they can easily lead to ostracization as well as fundamentally change the individual's self-understanding. The interplay of normality and deviance is also portrayed in literature, including situations in which the deviance of a character is (re-) negotiated. Here, literature can engage in protonormality and flexible normalism, either reinforcing norms or advocating for acceptance. Young adult fiction in particular focuses on the subject in relation to normality and deviance and thus offers application templates for its readers. I will explore the implications of this for autism narratives in the next chapter.

Identification and Representation

Autism narratives serve several important functions, such as representing and educating on autism, as well as serving as models for identification. The impact of autism portrayals in literature, and by extension other media, should not be neglected, especially since such narratives participate in spreading knowledge, stereotypes, and prejudices. Naturally, they also negotiate normality and deviance.

Young Adult Fiction and Normality

In 1985, Dan McAdams proposed his life story model of identity, arguing that "identity itself takes the form of a story, complete with setting, scenes, character, plot, and theme" (McAdams 101). In other words, identity can be considered an evolving narrative. Therefore, if the deviance of an individual is established through negotiation and subsequent labelling, this individual is forced to adapt their life story in order to integrate their deviance. On the other hand, McAdams's life story model suggests closeness to other narratives; if our identities are constructed as stories, we may align them with other stories. Link explored this possibility with regard to normality and normativity, i.e. how literary models serve as guidelines for 'being normal'.

Erik Erikson theorised that in late adolescence and young adulthood, individuals are confronted with

> the problem of identity versus role confusion. It is at this time in the human life course that people first explore ideological and occupational options available in society and experiment with a wide range of social roles, with the aim of eventually consolidating their beliefs and values into a personal ideology and making provisional commitments to life plans and projects that promise to situate them meaningfully into new societal niches … . (McAdams 101–02)

Identity is meant to provide 'unity and purpose' to an individual's life and to integrate their self-understanding synchronically and diachronically (McAdams 102, cf. Chapter 4.2). According to Link, throughout life individuals keep ricocheting between normality and deviance, whenever reality and goals come into conflict with each other.

> Two circles, which symbolise the 'real' and 'idealised self', can take up different distances to each other on a horizontal line. A maximum distance, at which there is no longer any intersection, is called 'alienation'; if the circles approach each other and intersect until they largely coincide, 'normality' arises – in between lies 'neurosis'. If we project this schema into time, the result is the logbook of a life's journey, which presents itself as a curve between normality, neurosis and madness/alienation. Such ideas turn the subjects into managers of their growth – they can register deviations towards neurosis as such and take corrective measures (especially therapy) against them. (Link, *Versuch über den Normalismus* 405, own translation)[1]

1 Zwei Kreise, die das 'reale' und 'idealisierte Selbst (self)' symbolisieren, können auf einer horizontalen Linieverschiedene Distanzen zueinander einnehmen. Eine maximale Distanz, bei der es keinerlei Schnittmenge mehr gibt, heißt 'Irrsinn/Entfremdung' ('alienation'), nähern sich die Kreises an und schneiden sich bis zur weitgehenden Deckung, so entsteht 'Normalität' – dazwischen liegt 'Neurose'. Projiziert man dieses Schema in die Zeit, so entsteht daraus ein Fahrtenschreiber der Lebensreise, die sich als Kurve zwischen Normalität, Neurose und Irrsinn/Entfremdung darstellt. Die Subjekte werden durch solche Vorstellungen zu Managern ihres growth gemacht – sie können Abweichungen in Richtung Neurose als solche registrieren und adjustierende Maßnahmen (besonders Therapie) dagegen ergreifen. (Link, *Versuch über den Normalismus* 405)

I understand McAdam's theory of identity as a sufficient overlap of the ideal and real self, whereby the ideal self is derived from the idea of normality. Here, Link suggests authority over one's own degree of normality or deviance, implying that individuals strive to be normal or wilfully choose deviance. Keckeisen, on the other hand, links deviance to power or lack thereof, even hinting at arbitrariness. Possibly, both instances occur; individuals are to a certain degree able to navigate their selves in regard to normality or deviance, and once they integrate their decisions into their life story, they become their identity.[2] However, if their deviance is negotiated for them, they may be forced to adapt their identity to integrate this alleged/outwardly perceived part of their selves. For example, a patient at a psychiatric facility who considers themselves completely normal is still forced to accept the label and its consequences (e.g. being locked up). Unless they accept their deviance and consequently transform their ideal self, they will suffer from alienation. In other words, if our real selves are labelled deviant, we generally have to adapt our ideal selves in order to meaningfully integrate our self-understanding.

Obviously, Link assumes that individuals will naturally strive towards being normal. Consequently, he theorises the existence of templates for 'normal' lives: "There is the underlying idea of a normal life curve whose direction, speed and energy must be managed" (Link, *Versuch über den Normalismus* 405, own translation).[3] Such live curves can be considered idealised stencils, according to which we align our own. Eventually, "the field of personality psychology began to look beyond the vicissitudes of the single, narrowly defined trait to explore broader issues of central concern for human lives" (McAdams 100).

2 Again, identity is the dia- and synchronic integration of self-understanding into a psychological niche, thus providing unity and meaning (see also Chapter 4.3).

3 Überall liegt die Vorstellung einer Normal-Lebenskurve zugrunde, deren Richtung, Tempo und Energie zu managen sind. (Link, *Versuch über den Normalismus* 405)

> As personality psychologists began to turn their attention to people's lives, they found notions such as 'story' and 'narrative' to be especially useful in conveying the coherence and the meaning of lives. (McAdams 100)

One may easily conceptualise Link's 'live curves' as narratives; coherent stories that align events and decisions to form identities. Equally, a subject's own life story may be more or less congruent with these ideal templates. Link suggests:

> Art and literature provide … 'application templates', i.e. discursive complexes that can be selectively assimilated by subjects (e.g. through positive or negative identification …). (Link, *Versuch über den Normalismus* 41, own translation)[4]

At any time, a subject can thus check their lives against fictional ones that portray (idealised) normality or deviance. In reality, the fact that we have all been institutionalised by society and its norms will naturally affect our idealised selves, thus reinforcing normalities. However, life stories are a process and may be re-adjusted if significant changes occur. Late adolescence or young adulthood is an especially difficult phase to identify and align one's life story and goals. According to McAdams, only in adolescence or young adulthood will individuals develop an identity in the form of a life story as they re-align their selves towards goals and in accordance or discordance with social norms and rules. At this stage,

> identity becomes a problem when the adolescent or young adult first realizes that he or she is, has been, or could be many different (and conflicting) things and experiences a strong desire, encouraged by society, to be but one (large, integrated, and dynamic) thing. (McAdams 102)

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4 Kunst und Literatur stellen … 'Applikations-Vorlagen' parat, d.h. diskursive Komplexe, die von Subjekten (z.B. durch positive oder negative Identifikation …) selektiv assimiliert werden können. (Link, *Versuch über den Normalismus* 41)

While the intermediary discourse may be concerned with normalities and 'normal' life curves, literature conjoins life curves with life stories, due to its story-telling nature. Here, individuals have a plethora of life curves to choose from, which reflect society's understanding of normality and deviance (Link, *Versuch über den Normalismus* 408). However, literature also has the power to renegotiate templates offered by society and its different aspects of normality by questioning rules and authorities.

Young adult fiction in particular tends to be conflict-oriented (Weinkauff and Glasenapp 84), with current texts thematising "excerpts of adolescence in situations of 'confrontation of the protagonist with society and its rites'" (Preusser 99, own translation).[5] Traditionally, the environment was considered 'completely normal' whereas the protagonist bore the potential for conflict, which was eventually solved by the protagonist aligning themselves with society. Historically, young adult fiction thus played an important role in socialisation, or, indeed, indoctrination, by steering the individual towards a normative life curve. However, the diversity of topics has since lessened the 'indoctrinating' aspect; there is no canonical set of values and knowledge in a pluralised society. Some even argue that young adult fiction nowadays offers too many life curves to be recognised as an important resource for socialisation (Weinkauff and Glasenapp 223). On the other hand, society is now more pluralised and diversified than ever before. While this makes it harder for adolescents and young adults to build their identity, I do not believe that young adult fiction, in all its medial forms, plays no role in socialisation anymore, just that it is less directed.

> If one considers that the adolescent individual moves in a field of tension between conformist and non-conformist behaviour, which he or she repeatedly reflects on as such, the question of the concepts of normality constructed in youth literary texts becomes virulent: Is social

5 Aktuelle jugendliterarische Texte … thematisieren stets Ausschnitte des Heranwachsens in Situationen der 'Konfrontation des Protagonisten mit der Gesellschaft und ihren Riten'. (Preusser 99)

> tolerance – if not recognition – of one's own person even worth striving for? In which spectrums of normality do the protagonists locate themselves? Which appearance, which behaviour, which way of life corresponds to social expectations of normality and to what extent? And finally: What understanding of normality does a text reveal by positioning itself in relation to the previous questions and what 'specific normalistic form(s) of representation' are used? (Preusser 99, own translation)[6]

In Chapter 3.3 I elaborated on dynamic characters and the criteria which I applied to determine whether a character has undergone change. The criteria could essentially be reduced to the idea that the impact of stereotypes was lessened. This, then, could potentially be read as my underlying wish that autism portrayals should be aimed towards (learned) conformist behaviour as the solution. Additionally, most criteria I identified in relation to the stereotypes are disparaging and ostracising, which could again be read in terms of normality and deviance. In my analysis regarding dynamism, I merely considered the most prominent stereotype for each character, i.e. the most defining conflict. With the exception of *The State of Grace*[7], these were either the stereotype 'Childlike' or the stereotype 'Robot'. Since young adult fiction in particular is concerned

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6 Berücksichtigt man, dass sich das heranwachsende Individuum insofern in einem Spannungsfeld von angepasstem und unangepasstem Verhalten bewegt, das es selbst immer wieder als solches reflektiert, wird die Frage nach in jugendliterarischen Texten konstruierten Normalitätskonzepten virulent: Ist die gesellschaftliche Toleranz – wenn nicht sogar Anerkennung – der eigenen Person überhaupt erstrebenswert? In welchen Spektren von Normalität verorten sich die Protagonisten selbst? Welches Aussehen, welches Verhalten, welche Lebensweise entspricht inwiefern gesellschaftlichen Normalitätsvorstellungen? Und schließlich: Welches diesbezügliche Normalitätsverständnis legt ein Text mit der Positionierung zu den vorangegangenen Fragen offen und welche 'spezifisch normalitische(n) Formen der Darstellung' finden dabei Anwendung? (Preusser 99)

7 This novel explicitly toys with the alien trope but is aimed towards awareness and acceptance. Here, Grace can be considered dynamic because she can make her peace with being different, not because she becomes 'normal'.

with coming-of-age and the threshold of adulthood, these portrayals do not differ much from those portraying neurotypical individuals, except perhaps that the protagonist is met with different challenges that stem from their autism. Secondly, whenever character portrayals were dominated by the stereotype 'Robot', they mostly struggled with communication. Therefore, their growth stemmed from reducing the communication barrier, thus reducing prejudices and fostering awareness within their own community. Instead of reinforcing ideas of normality, such portrayals renegotiate deviance by lessening stereotypes.

Indeed, "YA fiction is … a fundamentally didactic genre" (Donner), which likely facilitated diversity and inclusive portrayals, thus serving representative and educational functions. Among other aspects, literature helps

> in the taking of the other's perspectives. It helps groups to counter prejudices and stereotypes, and to come to some understanding of the experiences, needs, and concerns of differently situated groups. (Dahlberg 118)

Consequently, literature not only offers templates for 'normal lives' that an individual can use to rebalance their own, but it also fosters understanding for others. Here, literature is a form of representing minorities; it is the opposite of an idealised normality, yet simultaneously normalising otherness. Autism narratives aimed at young adults thus serve two main purposes: they represent a minority and are intended to foster awareness and understanding, but they also supply autists with life curves that could serve as application templates. Unsurprisingly, this led to a debate over how such characters should be portrayed in order to educate others and also serve as identification models for autists in real life.

'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

> [n]ovelists study autobiographies, whose authors learn from theorists. Parents pick up ideas from novels when they are thinking about their children. We all watch movies and documentaries. …
> The story-tellers learn from autobiographies how to tell their tales. But … [t]oday's autistic child, brought up on children's stories about autistic children, and who in later years goes on to write an autobiography, will give accounts that are textured by the early exposure to role models. (Hacking, "Autistic autobiography" 1467, 1469)

On one hand, there is an overarching discourse that subsumes all other discourses on autism, not only unified by terminology (labels) but, according to Hacking, shared ideas that are purported across different discourses. On the other hand, I believe, different agents can be identified behind some of the statements, such as medical professionals and autism activists. Here, it might be argued that these experts form their own discourses that feed into the general discourse on autism. Moreover, at least two of these specialised discourses are fighting to influence the public opinion, as I will show below. Fiction, on the other hand, reflects statements made by the intermediary discourse. Unless a novel was published with propagandistic intents, I can thus assume it reflects ideas of the intermediary discourse, which discusses and combines specialised normalities. In other words, I consider novels to be somewhat reflective of society's current understanding of autism and public opinions.

However, on the downside, the media discourse can easily amplify misconceptions. Any portrayal influences the public perception of autism, creating a hermeneutic circle which is constantly updated by new portrayals. Misinformation can be introduced as easily as knowledge and a layperson may not have the means of distinguishing them since their conception of autism is not based upon or updated by knowledge stemming from the scientific discourse or the autism community. Instead, a large part of laypeople solely relies on acquired stereotypes for information on autism. For one thing, this is because the public discourse does not engage in the question of autism diagnosis. It is not concerned with the details of what autism is or how to diagnose it, but

how to simplify the concept. However, while labels have the power to invoke stereotypes, the public also has the power to apply labels, thus attaching new meanings and consequently also stereotypes. Retrospectively labelled characters are thus aligned with intentional portrayals, suggesting a certain family resemblance which will change the working concept. Consequently, the public yields at least some power over the label autism and its stereotypes, if only by sheer number. However, one must not assume ill intentions, for they often also remain without the means of recognising their conceptions as stereotypical and possibly prejudiced.

To better understand the autism discourse, I will assume two opposite parties. One goes back to the medical roots of autism diagnosis; this one I dubbed the 'conservative movement'. It is opposed by the autism rights movement which famously found its beginning with Jim Sinclair and stands for self-advocacy and empowerment. This I will call the 'activist movement'. In parts, it has recently merged with disability studies into the neurodiversity movement, which originated in the late 1990s and suggests that "minority modes of neurocognitive functioning … are disabled by a hegemonic 'neuro-typical' (i.e. 'normal') society" (Chapman 371). It is most prominent online, i.e. in social networks, where it simultaneously fosters pride in neurodivergent individuals, sometimes also referred to as neuroqueer, while also rejecting "the idea that there is neuro-normality" (Hacking, "Humans, Aliens & Autism" 46). The neurodiversity movement is well embedded, drawing from and participating in

> a wide range of political modalities, including grassroots mobilization, human and children's rights activism, self-advocacy, promotion for system change targeted at service and government bureaucracies, and nonviolent political action. (Bumiller 981)

It partially overlaps with autism activism, but originally also embraced ADHD, and dyslexia, and has since grown to foster awareness for FAS, tic disorders, Tourette, and mental health, just to name a few. The general idea that some 'disorders' are in fact merely differences in the way

the brain works certainly borrows from the field of disability studies. It reframes 'deficits' as divergences and sometimes even as assets. Neurodiversity is often opposed to neurotypicality. The term 'neurotypical' is commonly used to contrast a non-autistic person with an autist. I too have used it in my study, however, it is neither limited to the meaning of 'non-autistic', nor actually in agreement with the idea of neurodiversity, since it suggests that there is a 'default' mode of thinking. Yet, 'neurotypical' is also a term used by advocates and activists of the neurodiversity movement. Thus, I hope it takes of the ableist edge of contrasting 'autistic' with 'neurotypical' individuals.

I have contrasted the conservative movement within the autism discourse with the activist rather than the neurodiversity movement. This is in part because the neurodiversity movement only overlaps with autism activism, but it is also because I fear that the impact of the neurodiversity movement could at times be misrepresented within scientific papers. Not only have researchers caught on to the term 'neurodivergence', but it is also at times presented as a buzzword. However, the hashtags 'autistic' or 'autism', alone or in combination with positive addendums such as 'pride', 'awareness', 'acceptance', etc., have been added to significantly more posts or videos on platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, or TikTok than the hashtags 'neurodiversity' or 'neurodivergent'. I therefore suggest that the idea of neurodiversity could be considered a generalised abstraction, perhaps similar to the idea of 'queerness', but that individual labels such as autism, Asperger's, or ADHD are of much more significance when it comes to representation and identification. In other words, the neurodiversity movement might manifest itself in an increased awareness and acceptance of individual labels without actually being named as such.

What I describe as the 'activist movement' within the autism discourse has produced "something akin to autism pride" (Hacking, "Humans, Aliens & Autism" 46). Here, activists are fighting for acceptance, against the label of 'disability' or 'disease', and against a cure. Although one should bear in mind that such labels as 'activist movement' hide the facetious appearance of this community, I believe, it is adequate for the issue at hand.

The conservative movement, on the other hand, has its roots in the medical origin of autism. Instead of placing autism on a neurodiverse spectrum, this movement stands for the dichotomy of disease and cure. Thus, it not only defines autism as a disorder but also promotes finding a cure. Again, not everybody who participates in the autism discourse necessarily belongs to one movement or the other. Consequently, one should not place all 'activists' within the activist movement, nor all psychologists, doctors, etc. within the conservative movement. However, the conflict between these two movements is not solely grounded in the debate around cure or anti-cure. Referring to Hacking's essay "Autistic Autobiographies", he at one point quotes Alison Singer, mother of an autistic daughter, who advocates for finding a cure:

> Many days it is hard to believe that the challenges Haley faces with regard to her Asperger syndrome and those Jodie struggles with are related under the same DSM-IV diagnosis. At one end of the autism spectrum, we often find lower functioning persons like my daughter who cannot speak, have violent tantrums and can be self injurious, while at the other end we have persons who struggle with very significant, but very different, predominantly social issues. (Singer, no date, qtd. in Hacking, "Autistic autobiography" 1468)

This, of course, clashes fundamentally with "a growing wing of the autistic community that rejects the idea of looking for a cure" (Hacking, "Autistic autobiography" 1468). However, as Singer mentions, the conflict also arises from the fact that 'autism' has become an umbrella term for different diagnoses, a change not all within the community were happy with, either (see Chapter 6.3). Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a label applied to 'low-functioning' autists, as well as 'high-functioning' individuals. The rift mostly refers to intellectual abilities but also the manifestation of symptoms in general, which tends to be more severe in 'low-functioning' individuals. Severely autistic individuals can be very limited in their ability to participate in society. Therefore, stereotypically high or low expectations can be equally harmful.

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.'

> For some reason we both stop and sit down on one of the benches that look across at the big wooden climbing frame in the gardens by the lake. … There's one [child] banging a huge stick down on the roof of the lookout shelter, and I realize that the parents below are yelling at him to get down.
> 'There you go. That's the sort of thing I used to do. Only sort of louder and bigger and messier. And pretty much every day. Like someone had forgotten to turn on my *dangerous stuff* filter.' (*State of Grace*, 132–133, original highlighting)

At the beginning of the dialogue, Gabe hesitates to tell Grace about his diagnosis, likely because he is used to hiding it as well as fearing a social status loss. He then describes his symptoms, placing them on a gamut ('best case' – 'worst'), from being 'spaced out' and 'crap at paying attention' to putting himself at risk by being reckless. Interestingly, Gabe does not so much describe his own feelings and emotions but how others would perceive him, i.e. being inattentive or loud and messy. Quite likely, he has adopted the words others have used to describe him, i.e. he has adopted the others' point of view and made it normative. The pills allow him to manage both his ADHD and his stigma.

> 'I spent a lot of school sitting outside the head's office.' Gabe shifts sideways so he's facing me more. He picks up the string of his hoody and pulls out the threads, untangling them, his mouth twisting sideways in thought.
> 'When they finally worked out I had ADHD and I wasn't actually as much trouble as they thought, Mum and Dad decided it would be better if I moved schools and started all over again.'
> 'Because you had a reputation for being tricky?'
> Gabe laughs. 'Tricky. I like that.' (*State of Grace*, 133)

As the conversation continues, it becomes clear that Gabe had previously been stigmatised as a 'troublemaker' and changed his stigma to ADHD when he was diagnosed. Such a change of labels as well as the consequent change in stigma can have opposing effects. For example, pleading insanity is sometimes used to defend criminal behaviour, and if successful

will result in the stigma of 'insanity' trumping the stigma of 'criminal'. In this case, Gabe's stigma 'improved', if one were to grasp it in terms like that. He is no longer considered a 'troublemaker' but his difficulties are now – at least in parts – attributed to his ADHD. The change coincides with Gabe moving schools to start afresh, i.e. leaving his previous stigma behind, which he did successfully since he is now popular (cf. *State of Grace* 67, 71, 138f.). Arguably, a stigma in the form of a medical diagnosis may be easier to manage since it usually involves higher social acceptance, lower culpability, and possible treatment as opposed to 'mere' (and potentially wilful) deviance. Here, the first two are intertwined, since the diagnosis makes Gabe less liable for his actions, thus attributing his behaviour to his neurodiversity and not ill intent. He also describes his neurodiversity as 'someone had forgotten to turn on my dangerous stuff filter', his words suggesting something went wrong in his 'configuration', for which he is ultimately not to blame. Only upon receiving a diagnosis, Gabe internalised his stigma (previously he referred to it as external; 'they thought'), but he is still aware of social repercussions and opts for managing the stigma via medication. He again hesitates to tell his story, instead fumbling with his sweater. Here, his hesitation could also be an indication of how he manages his stigma, in this case deciding how to frame his narrative so that he will not suffer a potential loss in status. When Grace calls his stigma 'tricky', he is relieved, because it is a harmless way of paraphrasing it.

The two continue their conversation and it is now Grace's turn to reveal her diagnosis.

> 'Me too.'
> I'm surprised I say it. It sort of falls out of my mouth. Gabe raises an eyebrow in question.
> 'Except autism, not ADHD. I was the weird kid in primary school.' I pull a face and I feel my face prickle with heat but I don't stop talking. 'I mean, weirder.'
> 'I like weird,' says Gabe … .
> 'Lucky. Anyway, now I'm older I don't take rucksacks full of fossils on school trips to London, or lie on the floor in H&M hooting. Or have

> meltdowns in the classroom.' I think about the moment when they handed me the time-out card so I could escape before the feelings began to boil over inside me. 'Well, not much, anyway.'
> And for some reason this makes us both giggle and we start laughing at the idea of it and then Gabe does a sort of honking noise.
> 'Like that?'
> I do a sort of whoop.
> 'More like that, I think.'
> 'Hoooot,' says Gabe.
> 'HOOOOT,' I say back, and an old man passes by and shakes his head at us. (*State of Grace* 133–134)

Grace is not used to openly admitting to her diagnosis ('I'm surprised I say it') and she is unsure what Gabe's reaction will be, fearing a potential face loss, as well as feeling embarrassed ('I feel my face prickle with heat'). However, in this section, both characters are united in the fact that they were outsiders in primary school, which, since nobody else is around, allows them to form a group and thus bond over their experiences. Although the old man shakes his head at them making hooting sounds, in this situation they are (for once) not in the minority and thus do not have to fear any repercussions. Instead, Grace's earlier missteps have become an inside joke.

Grace also admits to still being 'weird', i.e. still being deviant, although less so than in primary school. Upon looking back, she now classifies her previous behaviour as unusual and has since moved on, indicating progress she made when it comes to complying with social norms and aligning herself with them. However, even though her diagnosis may not be open knowledge (cf. *State of Grace* 34f.), she is not able to camouflage or mask her stigma as well as Gabe does, who only had to admit to it when he had to go home to take his medication. Thus, I may state that Grace is more limited by her autism than Gabe is by his ADHD diagnosis. Yet Grace, too, has opted to keep her diagnosis confidential, presumably because she expects a greater status loss than any possible gain from revealing it. Additionally, because she is working towards 'being normal', revealing her diagnosis would likely label her as

deviant, for at least the rest of school. Thus, even though camouflaging and hiding her autism is taking a toll on her mental health, as well as leaving her with the constant fear of not being 'normal enough', Grace keeps working towards fitting in. However, openly talking about her autism allows her to relay some of her thoughts and experiences, foster understanding, and ultimately defy stereotypes.

> 'So apart from the hooting situation,' Gabe says, swinging my hand, 'what's it actually like?'
> And I think for a moment, because people don't actually ask that very often. They tell me what they think I feel because they've read it in books, or they say incredible things like 'autistic people have no sense of humour or imagination or empathy' when I'm standing right there beside them (and one day I'm going to point out that that is more than a little bit rude, not to mention Not Even True) or they – even worse – talk to me like I'm about five, and can't understand.
> 'It's like living with all your senses turned up to full volume all the time,' I say. … 'And it's like living life in a different language, so you can't ever quite relax because even when you think you're fluent it's still using a different part of your brain so by the end of the day you're exhausted.' (*State of Grace* 134–135)

Grace's experiences reflect how her own life is dominated by autism narratives that can very well be traced back to what Duffy and Dorner called the 'Pathos of Mindblindness'. Grace acknowledges the assumed lack of Theory of Mind and consequently her alleged absence of humour, imagination, or empathy. The fact that these topics are discussed in her presence, or alternatively her being addressed like a child, signifies that other people assume her to be either mentally impaired or void of any emotion that could be hurt by their slander. It certainly refers directly to the stereotypes 'Child' and 'Robot'.

Curiously, even though Grace is verbal and able to express herself, other people seem to rely more on books – written by non-autistic persons – instead of asking her. Granted, Grace too has likely acquired her understanding of autism from the multitude of narratives the discourses provide, however, her experience clearly differs from the assumptions

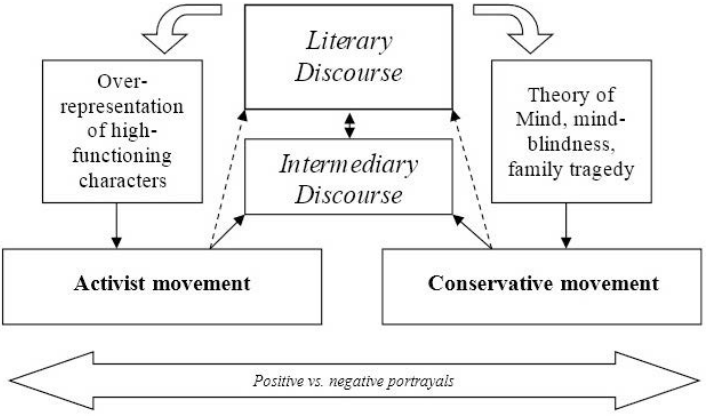
others make about her. She even mentions a place called 'Jigsaw Centre' she had to visit "before Mum realized that place was hellish, and that forcing me to go there was causing everyone more stress than anything else" (*State of Grace* 109). Here, 'jigsaw' is a nod toward the puzzle piece symbol that is used by the *Autism Speaks* organisation and thus the conservative movement. It is regarded as outdated by autism activists as it also stands for conversion or behaviour therapy (see Chapter 6.4). In a twist, then, Rachael Lucas incorporates two narratives ('mind-blindness' vs. neurodiversity), as well as the critique that too many assumptions are made, which result in stereotypes that are linked to a label. By giving Grace a voice, the novel allows for a self-advocating and -empowering perspective that is contrasted with the powerful 'mind-blindness'-theories as well as ideas of the conservative movement. However, as she herself reports, 'people don't actually ask that very often', implicating how her life is dominated by the narratives spun by medical discourses. Even though reframing her autism diagnosis allows Grace to renegotiate her stigma, she is ultimately trapped within the autism discourse and its narratives, walking a thin line between embracing and fighting the label.

I have, I believe, identified two important influences on the intermediary discourse and literary portrayals. On one hand, there is the activist movement seeking to normalise autism in accordance with disability studies, as well as trying to increase acceptance, tolerance, and awareness for autists. This movement opposes the idea of a cure for autism. Because it is strongly supported by the fact that 'high-functioning'[14] characters are overrepresented in literature, thus portraying autism as a quirky but harmless character trait, I can state that the activist movement dominates current fictional portrayals of autism. On the other hand, the conservative movement has a less favourable view of autism. Here, autistic children are presented as 'non-human' and the cause of family tragedies, thus this movement advocates for finding a cure. It also perpetuates the

14 I am acknowledging the use of 'high-functioning' in the context of mental health, where it indicates individuals are capable of completely hiding their diagnosis to others.

idea of a deficient Theory of Mind and mind-blindness in autists. Although ToM could be considered a neutral model medical experts use to conceptualise certain difficulties, it is often seen as disabling and limiting by activists. Unfortunately, one of the most widely known autism narratives is *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*, which perpetuates negative stereotypes and presents the protagonist as the cause of the tragic family history.

Figure 1: Two autism narratives influence the intermediary and the literary discourse, own graph



Source: own work.

I am assuming that both movements seek to influence the public opinion on autism by feeding their narratives into the intermediary discourse. This discourse will process the information, potentially resulting in public opinions, as well as influencing the literary discourse. Interestingly, it was found that "lay audiences seem to prefer fiction by a non-autistic over the non-fiction by an autistic" (Draaisma 1480). This could be because laypeople rely on public stereotypes which are perpetuated within the intermediary and the literary discourse. Consequently, liter-

ary portrayals share a family resemblance. However, I suggest that both movements also feed directly into the literary discourse. These works would be considered written by experts, be it medical professionals, autistic self-advocates, or personal accounts of parents, etc.

Figure 1 is a visualisation of how the two movements affect the intermediary and literary discourse.

The arrows indicate how the *activist movement* seeks to normalise and humanise autism. It advocates for embracing autism as part of one's identity and opposes finding a cure. Meanwhile, the *conservative movement* lobbies for finding a cure. Their narrative can be traced back to Kanner's research and is thus historically linked to the medical discourse. Both narratives influence the *intermediary discourse*, where the public seeks to integrate different oncoming knowledge on autism, as well as the *literary discourse* through works published by 'experts'. Both movements are technically discourses in their own right, but they are also both part of the general autism discourse and they both feed into the intermediary and the literary discourse. Here, I am under the impression that two narratives co-exist. One is that of the high-functioning individual as it is often represented in the media, i.e. in novels, movies, or TV series. It is overly positive and thus unrealistic. On the other hand, there are the narratives that make autists into tragic beings. These are overly negative and paint a very dark picture. Such accounts might sometimes be conceptualised as 'realistic' in contrast to fictional portrayals because they are generated by parents or caregivers. Additionally, 'high-functioning' verbal individuals will campaign for their cause and against discrimination and harassment. There is also a growing number that reject therapies or treatments for autism. However, most severely autistic individuals will never become activists in their own rights, nor will they voice their experiences and thoughts. These autists are spoken for by others, like Alison Singer, who advocate for a cure. Individuals at the 'high-functioning' end are offended by such claims, but might at times gloss over the fact that some autists are severely affected. Vice versa, those advocating for a cure are unwilling to accept that autists might not actually perceive themselves as disabled or deficient. I believe these are two fundamentally different conceptions of

autism which cannot be easily reconciled. At their extreme ends, both sides are unwilling to acknowledge the larger picture. However, the fact that autism was reconceptualised as a spectrum has fuelled this discussion – or perhaps even enabled it in the first place – because now both sides are fighting over the same label, while arguably not referencing the same individuals.

Again, I am making generalisations about the discourse(s) to demonstrate two contrasting movements. The curse-or-blessing dichotomy might not be as strong as I make it out to be. However, I do believe that there are two parallel running narratives that at some point will have to be meaningfully reintegrated within the intermediary discourse. Here, literature, and young adult fiction in particular, has the potential to foster awareness, educate on autism, and create means of identification, while also imagining (new) ways in which autistic individuals can be integrated into society, thus reducing the stigma. At the moment, autism portrayals in young adult fiction are overly positive but they lack diversity to serve as adequate application templates. These narratives lean towards making autists into heroes capable of saving the world. Ideally, autism portrayals would represent low- and high-functioning individuals in different settings to create awareness on both sides. However, whenever autists do not appear capable of speaking for themselves, others will narrate their story for them, which often results in a rhetoric of sadness. Such figures are either considered too boring to be featured in novels, or they are steeped deeply in tragedy, thus no positive life can be imagined for them or their families unless they are cured.[15] Consequently, both sides fight over what compels an 'accurate' portrayal. This was further intensified by the medical discourse merging different diagnoses under the label *Autism Spectrum Disorder*, thus essentially contrasting different understandings of autism.

15 Or killed, see also stereotype 'Disabled' in Chapter 3.3.

The Medical Discourse of Autism

Even though some autism activists, the neurodiversity movement, and the field of disability studies seek to deconstruct the medical scaffolding of autism, it is first and foremostly considered a medical condition. Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is characterised as a mental disorder with underlying physical, cognitive, and environmental causes. Although some self-advocates might disagree, research is still in large part focused on understanding the causes of autism and has not abandoned the idea of finding a cure. Here, one might argue that it is but the modus operandi of the medical discourse, which tends to frame conditions in terms of normal or deviant. Treatment or cure thus represents the urge to make these individuals as 'normal' as possible, e.g. through behavioural therapy. I am not concerned with the underlying causes because they are not relevant to the analysis of literary portrayals. As of now, however, there are no "definitive physiological or neurological markers" (Duffy and Dorner 210), although research favours congenital over environmental factors.

Diagnostic Criteria and Symptoms

What could be considered the official definition of autism is given by the ICD or the DSM. The ICD is the internationally acknowledged classification system for diseases and partly serves as an encoding tool in medical systems, e.g. communication between doctors. It may also be used for diagnostics (DGKJP 18) and is complemented by diagnostic

tools such as ADI-R, ADOS or ADOS-2[1]. Additionally, the APA (American Psychiatric Association) publishes the DSM (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders) which focuses on mental disorders only. All studies used in this paper referenced the APA and DSM, thus I conclude that within the medical specialised discourse, the DSM is of particular relevance. It was also the first classification system to merge different (autism) diagnoses into ASD (Autism Spectrum Disorder). This diagnosis was already adopted in the *DSM-5* (2013), preceding the *ICD-11* (2022) by nearly a decade. However, when the *DSM-5* was first published, it received considerable criticism for various reasons, such as the medicalisation of human conditions, a flawed revision process, as well as financial conflicts of interest for panel members (Wakefield; Cooper; Cosgrove and Krimsky). Although not the topic of this study, it demonstrates how diagnostic criteria are part of discourses and therefore caught up in power structures, too.

There are only subtle differences when it comes to the definitions of Autism Spectrum Disorder in the *ICD-11* and the *DSM-5*. For example, the latter differentiates contexts only in connection with social interaction and communication, while the *ICD-11* refers more broadly to deficits in functioning (see Appendix A). However, such differences are negligible for my study. ASD is currently considered the most up-to-date diagnosis, as opposed to earlier differentiations. The German directive on autism diagnosis states:

> New studies that have dealt with the question of dimensionality or categoricality have recently shown that although it is possible to differentiate between autism spectrum disorders and non-autistic disorders in the sense of a categorical differentiation, it is not possible to differentiate between different subgroups within the autistic spectrum. (DGKJP 18, own translation)[2]

1 ADI-R=Autism Diagnostic Interview Revised, ADOS=Autism Diagnostic Observation Schedule

2 Neue Arbeiten, die sich mit der Frage nach Dimensionalität oder Kategorialität beschäftigt haben, konnten zuletzt zeigen, dass zwar eine Differenzierung zwischen Autismus-Spektrum-Störungen und nicht-autistischen Störungen im

I will pointedly state that the medical discourse with its desire to categorise and define probably benefitted the most from merging autism onto a spectrum. Diagnostic criteria as featured in the *DSM-5* now include the whole spectrum of characteristics that may present; hence they are organised as a modular system according to three main aspects, i.e. social interaction, social communication, and restricted, repetitive behaviour, interests, and activities (RRBIAs). Onset is stated as 'early childhood', and the diagnostic criteria include everyday life impairment that may vary according to context. Here the spectrum goes from 'no disorder of intellectual development and no impairment of language' (*ICD-11* 6A02.0) to 'disorder of intellectual development and absence of functional language' (*ICD-11* 6A02.5), more commonly known as high-functioning and low-functioning respectively. Criteria may be specified according to severity (Level 3 'Requiring very substantial support', Level 2 'Requiring substantial support', and Level 1 'Requiring support'). It should be noted that symptomatology might fall below level 1, "with the recognition that severity may vary by context and fluctuate over time" (American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* 51–52, see also Chapter 6.4).

Diagnostic criteria of Autism Spectrum Disorder as defined in the *DSM-5*:

> A. Persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction across multiple contexts, as manifested by the following, currently or by history …:
> 1. Deficits in social-emotional reciprocity, ranging, for example, from abnormal social approach and failure of normal back-and-forth conversation; to reduced sharing of interests, emotions, or affect; to failure to initiate or respond to social interactions.
> 2. Deficits in nonverbal communicative behaviors used for social interaction, ranging, for example, from poorly integrated verbal and nonverbal communication; to abnormalities in eye contact and body

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Sinne einer kategorialen Differenzierung möglich ist, dass aber innerhalb des autistischen Spektrums die Unterscheidung verschiedener Subgruppen nicht möglich ist. (DGKJP 18)

language or deficits in understanding and use of gestures; to a total lack of facial expressions and nonverbal communication.
3. Deficits in developing, maintaining, and understanding relationships, ranging, for example, from difficulties adjusting behavior to suit various social contexts; to difficulties in sharing imaginative play or in making friends; to absence of interest in peers. …
B. Restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, or activities, as manifested by at least two of the following, currently or by history … :
1. Stereotyped or repetitive motor movements, use of objects, or speech (e.g., simple motor stereotypies, lining up toys or flipping objects, echolalia, idiosyncratic phrases).
2. Insistence on sameness, inflexible adherence to routines, or ritualized patterns of verbal or nonverbal behavior (e.g., extreme distress at small changes, difficulties with transitions, rigid thinking patterns, greeting rituals, need to take same route or eat same food every day).
3. Highly restricted, fixated interests that are abnormal in intensity or focus (e.g.,strong attachment to or preoccupation with unusual objects, excessively circumscribed or perseverative interests).
4. Hyper- or hyporeactivity to sensory input or unusual interest in sensory aspects of the environment (e.g., apparent indifference to pain/temperature, adverse response to specific sounds or textures, excessive smelling or touching of objects, visual fascination with lights or movement). …
C. Symptoms must be present in the early developmental period (but may not become fully manifest until social demands exceed limited capacities, or may be masked be learned strategies in later life).
D. Symptoms cause clinically significant impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of current functioning.
E. These disturbances are not better explained by intellectual disability (intellectual developmental disorder) or global developmental delay. Intellectual disability and autism spectrum disorder frequently co-occur; to make comorbid diagnoses of autism spectrum disorder and intellectual disability, social communication should be below that expected for general developmental level.
Note: Individuals with a well-established DSM-IV diagnosis of autistic disorder, Asperger's disorder, or pervasive developmental disorder not otherwise specified should be given the diagnosis of autism

> spectrum disorder. Individuals who have marked deficits in social communication, but whose symptoms do not otherwise meet criteria for autism spectrum disorder, should be evaluated for social (pragmatic) communication disorder. (APA, DSM-5 50–51, see Appendix B for examples, original enumeration)

It can thus be said that the diagnosis ASD is at the overlap of 'deficits in social communication and interaction' and 'restricted, repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests, and activities'. Difficulties in diagnosing ASD may arise from the fact that both criteria could indicate a plethora of other conditions in children, including ADHD, Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, epilepsy, obsessive-compulsive behaviour, global developmental delay, or intellectual disabilities ((Kamp-Becker et al. 463). Because symptoms tend to present differently over time, differential diagnoses for ASD in adulthood include – amongst others – depression, PTSD, schizophrenia, and personality disorders (463). Indeed, "70% of individuals with autism spectrum disorder may have one comorbid mental disorder" (APA, *DSM-5* 58). All this taken together, it becomes clear how many different manifestations of autism are subsumed under the same label, further underlining how stereotypes cannot possibly do this diversity justice. Even socio-economic factors will play into the diagnosis (57).

I will nevertheless briefly comment on the stereotypes I identified and some obvious parallels to the diagnostic criteria. In Chapter 3.4, I stated that all characters examined portrayed similar characteristics: a need/love for routine, hyper-attentiveness and/or -sensitivity, and special interests. These clearly relate to 'restricted, repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests, and activities'. Secondly, characters were portrayed as having a barrier when it comes to communicating feelings. They were also very honest and tended to communicate very literally. Here, the parallels become less obvious, although "[m]any individuals have language deficits, ranging from complete lack of speech through language delays, poor comprehension of speech, echoed speech, or stilted and overly literal language" (APA, *DSM-5* 53).

The novels in my analysis only featured instances of (overly) literal language, and a few instances of stilted language and echoed speech (e.g. *London Eye Mystery* 8, 121f). Of all associated language deficits, autism portrayals appear to emphasise literal language and difficulties in understanding figurative language, a narratological feature of autism portrayals to which I will return in Chapter 7. It can thus be argued that the portrayal of honest characters that communicate very literally is a stereotypical representation, which simultaneously excludes non-verbal individuals (or those with other language deficits) and individuals who do not have language deficits at all. However, I neither can nor wish to comment on the representativeness of stereotypes and/or diagnostic criteria for autism. Perhaps, one might cautiously state that the stereotypes identified partially coincide with the diagnostic criteria for ASD, but only for a very specific combination. In other words, although the stereotypes can be understood as part of the spectrum, they do not actually refer to its totality.

In those few studies that analyse autism fiction (e.g. Kelley et. al, van Hart), it seems a common approach to use the DSM diagnostic criteria for estimating 'good' portrayals. As I have stated before, I believe these studies are based on the misconception that symptoms equal accuracy (cf. Chapter 5.2). Yet, autism is not the totality of its symptoms but the plethora of its combinations. The diagnostic criteria might aim at comprehensiveness, but autism portrayals should not, if they claim to be representative. Indeed, the major flaw of autism stereotypes is not that they are 'unrealistic', but that they present only a section of the picture without communicating it as such. Unfortunately, the multifaceted nature of autism thus also creates a loophole for writers to justify artistic liberties and to purport these stereotypes. Indeed, it appears as if autism portrayals are actually representative of the author's concept of autism, to the point where definitions given within the novel are made to fit the characters (or vice versa).

Definitions of Autism in Fiction

If a writer sets out to portray autism in a character, they will – hopefully – value accuracy over artistic leeway. However, by labelling characters as autistic, this condition gets redefined. Thus, labelling characters could simply amount to muddying the water and might cause more harm than good in the long run. I have discussed this conflict at length in Chapter 2.

Intentional portrayals, on the other hand, can be criticised for their realistic representation or lack thereof. Here, it could be argued that autism is but a mimetic component of a character, for it cannot be generalised to fit all. However, all novels I examined, with the exception of *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*, give a definition of autism, thus these characters are not simply mimetic, but their autism makes them thematic, i.e. representative of a certain class, albeit with an educational claim. The protagonist will often either explain their condition to other characters or address the reader directly in the form of a first-person narration. In the following, I wish to point out three aspects of these definitions: the circumstances under which it was given, the medical vocabulary which directly links to the definition given in the *DSM-5*, and the order in which characteristics are mentioned.

Marcelo in the Real World

> 'The primary characteristics of AS, which is what Asperger's syndrome is called for short, occur in the areas of communication and social interaction, and there is usually some kind of pervasive interest. The AS person is different than most people in these areas.' (*Marcelo* 56)

Here, Marcelo explains Asperger's Syndrome to his co-worker, a diagnosis that was merged under the Autism Spectrum Disorder in 2013.[3]

3 The novel was published in 2009, hence they now outdated use of Asperger's Syndrome. However, definitions for Asperger's Syndrome and Autism Spectrum Disorder vary only slightly, thus no further differentiation is needed at this point. For more details, see Chapter 6.3.

Interestingly, Marcelo does not give any specifics on the 'characteristics' other than that they occur in the areas of communication and social interaction. However, his co-worker has previously been told that Marcelo has a 'cognitive disorder' (*Marcelo* 54), thus probably assuming some form of deficits, because she does not ask for clarification. The definition clearly references 'deficits in communication and social interaction' Marcelo also mentions his special interest religion (*Marcelo* 57), which plays an important role in his philosophy of life and his ideas of morale (e.g. *Marcelo* 115f.), ultimately leading to tension and furthering the plot.

What to Say Next

> Yes, I can get myself into trouble in social situations; I like order and routine; when I'm interested in something, I can be hyperfocused to the exclusion of other activities; and, fine, I am clumsy. But when I have to, I can make eye contact. I don't flinch if you touch me. I tend to recognize most idioms, though I keep a running list in my notebook just in case. I like to think I'm empathetic, but I don't know if that's true. (*What to Say Next* 3)

As a first-person narrator, David addresses the reader directly, delivering a monologue on his thoughts on diagnostic criteria. He explicitly refers to the *DSM-5* and reflects on his own strengths and weaknesses in terms of the criteria for Autism Spectrum Disorder. By doing so, David acknowledges that he at last partially fits the criteria 'deficits in communication and social interaction', as well as 'restricted, repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests, or activities'. Additionally, clumsiness is an associated feature that supports diagnosis (APA, *DSM-5* 55). However, while David's awkwardness in social situations certainly shapes his relationship with Kit, his clumsiness is not particularly characteristic. In fact, he uses Krav Maga to fight the school bullies (*What to Say Next* 189). At the same time, he refuses to be categorised in diagnostic terms to avoid certain assumptions or stigmata (autists do not like to be touched, they do not make eye contact, they are incapable of recognising idioms, they are not empathetic). David's portrayal emphasises that autists want and

need meaningful friend- and relationships, even when they are struggling to establish and maintain them ("… of course I get lonely. Just like everyone else", *What to Say Next* 40).

Mockingbird

> **Asperger's syndrome ▹ noun**
> A rare and relatively mild autistic disorder characterized by awkwardness in social interaction, pedantry in speech, and preoccupation with very narrow interests.
> *(Mockingbird* 5, original layout)

Again, this novel was published before 2013. In this case, the story is prefaced by the definition, both priming the reader and educating them. The definition itself focuses on deficits in social interaction and communication, as well as specialised interests, similar to *Marcelo in the Real World*. Pedantry in speech and a coinciding interest in language is a characteristic of Caitlin's portrayal (cf. *Mockingbird* 14, 15, 22, 51, 52…). Despite the definition given in the preface, Caitlin clearly also features 'restricted, repetitive patterns of behaviour and activities', such as Thursday being pizza night (30), or very explicit rules for clothing (101). Moreover, she has internalised many principles (cf. 35, 59, 60…), which she will not only apply to her own behaviour but to others too, at times admonishing them for not sticking to the rules.

The State of Grace

> 'It's like living with all your senses turned up to full volume all the time,' I say. … 'And it's like living life in a different language, so you can't ever quite relax because even when you think you're fluent it's still using a different part of your brain so by the end of the day you're exhausted.' And I think about getting home from school and the effort of making it through the noise and the lights and the people and the change and the cars and the smells and the sun and the rain and holding it together through all that, and then getting home. And how when I get

> home and I can switch off, that's when I blow up because it's safe. (*State of Grace* 135)

Grace's experience of autism is dominated by her hyperreactivity to sensory input. She is the only character to foreground her hypersensitivity instead of deficits in social interaction. Although Grace has no fixed routines as such, she has difficulties dealing with changes in social dynamics, e.g. her father being away for work or her mother making new friends. She also has a special interest in horses, which, however, is only portrayed as a hobby. However, Grace does refer to difficulties in social situations and communications, too. She describes it as trying to speak 'a different language'. Although hyperreactivity to sensory input is listed under the criteria for 'restricted, repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests, or activities', foregrounding it leads to a new perspective on autism. By doing so, other difficulties are subordinated to this characteristic, including being easily distracted in social situations and thus losing the thread in conversation (*State of Grace* 1).

The Londen Eye Mystery

> 'It's like the brain is a computer,' I said. 'But mine works on a different operating system from other people's. And my wiring's different, too. … It means I am very good at thinking about facts and how things work and the doctors say I am at the *high functioning end of the spectrum*. … But I'm rubbish at things like football. … My syndrome means I am good at remembering big things, like important facts about the weather. But I'm always forgetting small things, like my school gym bag. Mum says I have a brain like a sieve. … They [the kids at school] don't like me because I only talk big. I'm trying to learn how to talk small. But it's hard. … Sometimes it's like a big empty space where I'm all on my own. And there's nothing else, just me.' (*London Eye Mystery* 37ff.)

Ted uses a computer metaphor when explaining his condition to his cousin. Here, he mostly refers to 'restricted, repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests, or activities', such as being good at remembering facts, never forgetting his homework, or reading encyclopaedias (*London Eye Mystery* 37–8). His special interest is meteorology, and he is also clumsy. Although Ted's portrayal appears to be dominated by his restricted interests, he admits to having difficulties in social situations. Because he wishes for friends, he would prefer to be 'normal' (38–9). However, *The London Eye Mystery* portrays very few instances of harassment. Even though Ted struggles with communication from time to time, he is surrounded by family and friends who are accepting and understanding of his difficulties. Therefore, 'deficits in communication and social interaction' are mentioned but tend to be subordinated to his special interests and restricted, repetitive behaviours.

Trueman Bradley

> 'I sometimes have problems with idioms…' I said to myself. 'I can't always interpret other people's emotions. But I have a great ability to see details. I have a powerful visual memory and I'm an expert at recognizing patterns. … In addition to my other difficulties, I am also sensitive to certain sounds, like traffic. They distract me and sometimes they're actually painful to my ears. I'm capable of great concentration, but I'm easily distracted by sudden noises or anything unexpected. Such things are very disturbing to me. I need everything to be neat, predictable and in perfect symmetrical order or I can become very tense. (*Trueman Bradley* 16)

Trueman's monologue is disguised as a pep-talk for himself but is obviously intended to educate the reader. He first mentions difficulties in social communication and interaction but downplays them ('sometimes', 'not always'). However, Trueman struggles consistently with understanding figurative language, slang, etc. (Trueman Bradley 7ff.) and he has difficulties recognising emotions in other people most of the time (14f., 25f.). On the other hand, he compulsively adheres to his

checklist, on which he notes everything he is going to do. Thus, whenever unexpected situations arise, Trueman will add items to his list before acting (22f.), or else he becomes too overwhelmed (20). He is portrayed as having an exceptional memory and attention to detail, which is beneficial to his crime-solving activities, but he is also easily overwhelmed by his hypersensitivity. Trueman Bradley thus portrays a character that struggles with 'deficits in communication and social interaction' as well as showing 'restricted, repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests, or activities'. Despite him fulfilling all criteria of the diagnostics manual, including subdifferentiations, his portrayal might arguably not be more accurate but less so. After all, Loftis argued that autism is an experience, not a list of criteria (Loftis).

Can You See Me

Perhaps the most encompassing 'definition' is given in *Can You See Me*. This novel features the protagonist Tally's diary entries, including fact-sheets on autism, which she intends to share so that the world "can see autism from another perspective" (11). The cover states that these diary entries were written by autist Libby Scott, but I must assume that they were modified to fit the narrative. For example, since this novel was written with the intention of (self-)advocating ASD, I can expect a (at times overly) detailed list of symptoms that may not necessarily co-occur or may be exaggerated for educational purposes. Whereas other definitions were tailored to fit the character, such lists aim at broadly educating a reader on autism. They share thus more similarities with diagnostic manuals, although Tally's 'facts' do not necessarily coincide with the diagnostic criteria given in the *DSM-5*. In a sense, the fact sheets still provide an 'insider' definition of autism, as they, too, were made to fit the character and of course, they are not completely Tally's words, nor Libby's, considering they employ terminology coined by the medical discourse, such as Pathological Demand Avoidance, thus causing discourses to blend into each other (see also *autism narratives*, 5.5).

Either way, the 'fact sheets' provide significantly more explicit information on autism than any of the definitions given in other novels. Tally's 'autism facts' include hypersensitivity (*Can You See Me* 11f.), PDA (Pathological Demand Avoidance) (40–41), meltdowns (63f.), stimming (self-stimulatory behaviour) (109f.), sleep difficulties (153f.), anxiety (189f.), 'getting stuck' in bad moods (229ff.), mood swings (273ff.), and masking (303ff.). They also feature a few advantages Tally sees in being autistic, including better memory and higher awareness of sound, touch, smell etc. Some of her characteristics, Tally describes as involuntary, including meltdowns after sensory overload, 'getting stuck' in bad moods, anxiety, overthinking, and the fact that she has to appear normal and fit in: "Actually, the more I think about it, the more I reckon that a lot of the cons of autism are not really caused by autism but by how other people react to it" (110). This, of course, reflects ideas of normality and deviance of the activist movement. The struggle is further emphasised by Tally's Pathological Demand Avoidance, which causes her to become defensive whenever demands are placed on her. Incidentally, none of the other protagonists are portrayed as struggling with PDA. However, whenever Tally is expected to conform to society's standards of normality, her deviance increases. Other examples include sensory overload, which may occur when Tally is forced into social situations she is not comfortable with, yet still expected to attend. Similarly, her anxiety and overthinking are linked to being deviant and trying to appear normal (cf. 152f., 188f.).

Obviously, Tally's self-account opposes the standardised medical definition in more than one way. Similar to the other definitions, it prioritises those symptoms that affect the character's life in a significant way. Thus, for example, none of the bullet points fit the criteria of 'deficits in social communication and interaction' as stated by the DSM-5 (which is not to say they are not prevalent in conversation). Yet, all previously discussed definitions mentioned this aspect. Vice versa, meltdowns and PDA are neither included in the DSM, nor in the definitions given in other novels. However, anxiety, sleep difficulties, and depressive episodes are listed under comorbidities, and several characters report suffering from these (e.g. David, Grace, Ted…). Nevertheless,

one might conclude that Tally's 'autism facts' are in fact 'Tally's autism facts' as they provide the reader with a detailed symptomology of her autism, including comorbidities and subtypes. Still, Tally experiences her autism very differently to what the main diagnostic criteria as given in the *DSM-5* might suggest; and on a related note, certainly very different than what Kanner's 'autistic loneliness' and Baron-Cohen's 'mind-blindness' theory suggest.

I believe this demonstrates two important fallacies. First of all, the diagnostic criteria are not boxes to be ticked; even if one or more of the criteria are absent in an individual, they might still be diagnosed as autistic.[4] Secondly, the prevalence and intensity, i.e. the impact on everyday life, vary heavily between individuals, as well as over time (age, sex, comorbidities, etc.). Thus, comparing portrayals to lists of diagnostic criteria will establish neither 'good' nor 'accurate' portrayals. Put more lyrically, being autistic is a very unique experience. It also appears that autism portrayals in fiction perpetuate stereotypes and ideas that do not necessarily coincide with the diagnostic criteria. They specifically emphasise difficulties in social situations but are also often adapted to fit the character. Readers' stereotypes will further warp the individual's interpretation, to the point where they might consider portrayals unrealistic if they do not match their concept of autism. Fictional portrayals thus provide an opportunity to explore the uniqueness of 'being autistic' without having to supply an encompassing list of symptoms or a definition that fits all. On the other hand, these portrayals can easily perpetuate misconceptions because they still tend to feature definitions without explicitly stating their limitations and fictionality. Moreover, a set of stereotypes is commonly portrayed, thus again furthering the idea that these portrayals are representative – or vice versa, that stereotypes have to be catered to so as to make a portrayal 'realistic'.

4 There is certainly a grey zone with less impacted individuals, where they may fall in or out of a diagnosis, or remain undiagnosed. This also works independently of labels, i.e. subjects may be labelled even though they do not fulfil diagnostic criteria, thus rendering the label somewhat unattached to the diagnosis, whereas the diagnosis will necessarily be accompanied by a label.

Taken together, all portrayals mention 'difficulties in social interaction and communication'. However, *Mockingbird*, *The London Eye Mystery*, and *What to Say Next* foreground 'restricted, repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests, or activities' in their portrayals. This could potentially coincide with the fact that the stereotype 'Robot' was most prominent here. However, the other novels are more diverse. *The State of Grace* is the only novel to emphasise hypersensitivity as the main characteristic. This novel also toys with the alien trope rather than the other stereotypes. In *Marcelo in the Real World*, the definition foregrounds difficulties in social situations as well as special interests, whereas the portrayal of Trueman (*Trueman Bradley*) tries to incorporate all diagnostic criteria. Finally, in *Can You See Me*, much of Tally's experience is dominated by her Pathological Demand Avoidance combined with her hypersensitivity. Arguably, the 'diversity' of these portrayals could be deemed realistic since autism symptomology is generally considered diverse. However, these characters are still one-sided in that they only portray the 'high-functioning' part of the spectrum, additionally often combined with special talents, extraordinary memory, etc. Thus, explanations given in a novel might be confusing for readers who are unaware of the multifaceted nature of autism. A definition, especially as 'official' in appearance as the one in *Mockingbird*, which imitates an encyclopaedia entry, might lead readers to assume representativeness that exceeds the novel itself. The definitions showed, however, that although they tend to reference the same two main criteria as mentioned in the *DSM-5*, they do so covertly, often only portraying single characteristics. Additionally, the definitions are bent to fit the character. Therefore, readers who are unaware of the 'larger picture' of autism might be misled whenever the limits of such definitions remain undeclared. Although it can be argued that readers have a working concept of autism rather than a set definition and are therefore able to meaningfully integrate additional information, there is a distinct possibility of misinformation.

Generally speaking, however, the more individual the experiences of an autistic character are portrayed, the less stereotypical they are. Since the autism community prides itself on the diversity of its members, this is also a reoccurring topic in most novels (e.g. the snowflake metaphor

in *What to Say Next, Can You See Me*; opposing stereotypes in *The State of Grace* or *Marcelo in the Real World*). For example, in order to explain his behaviour, David gives Kit a copy of the *DSM-IV*[5] where he has highlighted the section on Asperger's Disorder. He also attaches a note reading:

> There's a famous expression that if you've met one person with autism, then you've met one person with autism.
> So you met me.
> Just me.
> Not a diagnosis. (What to Say Next 274)

Curiously, Christopher (*Curious Incident*) ticks all the boxes for the *DSM-5* diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder[6], yet his portrayal was heavily criticised by the autism community for being majorly flawed. I therefore suggest that fictional representations of autism are not 'accurate' in terms of diagnostic criteria, nor do they have to be. However, fictional portrayals have additionally developed their own momentum. Novels explore the lives of individuals and their normalities, whereas the medical discourse seeks to sharpen categories and labels. Fictional portrayals individualise autism whereas the medical perspective tries to generalise it, but neither of them fully encompasses the 'experience' of being autistic.

High- and Low-functioning?

The idea of a spectrum has certainly caught on within the last decade, and yet it remains contested. Some laud it as combining diagnoses that were impossible to clearly differentiate, but many have voiced criticism over

5 Up to the DSM-5, editions were identified by Roman numbers.

6 He struggles with communication and social interaction (cf. 2f., 7f., 10, 19f., etc.) and displays restricted, repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests, and activities (cf. 4, 8, 14, 16f., 31f., 52f., etc.), which were present from an early age on (cf. 145) and cause impairment in differing areas of functioning (cf. 59f., 149, etc.). However, not necessarily for AS in the *DSM-IV*, at least Christopher does not appear to be independent and 'age-appropriately' skilled.

the metaphor of a spectrum. In 2013, the APA stated that the following diagnoses would be merged under the label of ASD[7]:

> Autism spectrum disorder encompasses disorders previously referred to as early infantile autism, childhood autism, Kanner's autism, high-functioning autism, atypical autism, pervasive developmental disorder not otherwise specified, childhood disintegrative disorder, and Asperger's disorder. (APA, *DSM-5* 53)

Interestingly, not all of these labels were used in the DSM or the ICD respectively. For example, neither mentions 'high-functioning' autism.[8] On the other hand, some diagnoses are still used in contrast to the autism spectrum as a whole, such as Asperger's Syndrome, which is used to this day to refer to a certain combination of symptoms. The spectrum, too, has been subdivided into high- and low-functioning, an idea that appears to be simultaneously contested and accepted within the autism community, with some opposing it as a form of ableism and others having found a way of managing their identity by accepting this differentiated label. The literary discourse has certainly caught onto the change in terminology and the debate arising from it. Novels published before 2013 use the label Asperger's instead of autism to describe the protagonist, whereas newer novels (*The State of Grace, What to Say Next, Can You See Me*) have adopted the label ASD or simply refer to it as 'autism'. However, the conflict around the 'spectrum' as well as high- and low-functioning is echoed in *What to Say Next*:

> One doctor thought I might have a 'borderline case of Asperger's,' which is stupid, because you can't have a borderline case of Asperger's. Actually, you can't really have Asperger's at all anymore, because it was written out of the DSM-5 … and instead people with that group of characteristics are considered to have high-functioning

7 Some criticise the fact that it is not simply called Autism Spectrum but explicitly classified as Disorder.

8 The term recently underwent a reorientation, or so it seems, considering that it is now also used in combination with ADHD, depression, or anxiety.

> autism (or HFA), which is also misleading. The autism spectrum is multidimensional, not linear. The doctor was obviously an idiot. (3)

Essentially, *What to Say Next* touches upon the idea that a condition is defined by its label. David concludes for himself that Asperger's is a better label for his deviance, likely because the attached stigma is more manageable. In differentiation from other autism diagnoses,

> [i]ndividuals with Asperger's Disorder do not have clinically significant delays in cognitive development or in age-appropriate self-help skills, adaptive behavior (other than in social interaction), and curiosity about the environment in childhood … . (APA, *DSM-IV-TR* 81)

Individuals with Asperger's or 'high-functioning' autism respectively, appear less restricted by their autism and are therefore 'less deviant'. Put starkly, high-functioning autism appears mild enough to still be palatable for a mass audience, with a self-perpetuating effect, since, as Rozema whimsically remarks,

> narrators with Asperger syndrome have become their own kind of literary trope [which] is forgivable: they are hard to resist, at once innocent and unfiltered, literal-minded and verbose. (Rozema 27)

However, David's scathing verdict ('The doctor was obviously an idiot') not only refers to the fact that Asperger's is considered to be an outdated diagnosis, as well as the misleading 'spectrum', but could potentially be read as a jibe at the medical discourse, i.e. a name- and faceless collective which has historically proven to be somewhat stuck in their proverbial ivory tower. Indeed, David voices a common critique, i.e. the fact that the idea of a spectrum is misleading:

> A spectrum is intended to emphasize the previous point about variety, but the image is problematic: spectra are linear and autism isn't. The metaphor suggests that you can arrange autistic people on a line, from more to less. (Hacking, "Humans, Aliens & Autism" 47)

Ironically, this notion is reinforced by the use of the labels high- and low-functioning. While a spectrum presumably allows for easier diagnosis, it might also bar individuals from getting the help they need or, vice versa, leading to patronising treatment. A spectrum requires a more complex knowledge of a topic rather than a clear and simple definition, and while autism cannot be easily defined, subsuming all these individuals under one label will move a stereotype towards a prejudice, unless the public becomes aware of the broad spectrum of symptoms. However, what is obstructive to this development is the general lack of knowledge on autism, which pairs badly with the idea of a spectrum.

Yet again, it is those on the 'high-functioning' end of the spectrum or those previously diagnosed as having Asperger's, who reinforce the subdifferentiation of the label. I believe this is because studies on stigmatisation have shown that

> autistic individuals (without accompanying intellectual or cognitive disabilities) appear acutely aware of how they are being stigmatized by others. They are able to identify societal stereotypes of autistic people that parallel literature from the perspectives of non-autistic people, such as common myths that autistic people are unempathetic, socially disinterested and potentially dangerous … . They are also able to anticipate how they may be judged, excluded or treated differently by others in ways that align with research showing that neurotypical individuals make unfavorable judgments of autistic individuals and are less likely to interact with them … . (Han et al. 20)

In other words, 'high-functioning' individuals are aware of their deviance, stereotypes, and the way they are stigmatised by others. Subsequently, stigma plays a significant role when it comes to accepting or opposing labels. For example, in a study on stigmatisation,

> a university student with AS used the rhetoric of intellectual functioning to position himself as better than both his neurotypical peers and other autistic peers, carving out a narrow space for himself as an "exceptional autistic". [Moreover,] [i]n Jones et al. (2015), several interviewees also specifically identified with the label of 'Asperger's' or 'high

> functioning autism', dissociating themselves from the label of 'disability' and differentiating themselves from people with more significant impairments. (Han et al. 20)

Thus, although some autists may oppose the use of high- and low-functioning, or indeed 'Asperger's', others embrace it to manage their stigma (Han et al. 21), with the latter usually referring to some kind of special abilities that 'balance out' other difficulties.

What I have here reframed in terms of a stigma are the contrasting understandings of autism which I have previously assigned to the activist and the conservative movement. The rejection of the label not only equals the rejection of being aligned with those severely autistic but also the rejection of autism as a 'disorder' in need of a cure. High-functioning signifies that these individuals are capable of participating in society with little to no restrictions. A couple of participants in autism studies even stated that they feel superior to both neurotypicals as well as neuroatypicals.

> Punshon et al. … reported that a minority of their participants framed their AS an advantage, describing themselves as being "one rung up on the evolutionary ladder" and having a "superiority complex". (Han et al. 20)

For these autistic individuals, reframing their diagnosis as a form of superiority was their way of managing the stigma attached to it and consequently (re-) building their identity. This, as well as the continuous use of the label Asperger's, can be understood as a form of reclaiming the diagnosis and consequently defining it in one's own terms. David is a good example of this. He states: "So Asperger's is no longer in the *DSM*. It doesn't mean it's not at least somewhat descriptive of me" (*What to Say Next* 263). He claims the label Asperger's with the restriction that he does not equal the diagnosis. However, David not only resists the label ASD but also any generalised assumptions made on the basis of this partic-

ular label.[9] However, accepting the label ASD may involve accepting the stigma of being intellectually impaired. Thus, "[w]hile such rhetoric may help some members of the autistic community to mitigate stigma, it may come at the expense of marginalizing others" (Han et al. 21). Consider for example the following excerpts from *Mockingbird*:

> [Classmate:] *She's autistic. Like William H.*
> My hands are shaking really fast now. *I am NOT autistic!*
> Some of the girls laugh.
> *William doesn't talk. Can you HEAR ME TALKING?*
> *Okay but –*
> *William eats DIRT and SCREAMS when he gets mad! I AM NOT AUTISTIC!*
> I am breathing hard and I want to jump out of my skin but I grit my teeth and shake my hands harder and turn and run away and I hear screaming and I don't know if it's music class or Mia or me. (184, original highlighting)
> [PE teacher] *Oh for the love of – Why do they give me all the autistic kids?*
> Some people laugh. I'm not sure who all the autistic kids are. I thought William H. was the only one. (190, original highlighting)

One must bear in mind that *Mockingbird* was written in 2010, thus within the medical context there was still a clear distinction between AS and other autism disorders. Although Caitlin knows that she has some deficits, she refuses any label that hints at autism, only perceiving William H. as autistic but not herself. From her defence, the reader learns that Caitlin's definition of autism includes not talking, eating dirt, and screaming; behaviour that she does not display but that is considered highly deviant by society. Being labelled as autistic and thus likened to William consequently leads to a face loss for Caitlin. Because she is trying hard to fit in and appear as normal as possible, it is particularly humiliating for her that her efforts are insufficient.

The fight over labels is not only fuelled by different understandings of autism, which might indeed claim to refer to different conditions, but

9 On a related note, David touches upon the question whether medical classifications are bound in space and time or could potentially be applied retroactively.

also the associated stigmata, stereotypes, and prejudices. 'Being normal' and 'fitting in' is the only way to escape ostracization and subsequent harassment, thus many autists choose this road over fighting for acceptance and awareness. It is also commonly encouraged in autists, to the point where the ways by which individuals avoid stigmatisation have become their own field of research.

Masking and Camouflaging

Avoiding stigmatisation could be understood as an intrinsic motivation towards appearing normal and obviating a deviant status, although it must of course be considered a consequence of pressure by society's standards. We are all part of this phenomenon by aligning ourselves according to normalities, as well as navigating and negotiating deviance. In terms of autism, this pressure towards 'being normal' manifested itself in the form of therapies and attempts to find a cure, especially before the activist movement gathered pace. For example, in the wake of Baron-Cohen's theory that autistic individuals lack a Theory of Mind, training programs were developed that aimed at educating – and training – autistic individuals to become 'normal' members of society. A well-known technique is called Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) and relies on operant conditioning.

> To put it briefly, ABA represents a suite of therapeutic modalities whose end goal involves behavioral shaping toward the normative, toward the prosocial, toward compliance. It is, in combination with aversion therapy, one of the primary methodological forerunners of what might now be termed reparative therapy. Paradoxically, it remains the contemporary autism therapy of choice, endorsed by numerous medical authorities, including the U.S. Surgeon General. (Yergeau 29)

ABA is also considered a viable option in other countries, e.g. France, the United Kingdom, or Germany, and there are schools that offer stan-

dardised training programs (e.g. ABAA4all). In *The State of Grace*, Grace hints towards having attended such training programs (109). However, she does not remember them in a positive way, reflecting the change in attitude that has occurred in recent years when complaints surfaced:

> In the autistic community there has emerged a distinctive ex-ABA movement, one led by traumatized autistics and parents alike. Survivors of ABA speak of hours-long sessions spent on inculcating compliance, assent, and normalized gender roles, hours spent on social stories that reinforce stereotypical and cis/heteronormative behaviors. (Yergeau 29)

Such criticism can be attributed to the activist movement; albeit not necessarily grounded in the fact that these individuals oppose the idea of a cure, the obvious grievances certainly furthered their cause.

Obviously, behavioural programs are oriented towards normativity rather than flexible normalism. In contrast, the activist movement was likely accelerated by the fact that "over the past thirty years the incident rate of autism worldwide may have increased three- to fourfold" (Bumiller 967). In the meantime, parents, teachers, and medical staff alike have encouraged autists to "'fit in' and 'act normal'" (Han et al. 17). Consequently, these individuals are openly pressured to change while continually reminded of their deviance. I have previously discussed how stigma can be internalised and reframed (see also Chapter 4.5). However, these coping strategies would lead to acceptance of stigma and integration into identity. This section, on the other hand, discusses forms in which stigma is reduced. It could be considered somewhat of a middle road for those neither fighting for a cure nor fighting the label of a disorder:

> To manage stigma and its negative consequences, the literature suggests that autistic individuals may adopt a few main strategies: concealment and camouflaging, selective disclosure and self-advocacy, as well as positive reframing and reconstructing identity. (Han et al. 18)

Camouflaging "refers to the use of conscious or unconscious strategies, which may be explicitly learned or implicitly developed, to minimise the appearance of autistic characteristics during a social setting" (Hull, Petrides, and Mandy 309). Unfortunately, "numerous, potentially overlapping terminologies have been used in the literature" (Livingston and Happé 729), such that these concepts can easily cause confusion. One model differentiates two forms of camouflaging, i.e. compensation and masking ('concealment') (Hull, Petrides, and Allison et al. 2524). Yet even these categories have no clear division.

> Masking encompasses the aspects of camouflaging that focus on hiding one's ASC [Autism Spectrum Conditions] characteristics and developing different personas or characters to use during social situations. (Hull, Petrides, and Allison et al. 2525)

In other words, it is a mask these individuals put on or a role they act out so as not to appear autistic. On the other hand, compensation

> will also result in a more neurotypical behavioural presentation, however, it goes further than masking/suppression of autistic traits and, instead, involves alternative cognition to circumvent underlying cognitive difficulties. (Livingston et al. 102)

There is a fluent transition from masking to compensation when those 'rules' and behaviours become internalised. Another possible way to differentiate these two modes of behaviour would be to define masking as imitating other people's behaviour versus compensation as actively constructing rules (Livingston et al. 102).

The results of training programs that seek to integrate autistic individuals can be understood as learned camouflaging behaviour. While camouflaging in general and compensation, in particular, might improve outward behaviour in terms of normality, there is "great heterogeneity in the degree to which symptoms lessen, persist or even worsen across the lifetime" (Livingston and Happé 729). Here, it cannot be stressed enough that camouflaging refers to masking, not *healing*,

i.e. camouflaging is not a treatment for autism. However, it is a vicious circle which sets the standards for others, i.e. the better some autists are able to fit into society, the higher expectations become for others. In terms of normality and deviance, individuals may 'outgrow' their diagnosis in that they no longer fulfil diagnostic requirements, sometimes also referred to as 'optimal outcome' (Livingston and Happé 736). In extreme cases, highly able autistic individuals may never or much belatedly be diagnosed. "Success here may be defined as simply not having overt functional impairments or raising concerns of teachers or other professionals" (Hull, Petrides, and Allison et al. 2521). Thus, it is sometimes said that autism in "high-functioning individuals is an invisible disability" (Kelley 123).

Ironically, there are also underlying expectations linked to 'appearing autistic'. This obviously manifests itself in diagnostic criteria when it comes to the health care system, but it may also surface in stereotypical expectations. Individuals who do not appear 'sufficiently' autistic may not get the support they need (Hull, Petrides, and Allison et al. 2528), and their surroundings may not be understanding of their difficulties. Thus, having a label, albeit a guarantee for deviance, may at times be more helpful than trying to avoid stigmatisation. Yet, to be recognised as autistic by lay people mostly consists of fulfilling public stereotypes. A study showed that some individuals were relieved not to meet the stereotype (2528), and consequently not having to fulfil these expectations, but others reported either delayed diagnosis or accusations of being imposters (2528). Thus, being considered normal can be detrimental at times, too.

Camouflaging has measurable benefits. Some participants of a study on this topic "reported feeling satisfied and relieved after camouflaging, particularly if they felt as though it went well" (Hull, Petrides, and Allison et al. 2527). They also assumed that by not appearing autistic they were more successful in life, reaching career goals and having relationships (2528). On the other hand, individuals may at one point become unable to stop their camouflaging behaviour even if they wish to do so (Hull, Petrides, and Allison et al. 2528). It therefore usually comes at a cost to mental health. Camouflaging in all forms

> often requires substantial cognitive effort, can be exhausting and may lead to increased stress responses, meltdown due to social overload, anxiety and depression, and even a negative impact on the development of one's identity. (Lai et al. 691)

Autistic individuals tend to describe camouflaging as "mentally, physically, and emotionally draining; requiring intensive concentration, self-control, and management of discomfort" (Hull, Petrides, and Allison et al. 2527). This is due to "a constant monitoring of the situation as if training oneself in self-monitoring, self-awareness, and monitoring others' reactions, both during and after the interaction occurred" (2527). Masking and shallow compensation, especially, will require much concentration. Internalised strategies, on the other hand, can be applied with less effort, however, only after the individual has invested considerable time and energy into establishing them.

> Put bluntly, camouflaging is not hands-on learning of social conventions but the constant struggle to abide by unknown rules that seem obvious to everybody else. While this might sound dramatic, autistic individuals often cannot tell whether their strategies were successful. (Hull, Petrides, and Allison et al. 2527)

A worst-case scenario might be unsuccessful camouflaging. In this case, individuals have all the costs but none of the benefits. It certainly has to be considered that individuals have different motivations and abilities to engage in such behaviour. However, some "struggle to maintain social relationships and may remain unemployed, despite having the motivation and capabilities to work" (Hull, Petrides, and Allison et al. 2521). For others, the cost of camouflaging might add up or increase over a lifetime and "have a downstream detrimental impact on mental health" (Livingston and Happé 736), leading to burn-outs (735). Others still might engage in camouflaging but be semi-successful, thus leading to "continued social awkwardness and reduced quality of friendships" (733).

All this considered, camouflaging is a common experience for autistic individuals (Hull, Petrides, and Mandy 313), mostly because they are

expected to fit in. Nevertheless, "camouflaging is not necessarily a beneficial behaviour, and should not be regularly expected or encouraged for individuals with ASC" (Hull, Petrides, and Allison et al. 2521), rendering training programs questionable. Representations of autism in the media likely set out to educate the public on autism but have involuntarily created and reinforced stereotypical expectations on what it means to be autistic (and equally, to appear so). Additionally, it can be argued that they have also increased the demand for autistic individuals to fit in, have jobs, friends, and relationships, and contribute to society. The latter may even be vindicated by extraordinary abilities that should be used for the greater good.

There is a plethora of instances in the novels where characters consciously try to mask or camouflage their deviance. I have previously discussed different forms of deviant behaviour and placed them on a gamut. Most notably, I distinguished between visible and invisible deviance, both of which may result in stigmatisation. However, 'invisible' deviance can be more easily camouflaged by avoiding social interactions. Visible deviance, such as being wheelchair-bound, will often lead to immediate stigmatisation and is more difficult to conceal. For autistic individuals, visible deviance may be reduced by adapting clothing styles, haircuts, or body language. It also includes losing 'autistic' body language such as hand flapping. However, since autists usually struggle with social interactions, their difficulties lie with camouflaging their 'invisible' deviance which is significantly harder to accomplish.

Masking and Camouflaging in Autism Portrayals

Masking and camouflaging techniques vary from individual to individual, and they are equally diversely portrayed in the novels. I have thus chosen but a selection of instances to demonstrate some ways in which these techniques are applied in fiction. In *The State of Grace*, Grace has chosen to hide her autism diagnosis. However, this leads to her having anxiety over 'being found out'. She puts it as follows:

> Being a human is a complicated game – like seeing a ghost in the mirror and trying to echo everything they do. Or like walking in step, but with someone trying to trip you up – and you're juggling at the same time, with people pelting more and more balls at you. Then, just when you get the hang of it, someone starts flashing a torch in your eyes and then yelling in your ear.
> I'll be mid conversation and listening and responding in all the right places, then someone will say something on the other side of the room – a snatch of something that my brain will pick up. I'll lose the thread for a second, and when I tune back in I've lost my way. And then the other person might – for a split second – look at me oddly or scratch their nose and I'll start thinking, No, Grace, you've lost it, and by then I've fallen even further behind, and I remember that my face has probably stopped making the appropriate shapes (interest, listening, concerned, thoughtful – I have a full repertoire, as long as I don't get distracted) and then I panic. (*State of Grace* 1)

Grace describes her struggle to keep up with the conversation as 'a complicated game'. This is a conscious form of constant camouflaging, which would have been successful if the conversation had ended earlier. However, in this generalised example, Grace crosses the threshold of her concentration which sends her spinning into a loop of over-thinking and anxiety from which she cannot recover ('I panic'). Social interactions are not only a source of joy or contentment for many people (depending on the interaction of course) but also the glue of a community. Thus, fear of social interaction will not only lead to constant stress but avoiding social interaction will also result in loneliness. The unwillingness to participate in social interactions – for whatever reason -, is the equivalent of surrender in the negotiation of deviance. Grace wants to be or at least appear normal, otherwise she would not even try to 'play the game'. Yet, she participates with a huge disadvantage ('someone trying to trip you up') which is intensified by her own anxiety over being perceived as deviant, being stigmatised, and ultimately ending up alone.

Her 'repertoire' of faces is a straightforward example of masking; Grace does not see the point in making these faces, since they do not come naturally to her, but she has learned to mime them to satisfy

others. Caitlin (*Mockingbird*) describes how she was taught emotions with the help of a facial expression chart:

> … I have looked at that chart about a million times to try to figure out which emotion goes with each face. I'm not very good at it. I have to use the chart because when I look at real faces I don't Get It. Mrs. Brook says people have a hard time understanding me because I have Asperger's so I have to try extra hard to understand them and that means working on emotions. (*Mockingbird* 18–19)

When her father praises her for doing a good job at school, she makes "a smiley face with … [her] mouth" (*Mockingbird* 43). The choice of words demonstrates how this is not an intuitive reaction but one she had to learn and now displays for the satisfaction of others. Moreover, the 'smiley' face is a direct reference to the chart, instead of her showing how she is genuinely happy – which she likely is, but would not usually communicate by smiling.

Generally speaking, body language is an important part of communication. In *What to Say Next* Kit observes how David's posture seems unnatural: "David shrugs, up and down, like he's being manipulated by an amateur puppeteer. His body language, I realize now, is as stilted as everything else about him" (181). Here, Kit sees through David's efforts of camouflaging by displaying certain forms of learned body language; his camouflaging is unsuccessful although he might not realise it himself. Her choice of words ('amateur puppeteer') is a direct hint towards David's masking, which encompasses his whole character and demeanour. Yet Kit also realises that she, like everyone else, only ever gets to see his façade.

Sensory overload or hyposensitivity might cause an individual to stim, including hand flapping or spinning in circles. This is, of course, a form of visible deviance since it can already be perceived from afar. Thus, "[r]espondents described attempting to minimise their self-soothing or 'stimming' behaviours, and their responses to sensory overstimulation, in order to make their condition less obvious to others" (Hull, Petrides,

and Allison et al. 2525). However, this comes at the cost of not being able to self-soothe as effectively.

> [David:] My hands flap side to side, and my legs shake up and down. I look like a bird readying for flight I haven't flipped like this since the sixth grade, when Miney filmed me on her phone and explained that if I ever wanted to have any friends, I needed to stop. And to my amazement, next time I caught myself doing it, I was able to quit; I replaced the motion with silent counting, though by then the damage had already been done. (*What to Say Next* 147)

When David finds out that his notebook was stolen and made public online, his reaction is so emotional that he automatically starts stimming. Here, the magnitude of the event – and presumably also the fact that he is at home with his family – overrules his conscious decision not to stim visibly ('I was able to quit'); his bodily reaction is a reflex that can only be suppressed to a certain extent. It is comparable to shaking, an involuntary reaction most people have to emotionally disturbing news.

> [Kit:] I think back to middle school, when we'd have to pick players for dodgeball in gym. David was always chosen last. I imagine him standing there, looking two feet above everyone else's heads, his hands flapping at his sides – something he still does occasionally, though I'm not sure he realizes it … . (*What to Say Next* 248)

Kit recalls how David's stimming was a visible sign of his deviance and how it reinforced his stigmatisation. However, not only is it very likely that David was already aware of his outsider status, but his stimming is an indicator that this situation was stressful for him, thus he was presumably also aware of the 'significance' of being chosen last. Interestingly, her account is slightly different. While David claims he hasn't 'flipped like this since the sixth grade', Kit reports that he still occasionally flaps his hands, presumably an involuntary and unconscious reaction on David's side, i.e. something over which he has no control because he can only reduce the reflex but not switch it off completely.

Conversely, David would quite likely suppress his hand flapping if he knew he was doing it – after all, it is a recurring topic of the novel how he tries to fit in and camouflage or mask his autism.

In the first example, Grace also hints at hidden rules that dominate conversations, such as 'listening and responding in all the right places' or making 'appropriate' faces. The fact that nearly all characters analysed for this study mention rules for social interactions underlines how important they are to them. Not only do autists have to invest time and effort into learning them, but these rules also dominate their realities to the point that a character will point them out explicitly. David has even written these rules down in a notebook:

> 'Oh my God, D. Have I taught you nothing?' she [Miney] says.
> 'You've taught me lots of things. I didn't mention her weight, if that's what you're worried about.'
> 'What are we going to do with you?' she asks, and my stomach clenches. Freshman year, when I would find myself in trouble at school on a biweekly basis, Principal Hoch would pose this question, which is both idiomatic and rhetorical. *What are we going to do with you?* Like I was a group project.
> Just once I'd like the answer to be: *nothing*.
> Just once I'd like the answer to be: *You are just fine as is*.
> Just once I'd like the question not to be asked in the first place. (*What to Say Next* 82)

David anticipates his sister's worries and counteracts them by stating that he did not mention Kit's weight during their conversation. He not only has internalised this rule but is able to reflect on it afterwards, albeit not capable of analysing for himself what went wrong. Secondly, although David is trying to fit in, he is labelled as deviant by the headmaster, or in this case, problematic. Here, David has internalised the stigma and he is willing to work towards being 'more normal'; however, he still dreams of being accepted the way he is. Metaphorically speaking, the 'group project' could refer to society, i.e. a general tendency towards making autists fit in.

Finally, masking and camouflaging touches upon the communication barrier between autists and neurotypicals, or rather their different forms of communicating. Learning to read and display facial expressions is not simply linked to appearance but can be compared to learning a new language. Similarly, neurotypicals are unable to 'translate' some autistic behaviours, such as stimming. Researchers have also suggested that 'behavioural problems' such as hitting or screaming may need to be reframed as communication attempts or forms, leading scientists to believe that many behavioural symptoms of autism actually serve a function (Kern Koegel 387). The communication barrier also gave rise to the double empathy problem, which was first described by Damian Milton in 2012 (Milton et al. 1901). Essentially, it opposes the idea that a lack of understanding can be solely attributed to the autistic participant, instead suggesting that the problem

> is based in the social interaction between two differently disposed social actors, the disjuncture being more severe for the non-autistic disposition as it is experienced as unusual, while for the 'autistic person' it is a common experience. (Milton 884)

In other words, neurotypical persons are so used to being understood that they do not assume the fault to lie with them. Contrary to this binary of normalcy and deviance, Milton's theory states that both participants are willing to display empathy (Milton 884), yet autists are assumed to have none according to supporters of the conservative movement.

> One could say that many autistic people have indeed gained a greater level of insight into non-AS society, and more than vice versa, perhaps due to the need to survive and potentially thrive in a non-AS culture. Conversely, the non-AS person has no pertinent personal requirement to understand the mind of the 'autistic person' unless closely related socially in some way. (Milton 886)

However, even those 'closely related' may have their own agendas and narratives, thus one cannot expect the debate around labels to end anytime soon.

Additionally, although autists can suppress some of their behaviours and needs for the benefit of 'fitting in' and appearing normal, they might require a different outlet. For example, David mentions how he became conscious of his hand-flapping and was able to stop it for the most part. However, the flapping served a specific function and let him cope with his emotions. Thus, whenever he is overwhelmed, he now consciously applies methods such as counting pi. Chapter 19 demonstrates how shaken up David is when his notebook gets stolen, as it consists of him repeatedly counting to the 1095th decimal. Yet, it also becomes obvious how counting is not a full replacement for stimming, presumably because it is not physical in nature.

> Pi doesn't work. Neither does the periodic table. I try simple counting, and I make it all the way to three hundred thousand, but I cannot let any of it go. My notebook is in the public domain. Kit must have read the whole thing by now. … Which means that it's all over: us sitting together at lunch, the Accident Project, me being in any zone. (*What to Say Next* 167)

David mentions several of his techniques to calm himself. Interestingly, the initial shock was great enough for his old habits to resurface, thus he could not suppress the hand-flapping. This hints toward involuntary physical reactions that are at least partly subconscious and need actively to be repressed. Such reflexes could potentially be likened to people flinching as an instinctive reaction to pain or fear; behaviours that are very difficult to suppress.

I assume that David uses these techniques successfully on a regular basis. The fact that they do not work, however, shows how the anticipated consequences are too terrible to be counteracted by counting or repetition. On a more abstract level, this instance hints towards the layer of camouflaging he has created to hide his deviance. David also seems mostly worried about things returning to what they were before; pre-

sumably because he saw a way out of his deviance and an opportunity to make friends, although Kit holds a special part in his heart. It shows how strongly he desires to be part of the community and engage in meaningful relationships, to the point where he is willing to put in all the effort to learn the rules and hide his identity.

Nearly all characters have self-soothing techniques such as counting, with some of them also mentioning hand flapping.

Examples of stimming in the novels

- Ted (*London Eye Mystery*) either listens to shipping forecasts or makes them up in his own head to calm himself down (cf. 40). When Salim disappears, however, his emotional reaction is so strong that he opts for movement: 'I jumped onto my bed, down next to the lilo where Salim had slept the night before, and banged my fist against the wall, then jumped up on the bed again and down again, wall again … . I hadn't done the routine in years. I'd forgotten how good it felt.' (70)
- Trueman (*Trueman Bradley*) usually does calculations in his head to calm himself, but when he is caught out or panics he has a tendency to fall to the floor: 'I could feel my face burning with embarrassment. I remembered my childhood habit of falling to the floor when I got nervous or over-excited, but I hadn't done this for a long time. Usually, I could resist the urge to fall and would try my best to act as if nothing was wrong. Although my breath became rapid and I'd start to feel dizzy, I was always able to maintain my dignity.' (8–9) (cf. 26, 210, 220…)
- Caitlin (*Mockingbird*) uses counting and a technique she calls 'stuffed-animaling' where she squints her eyes so that everything becomes blurry; she also finds comfort in her stuffed animals: 'If you take the monkey bars and the people and blur them together they get soft and fluffy and kind just like a stuffed animal. And you can forget about where you are and pretend you're somewhere else like under your bed with your stuffed animals.' (36)
- For Grace (*State of Grace*) it is soothing to go to the stables, listening to music, or taking a bath, but she also mentions watching 'Walking

> with Dinosaurs': 'I just want to sit here all evening, because then my brain might just stop whirring around. It's like a million shooting stars flying out in different directions and I can't make them stop and then I can't sleep. The dinosaurs help. The beanie hat I've got on helps too. It sort of stops the thoughts from shooting around.' (22)

At times, autists might find sensory input soothing, such as listening to music, being hugged, wearing certain clothes, or being wrapped in blankets, but also swinging or spinning in circles. Such familiar sensations can drown out other sensory input, thus decreasing it to an acceptable level.

Ironically, masking and camouflaging are both helpful for reducing stigmatisation and consequent harassment, as well as harmful to the individual's mental health due to identity loss, unsuccessful camouflaging, and the constant anxiety over being found out. Technically, the activist movement is seeking to reduce the pressure to 'fit in' by normalising autism as a different form of cognitive function, however, at present we are still a long way from this. On the other hand, being 'sufficiently' autistic and displaying the right symptoms is critical for getting the help and support an individual needs[10]. Due to increased (stereotypical) awareness of autism by the public, this can also result in unwanted help, overestimation, or further stigmatisation.

By merging different diagnoses (labels) under the label of Autism Spectrum Disorder, the medical discourse contributed to the continued fight over labels, as well as the creation of new subdifferentiations, including high- and low-functioning, to indicate levels of abilities, need for support, but also stigmata. The labels used within the autism discourse are thus also closely linked to ideas of normality, deviance, ableism, and acceptance. Additionally, at least two opposing understandings of autism exist, which might both be misleading in that they

10 German researcher Hans Wocken coined the term 'Etikettierungs-Ressourcen-Dilemma' ('Labelling-Resources-Dilemma', *own translation*), emphasising how help and resources are attached to labels such as medical diagnoses.

are narratives and thus not objective. As of now, there still exists a communication barrier between autists and neurotypicals, which is at times reinforced by the conservative movement and ideas of 'mind-blindness', lack of 'Theory of Mind', and a rhetoric of sadness. However, within the literary discourse, portrayals tend to focus on a certain set of stereotypes. Thus, these portrayals are neither comprehensive nor necessarily representative. Instead, they might have gained their own momentum by focusing on gifted individuals with specific communication patterns – honest, literal, and lacking comprehension of linguistic conventions.

Narrating Autism

Although I have suggested the existence of two pre-dominant autism narratives – either overly positive ('capable of saving the world') or overly negative ('non-verbal, violent, self-injurious') – I have not yet explored the way these narratives are expressed. Chatman suggested the differentiation of story (content) and discourse (expression) (26) and I believe there are some modes of representation that have manifested themselves in shared narratological features. However, I will not cross the whole field of narratology, since it is altogether too large to cover. Additionally, the novels I examined all portray high-functioning characters, which were imagined by non-autistic authors. Thus, there always remains the critique that these portrayals represent the neurotypical gaze. Conversely, some autistic authors have described difficulties portraying neurotypical characters due to fundamentally different perceptions (cf. Caldwell).

Visual Rhetoric and Semiotics

In *Visual Rhetoric and the New Public Discourse*, Bruce McComiskey suggests that present-day multimedia communication should be framed as overall rhetoric (189), thus catering to the various ways in which information is presented, i.e. as video, audio, text, or graphics (188). He further states that

> Even documents that convey their messages by words alone are exhibiting more access strategies, visual techniques for guiding readers through blocks of text: emphasizing important words and phrases through **bold**, underlined, or *italic* script; beginning new sections with **Highlighted Headings**; using ▪ bulleted lists and color to draw readers' attention to particular areas on a page. (McComiskey p. 187–188, original highlighting)

However, being aware of the fact that information is communicated unfortunately will not guarantee comprehension on the receiver's end, or indeed unambiguity. Thus, when heading off into the field of rhetoric, I can only be sure that somebody is trying to persuade me of *something*.

Apart from *Trueman Bradley*, all novels feature highlighted passages, bold, underlined, or italic scripts, bulleted lists, or different fonts to emphasise letters, notes, diary entries, etc. Since all novels are told from a first-person perspective, these visualisations serve as further characterisation of the protagonist. For example, highlighted passages may indicate new words/expressions a character has encountered, lists or bullet points a love for order and routine, and so forth. They do not signify autism per se but may emphasise a character's unique mindset. The following examples will show how such techniques are used for more than making the text more appealing to the reader.

Mockingbird has two striking features, the first being that no quotation marks are used but direct speech is set in italic letters. While the text is legible, it has at times the curious effect that voiced statements could also be read as the internal voice of the protagonist. For example:

> [Mrs. Brook asking about the funeral:] *Did it make you uncomfortable?* I try to think of a different answer than I don't know because Devon says people don't like I don't know all that much. I don't know why. So I try hard to focus on her question. *Did it make you uncomfortable?* I think about what is comfortable. Being completely covered by my purple fleece blanket under my bed or putting my head under the sofa cushion or reading my Dictionary. I did not have any of those things at the funeral. *Yes. I was uncomfortable.* (*Mockingbird* 21, original highlighting)

While reading the passage, I do not know whether Mrs Brook repeats her question ('Did it make you uncomfortable?') or whether Caitlin echoes it, either aloud or in her head. Additionally, putting the question in italic letters could simply be a way of refocusing the reader, since Caitlin's thoughts have previously drifted off.

> I rub my finger across the wood back and forth harder and harder until a splinter cuts me. I hit the splinter back.
> There is a drop of blood on the wood now. It is read and it spreads…seeping into a crack and bleeding across the unfinished wood. …
> *No!* I rub the wood harder and harder to try to erase the blood but it won't go away.
> *Caitlin!*
> I press my finger against the raw wthood and rub faster and faster and it hurts but I don't care because I want to stop the blood but it's still there and I can't make it stop!
> *Caitlin!*
> *I can't stop it!*
> *Caitlin!* It's Mrs. Brook calling from somewhere and I feel pulling on my arm but I yank my hand free. *No!* I have to erase the blood! I have to. I have to! I HAVE TO!
> I can't see or feel or hear anything except for some screaming far away. (*Mockingbird* 25–26, original highlighting)

Focusing on statements set in italics, it is easiest to recognise Mrs. Brook, who repeatedly calls Caitlin's name. Since the reader has so far had no reason to suspect that Caitlin talks to herself in 3rd person, it is less likely to be interpreted any other way. Additionally, the 'I can't stop it!' is framed by two of Mrs Brook's utterances, thus giving the impression of a dialogue. However, both 'No!'s could also be read as internal utterances, i.e. a voice in Caitlin's head telling her to stop. Upon further inspection, one finds that 'I have to erase the blood! I have to. I have to! I HAVE TO!' is not set in italic letters, thus most likely being Caitlin's thoughts instead of an audible utterance. Yet, the 'No!' could be representative of Caitlin's emotional state. Since it is only a single world, this further complicates matters, as on other occasions in the novel, sin-

gle words are put in italic letters for emphasis (cf. *Mockingbird* 37). I thus cannot simply assume that all italic printed words are uttered aloud. For example, a bystander would either only see Caitlin rubbing the wood with her finger, or also perceive her shouting 'No!' (I will assume that she is uttering it with force because of the exclamation mark), thus creating two different impressions. This distinction is not necessarily relevant for the reader to understand the scene at hand since they have access to both, Caitlin's thoughts and verbal statements. However, printing it in italic letters has the effect of simultaneously hinting at a verbal, a non-verbal, and an emotional utterance. Thus, although some passages are clearly dialogues, the border between Caitlin's inner and outer self is blurred throughout the novel. Consequently, the reader is drawn into Caitlin's mind, creating a deeper understanding of her inner workings. Yet, Caitlin sometimes seems to lack self-awareness (her not being aware that she is screaming), something that is also portrayed in other characters (e.g. David talking to himself, *What to Say Next* 20).

However, Caitlin's lack of self-awareness is also reflected in her use of pronouns (or lack thereof): "All this time I thought I was learning YOUR Manners when really I was learning MY Manners?" (*Mockingbird* 68). Her dialogue with Michael shows that she had not made the connection between being 'you' (from another person's perspective) and herself. Yet it would be unwise to read too much into this incident since Caitlin reports everything from a first-person perspective. Thus, while 'YOUR Manners' might be a single misunderstanding, I can presume that in other situations Caitlin is very much aware of herself. Printing verbal utterances in italic letters instead of sectioning them off by quotation marks blurs the lines, but it does not nullify her self-awareness.

Another technique used is that of capitalising letters or printing them in all caps. Apart from instances where this is used for emphasis (as in the previous excerpt, 'I HAVE TO!'), it demonstrates Caitlin's strong interest in words. Thus, in several instances, she learns new words, e.g.:

> Here's what I'm writing down in my Word Study notebook because these are the words I want to study more than eLIMinate and DEVastate:
> CHAMbers
> AORta
> Atria
> VENtricles
> VEINS
> Arteries
> VALVES (*Mockingbird* 43–44, original capitalisation)

In a sense, this list is some kind of graphic insert, since it depicts the way Caitlin has written down the words in her 'Word Study notebook', i.e. with the emphasised syllables in capital letters. Throughout the novel, other words are introduced, such as finesse, which Caitlin echoes as fin-NESS (*Mockingbird* 96). Here, the misspelling shows how Caitlin only knows the pronunciation of the word, but not yet how it is spelt, or alternatively attempts to spell it phonetically. By imitating the way, words are printed in a dictionary, Caitlin's interest in words and dictionaries is emphasised, demonstrating her unique passion as well as her hyperlexicality.

However, there is another way in which capitalised words are used, which is to emphasise certain expressions. These include:

- The Day Our Life Fell Apart (*Mockingbird* 13)
- Look At The Person (13)
- Get It (14)
- Deal With It (16)
- Let's Talk About It (20)
- Personal Space (19), TRM=Tantrum Rage Meltdown (27), Facial Expressions Chart (22)
- Start A Conversation (29)
- No Running In The Halls (77)
- No Stickers On The Furniture (85)
- Work At It (122)

While The Day Our Life Fell Apart paraphrases the day Devon died, the other expressions are centred around conduct and social interaction. Interestingly, they are used as set expressions: "[Mrs Brook] She's using her Look At The Person behaviour to look at me and I don't like it. … She answers [the phone] but her eyes still Look At The Person." (*Mockingbird* 24) Interestingly, expressions are not only set in capital letters but remain rigid, which emphasises their artificiality. In other words, it demonstrates how these things do not feel natural to Caitlin by estranging them. Contrary to the reader, Caitlin has consciously learned to categorise behaviour, including certain rules for certain interactions. Because 'Look At The Person' is a behaviour Caitlin has learned, she does not perceive Mrs. Brook as 'still looking at her', but as still displaying a certain behaviour. Since the expression is not conjugated the way a verb in this place would be, it appears rigid and intentional, but not intuitive. In a sense, 'Look At The Person' is a disruptive element in this sentence, demonstrating how Caitlin cannot intuitively grasp such body language but has since formed a (rather prim) conception of it. The fact that 'No Running In the Halls' and 'No Stickers On The Furniture' are listed in the same fashion shows how Caitlin has consciously learned and internalised these rules, as well as attributes them the same importance. Other behaviours for interaction also include (respecting) Personal Space and Start a Conversation. Technically, 'Let's Talk About It' is one of Caitlin's categorised behaviours as well, although it is presumably a less intentionally taught one. Most likely, Mrs. Brook has used this expression to initiate a conversation, conditioning Caitlin to expect a discussion:

> But talking about it can help both of you a lot, she [Mrs. Brook] says. Talking about your feelings.
> That will not work for me. I don't like Let's Talk About It. (*Mockingbird* 79)

On the other hand, Work At It, Deal With It and Get It are not behaviours that pertain to body language or interaction per se. Rather, these are methods people apply to their own emotions, needs, cognitive state etc.

> Devon said, If you want to be a Scout you have to Work At It. (*Mockingbird* 122, original capitalisation)
> I wish they [the mints] were gummy worms because that's my favourite but I Deal With It. (16, original capitalisation)
> I make a smiley face with my mouth. I deserve these gummy worms because I do spend all my time considering everything. I just don't always Get It. (43, original capitalisation)

Deal With It is a form of self-regulation that helps Caitlin cope with less ideal situations. Having an expression for it presumably also facilitates this, since it makes it some form of rule. The same applies to Work At It, a behaviour that Devon has taught her, fostering perseverance. Finally, to Get It is Caitlin's way of categorising understanding. She not only applies this rule to herself but also to others: "I sigh and try to explain it [to the teacher] so she'll Get It" (*Mockingbird* 48). Thus, to Get It is crucial for Caitlin, not only in the sense that she is trying to Get It, i.e. trying to understand other people but also in the way that other people have difficulties understanding her.

> I sit at Mrs. Brook's table and cry because even though I Work At It I still don't Get It. (*Mockingbird* 128, original capitalisation)

Caitlin is aware that she has to work hard at understanding others, but she is also aware that her efforts quite often result in failure. However, categorising her behaviours allows her to find words for them, as well as frame her actions and emotions. In terms of her autism diagnosis, the emphasis on rules, even though these rules appear disruptive within a sentence, demonstrates how Caitlin has no intuitive grasp of social conventions. They are also symbolic of the way her behaviour is regulated by rules others have established.

Mockingbird is certainly the most striking example of visual rhetoric when it comes to underlining a character's lexicality. However, in *What to Say Next*, David's notebook in which he jotted down social rules and information on his classmates, teachers, etc., plays an important part. It is, so to speak, his rulebook for 'how to behave normal'. Whenever the note-

book is cited, a different font is used, as well as numbered lists. Moreover, all entries on persons have the same format, indicating David's love for numbers, routine and (mathematical) order (cf. 3).

Similarly, Marcelo tends to have a strict routine and works best with schedules:

> This is the schedule for this morning I prepared last night:
> 5:00 A.M. Wake up
> 5:05 A.M. Remembering
> 5:35 A.M. Feed Namu
> 5:40 A.M. Dumbbells … (*Marcelo* 36)

From this list, the reader not only learns about Marcelo's meticulous habits but it is also a powerful visualisation of his preference for order and clearly structured information. Here, a list conveys this idea much more effectively than a mere mention of it would.

In *The State of Grace*, the text's appearance is at one point used to visualise the effect of sensory overload:

> I can't hear very well and now my brain's doing that thing it does where it sort of goes on a
> delay
> so
> when
> someone
> speaks
> I
> watch their mouth move but the processor takes a moment to translate the words and by the time I've caught what they mean they've started to say something else. (*State of Grace* 127–128)

By interrupting the flow of reading, Grace's 'delay' in the processing of words is transferred to the reader.

Finally, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* also features graphics, which are not uncommon in children's literature, but less so in young adult fiction. In this particular case, pictures might be repre-

sentative of two things. One reason might be that Christopher cannot convey in words what can be shown in a picture or graph. Another reason might be that hinting towards modes of presentation in children's literature may also hint towards Christopher's juvenile way of thinking.

Although or perhaps especially since such visual rhetoric is not used consistently but constitutes a unique narrative feature, it allows the reader to enjoy the narrative while creating a new impetus for reflecting on the autistic mindset of the character, as well as emphasising individual traits of different protagonists.

Pragmatics

Even more characteristic for autism portrayals than visual rhetoric – a technique that interleaves young adult fiction in general – are moments of misunderstanding in communication. These can easily be featured across different media and are thus more noticeable and consequently more likely to be linked to autism portrayals. Indeed, many conversations that autistic characters participate in are portrayed as unconventional, to say the least. Generally speaking, pragmatics focuses on the context-dependent meaning of utterances, whereas semantics is concerned with context-independent meaning (Cummins 6). Since dozens of theories on pragmatics exist, many of which are interrelated or feed off of each other (e.g. based on Austin/Searle or on Grice), I am ill-equipped to make any statements of significance. Indeed, pragmatics and autism are their very own discourse, fed from both a medical and a philosophical perspective. Thus, my findings mostly amount to a list of observations I made about the novels I read. Because most readers will have encountered the Gricean maxims before, I will use them to loosely categorise these ideas.

For Grice, the heart of the matter is that speakers generally expect each other to be cooperative and that other expectations about their behaviour naturally follow from this, concerning the quality and quantity of information that they provide, how they provide it, and how it relates

to the current discourse's purpose. Specifically, he proposes an overarching principle which he calls the Cooperative Principle (CP):

> Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged. (Grice 26)

The Cooperative Principle includes the following maxims:

> **Quantity:**
> 1. Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange).
> 2. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.
> **Quality**:
> Try to make your contribution one that is true.
> 1. Do not say what you believe to be false.
> 2. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.
> **Relation**:
> Be relevant.
> **Manner**:
> Be perspicuous.
> 1. Avoid obscurity of expression.
> 2. Avoid ambiguity.
> 3. Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity).
> 4. Be orderly. (Cummins 16–17, original highlighting)

Grice is indeed aware that people may fail to observe these maxims, either intentionally or, for example, by being "incapable of speaking clearly, or because they deliberately choose to lie" (Thomas, *Meaning in Interaction* 64). Different forms of non-observance include:

- **Flouting a maxim:** "a speaker blatantly fails to observe a maxim" (Thomas, *Meaning in Interaction* 65), including through the use of irony, sarcasm, or figurative language

- **Violating a maxim:** "the unostentatious non-observance of a maxim" (72), which leads to the assumption that the speaker intends to mislead the hearer (72)
- **Infringing a maxim:** non-observance of a maxim but "with no intention of generating an implicature and with no intention of deceiving" (74)
- **Opting out of a maxim:** the speaker indicates "unwillingness to cooperate in the way the maxim requires" (74), e.g. by being bound by an NDA
- **Suspending a maxim:** the observance of a maxim is not expected, thus a non-observance is of no consequence (76)

Only two of these are relevant to my analyses. Flouting a maxim will create some kind of implicature, i.e. the speaker "suggests, implies or communicates [meaning] beyond what she says" (Korta and J. Perry).[1] Implicatures are, according to Grice, figurative or non-literal, such as metaphors or irony. On the other hand,

> [w]hen the speaker's meaning is closed to the conventional meaning of the sentence uttered the speaker is said to be speaking literally. When it departs from conventional meaning [it] is considered non-literal. (Korta and J. Perry)

Flouting a maxim naturally requires the speaker to have mastered the language beyond the level of literal meaning. In contrast, infringing a maxim occurs when the speaker has no intention of creating an implicature, i.e. a non-literal meaning, but still does so (Thomas, *Meaning in Interaction* 74).

Language has a level of literal meaning, as well as a figurative or non-literal level, the latter being implied by the speaker and/or inferred by the hearer (Thomas, *Meaning in Interaction* 58). Here, linguists have pointed out that

1 (Grice made further distinctions here, which are of no relevance to this study.)

> the pragmatic force of an utterance is frequently ambivalent, even in context, and often intentionally so. For reasons of politeness or expediency, both speaker and hearer may deliberately exploit ambivalence. (Thomas, "Cross-Cultural Pragmatic Failure" 93) [2]

Consequently, implicatures and inferences may remain ambivalent, too.[3] At worst, misunderstandings or conflicts arise, however, if both parties are equally pragmatically competent, they should be able to find common ground. Here, Thomas further differentiates linguistic and pragmatic competence:

> A speaker's 'linguistic competence' would be made up of grammatical competence ('abstract' or decontextualized knowledge of intonation, phonology, syntax, semantics, etc.) and pragmatic competence (the ability to use language effectively in order to achieve a specific purpose and to understand language in context). (Thomas, "Cross-Cultural Pragmatic Failure" 92)

However, if one person is linguistically or pragmatically more competent than the other, the latter will find themselves in an inferior position unless the first one chooses to cater to their difficulties. I may apply this to parent-child or teacher-student relations, but I may also apply it to negotiations. Referencing Keckeisen once again, I will assume that a linguistically or pragmatically less competent individual is more likely to be labelled deviant, for the simple reason that they are inferior in a verbal negotiation. If they were previously presumed to be more capable but turned out to be less so, their deviance will entail a loss of status. This also suggests that mastery of language equals power and social standing, not only within discourses or when it comes to influencing the public, but also in face-to-face conversations, implicatures, and deception of

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2 Humorous statements exploit literal and non-literal meanings as well as pragmatic force.

3 For this reason, it seems almost impossible to analyse the non-literal meaning of utterances exhaustively and I apologise in advance for the next section being rather lengthy.

others. Vice versa, a person who can only understand and communicate on a literal level will always suffer disadvantages.

In fact, pragmatic competency alludes to two of the stereotypes discussed in Chapter 3.3. The first one is the stereotype 'Childlike', explicitly stating literalness and difficulties with pragmatics. I will also include naivety (failure to observe floutings or violations of maxims, as well as potential infringements of the same) and honesty (over-observation of the maxim of quality to the point of face-loss, see below). Secondly, the stereotype 'Robot' refers to a communication barrier when it comes to conveying feelings and emotions. However, as discussed before, this communication barrier poses an obstacle to both sides. Body language that is generally considered normal by society's standards may feel foreign or unnatural to autists. Similarly, autists might struggle with figurative language that is often used to express abstract concepts, such as 'feeling blue' or 'having one's heart broken'.

Before I use these findings for my analysis, I wish to include some thoughts on what appears to be the only study on this topic in the field of literary theory[4]. In 2014, Semino analysed three novels (*Curious Incident, Speed of Dark* by Elizabeth Moon, *The Language of Others* by Clare Morrall[5]) regarding 'pragmatic failure'. This particular term was coined by linguist Jenny Thomas in the context of 'cross-cultural' interactions, including "any communication between two people who, in any particular domain, do not share a common linguistic or cultural background" ("Cross-Cultural Pragmatic Failure" 91). Similar to linguistic and pragmatic competence, Thomas distinguishes between a semantic level which spans "the range of possible senses and references of an utterance" (92) and a pragmatic level, which she further differentiates. Here, pragmatic principles provide "sentence meaning" (level 1) and "speaker meaning" (level 2) (92).

4 With the exception of another study by Semino, which I have chosen to disregard because it solely concentrates on *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Nighttime*.

5 Because these two novels feature adult protagonists, they are not part of my study.

"At level 1, pragmatic principles, particularly the Gricean maxim of relevance, allow one to assign sense and reference to the utterance in context" (92), whereas at level 2 force is assigned to an utterance, e.g. " 'criticism' or 'disapproval' or 'commiseration'" (83, 92–93).

> Strictly speaking, it would be logical to apply the term 'pragmatic failure' to misunderstandings which occur at either level one or level two, since both levels involve H in pragmatic inferencing; but I reserve the term exclusively for mis-understandings which arise, not from any inability on the part of H to understand the intended sense/reference of the speaker's words in the context in which they are uttered, but from an inability to recognize the force of the speaker's utterance when the speaker intended that this particular hearer should recognize it.
> We can say, then, that pragmatic failure has occurred on any occasion on which H perceives the force of S's utterance as other than S intended s/he should perceive it. For example, if:
> a. H perceives the force of S's utterance as stronger or weaker than S intended s/he should perceive it;
> b. H perceives as an order an utterance which S intended s/he should perceive as a request;
> c. H perceives S's utterance as ambivalent where S intended no ambivalence;
> d. S expects H to be able to infer the force of his/her utterance, but is relying on a system of knowledge or beliefs which S and H do not, in fact, share. For instance, S says 'Pigs might fly!' to an H unaware that they do not, or S says, 'He's madder than Keith Joseph', to an H who believes Joseph to be perfectly sane. (Thomas, "Cross-Cultural Pragmatic Failure" 94)

My main point of criticism with Semino's study lies in the fact that she uses 'pragmatic failure' rather loosely and with no obvious system of classification. Not only does she forgo the level 1/2 distinction completely, but she also states that there are:

> [t]hree main types of pragmatic failure [that] occur across all three novels: problems with informativeness and relevance in conversa-

> tional contributions; problems with face management resulting in unintentional impolite behaviours; and problems with the interpretation of figurative language. (Semino 141)

To me, it is unclear how these are three 'main' types and not simply three cases Semino happened to come across.[6] I also believe that two out of three are not actually instances of 'pragmatic failure' as per Thomas's definition. Thomas explicitly states that the Gricean maxim of relevance is linked to level 1, thus this would not technically pose an instance of pragmatic failure. Secondly, figurative language such as metaphors is set between semantics and pragmatics or has at least been investigated by both sides. Now, Thomas herself states that if the hearer is unaware that pigs do not fly, he might not understand the intended force (in this case incredulity). However, I argue that in this case the hearer already fails to assign meaning and sense to the sentence on level 1. Taking a metaphor literally, in this case imagining pigs that fly, indicates unawareness of what Thomas calls pragmatic ground rules ("Cross-Cultural Pragmatic Failure" 107) and thus deficits in pragmatic competence. Although the communication barrier suggests that autists speak a different language or rather, communicate differently, they are native speakers and consequently do not have any other language to conceptualise their thoughts. In other words, although they might think differently or use different words to describe their emotions, they are still speaking English. I believe the issue itself needs conceptualisation on philosophical and ethical grounds. Even though autists may have a different or no understanding of implicit pragmatic rules, they do share a reality with us. Therefore, if the hearer is aware of the fact that pigs do not fly but unacquainted with this particular metaphor, they might perceive this utterance as an outright lie or simply nonsense but will nevertheless remain unaware that it has an entirely different meaning. Consequently, the communication failed at level 1.

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6 Semino does justify them with Thery of Mind deficiencies; however, the selection remains unclear.

I also believe that Semino stretches Thomas's definition of 'people who, in any particular domain, do not share a common linguistic or cultural background' by stating that instances of pragmatic failure "suggest that the three protagonists partly lack the ability, or motivation, to imagine the contents and workings of others' minds" (Semino 143). Here, it becomes a question of ability and willingness. I thus suggest extending the theory of the Cooperative Principle. Assuming that most people wish to make themselves understood during communication, I believe that all people apply the Cooperative Principle (CP) to their conversations. However, they will also weigh the Gricean maxims differently and observe or non-observe them according to personal and cultural dispositions. Therefore, the CP can be conceptualised as the willingness to make oneself understood by adhering to 'rules' that govern one's own understanding and thinking. In other words, misunderstandings might arise if the CPs of two people significantly diverge from each other. Because such misunderstandings might already arise on level 1, divergent CPs do not (necessarily) cause pragmatic failure in their original definition. However, I believe it will lead to negotiations of normality and deviance. Consequently, one person will win the negotiations, making their CP the dominant and thus normative one, whereas the other person is perceived as deviant for failing to adhere to 'common' rules. For example, metaphors such as 'pigs might fly', 'time is money', or a 'heart of gold' are so common that they are not renegotiated – not even as schema-refreshments. Unawareness of them will result in a perceived lack of pragmatic competence, which might then result in deviance, since deficits in pragmatic competence or unwillingness to incorporate such idioms in one's own CP will necessarily distance the individual from normality.[7] Put starkly, in a community where it is common to lie (non-observance of maxims), the truth-speaker will still have to admit defeat; morally they might have the high ground, but their deviance makes them powerless. Thus, I believe that pragmatic competence is a way of demonstrating de-

7 Here, 'normality' should be considered a discursive overlap of individual CPs, as well as explicit and implicit rules for language use.

viance in autism portrayals, and that portraying different styles of communication hints toward different Cooperative Principles.

Pragmatic Competence and Deviance in Autism Portrayals

In Chapter 6.1, I compared the commonalities of stereotypes portrayed with the diagnostic criteria as stated in the *DSM-5*. I found that while the stereotypical portrayals might represent one way in which autism symptoms could manifest, it fails to consider the multifaceted nature of autism. One aspect of the stereotypical portrayals included honesty and literalness. The *DSM-5* also refers to language difficulties, ranging from non-verbal individuals to stilted or overly literal language use. I also argued that individuals who communicate very literally are merely one form in which autism might affect language. In novels, such linguistic differences can be used as artistic devices but at times they are overused.

Thomas refers to pragmatic competence as 'the ability to use language effectively in order to achieve a specific purpose and to understand language in context' (see above). I have also suggested that the Cooperative Principle can be considered the individual's readiness to make themselves understood to their best ability. However, the Cooperative Principle should also be understood as a set of cultural and social norms and rules by which language use is governed. Therefore, two individuals with the same pragmatic competence could employ different CPs and subsequently still arrive at a misunderstanding, e.g. misheard sarcasm. This simplified understanding of communication is sufficient to explain how normality and deviance can be negotiated through the use of language. I will assume that it varies based on age, upbringing, social status, cognitive abilities, cultural norms, native language, etc. Difficulties arising from a lack of pragmatic competence (in the following referred to as 'pragmatic difficulties') or a different CP may thus arise in a plethora

of situations and are not restricted to autists.[8] In this section, I will explore some instances of (failed) communication, including

i. under- and oversharing,
ii. literalness,
iii. body language,
iv. honesty and lies,
v. figurative language, and
vi. politeness.

There is a distinct overlap between the categories, but I have attempted to create some form of order to point out certain differences.

i. Under- and oversharing

What Semino classifies as problems with informativeness and relevance, essentially boils down to saying too little or too much. The Gricean Maxim of Quantity states that one should make a contribution as informative as is required but not more, whereas the Maxim of Relevance simply asks the statement to be relevant. Thus, what I have termed 'undersharing' refers to instances in which a conversation fails because a character is unwilling or unable to cooperate under the Maxims of Quantity and Relevance. I will loosen the linguistic bounds of this phenomenon by defining it as occurrences where a character is unable to communicate their thoughts and emotions and consequently appears passive, emotionless, or disinterested *even though they are not*. This communication barrier is portrayed in all characters to a certain extent. Examples include:

8 Another point of contention with Semino's study is the fact that she does not draw parallels to neurotypical individuals nor considers other causes for impairment other than ToM. Although she does not state that pragmatic difficulties hint towards autism, she assumes that autists will naturally be pragmatically impaired, regardless their age, etc.

Marcelo in the Real World:

> That's why I think many more thoughts than I actually express and why sometimes I come across as slow. I think too much about what I'm hearing and what I'm going to say, and that's a problem when trying to carry on a conversation. (*Marcelo* 45)

Mockingbird:

> *Your dad is worried that you might not understand that Devon…isn't alive.*
> *He tells me you say, Devon says this or Devon does that, as if he's still alive.*
> *I do say that but it doesn't mean I think he's still alive. He was alive when he said those things though.*
> *Your dad said you want Devon to take you shopping.*
> *I do.*
> *But Devon can't take you shopping. Do you understand that?*
> *Yes. But he asked what I want. That's what I want. I know I can't have it.* (Mockingbird 111f., original highlighting).

Can You See Me:

> 'It wouldn't have killed you to say sorry too,' Nell hisses, as she sits down at the table.
> Tally looks at the congealed honey as it solidifies on the toast and tries not to feel sick. She is saying sorry. It's not her fault that Nell can't see that. (*Can You See Me* 118)

The State of Grace:

> 'Sorry.'
> I surprise myself by saying it. Most of the time I find it almost impossible to get the word out. Not because I'm not sorry, but because it's like there's a glass bubble in my mouth stopping the words from forming. (*State of Grace* 98)

The instances of undersharing are very different but they will all cause characters to appear in a negative light due to a misunderstanding. Consequently, these characters are perceived as aloof, selfish, or rude, although they are actually struggling to communicate. Undersharing may also occur when individuals do not display 'adequate' body language (see below). In all examples, characters are ready to communicate, but their statements (with the exception of *The State of Grace*) cannot be understood by others. Therefore, it could be theorised that these characters have pragmatic difficulties, at least in certain situations. Of course, apologies also follow social norms and will easily result in impoliteness. It can thus be said that the undersharing of information is not meant to withhold the latter but stems from their inability to actually express themselves verbally. However, these are singular events and one instance alone cannot be considered a feature of autism portrayals since it may occur in other characters, too, for a plethora of reasons. Even characters who frequently fail to communicate their feelings or get a foot in the door during a conversation may simply be shy or overwhelmed; or rude for that matter.

On the other hand, oversharing can at times be an autistic phenomenon. It usually occurs in relation to their special interests, i.e. topics they are very invested in. All protagonists examined in my study have such special interests:

Marcelo in the Real World:

> I wish I had a glass of water. There is no saliva whatsoever in my mouth. I cough again. 'My special interest is God.' …
> I think, Now she thinks I'm weird. I don't want to be here anyway. At Paterson no one regards me with suspicion or stays away from me because I have an interest in religion. I have to remember never to talk about anything religious while I'm here. It scares people. (*Marcelo* 57)

The State of Grace:

> 'Horse. She's a horse, because she's Arabian, and even if they're smaller than the official horse classification they're still horses…' I sort of tail off, because even I can tell when I'm doing the *fascinating facts by Grace* thing sometimes. (*State of Grace* 116, original highlighting)

The London Eye Mystery:

> [Preceded by a monologue on topological maps] When people are bored, Mr Shepherd says the muscles in their face don't do anything and they stare without really looking and he says I should always check to see if this is how people are looking when I talk to them. (*London Eye Mystery* 46)

All three characters mentioned have learned to reflect on their utterances when talking about their special interests, either because they might talk about it too extensively, breach non-free topics or simply bore the other person. Marcelo's father previously reminded him to not talk about his interest in religion (*Marcelo* 42), thus Marcelo is now struggling to obey his father's rule as well as the demand put on him by his co-worker's question. Although in this case, Marcelo tries to change the topic of conversation, there are several instances in the novel where he talks about religion, including with a rabbi, his parents, and his friend (e.g. *Marcelo* 114ff., 158, 188…), as well as other instances where he reflects on his life in light of religious ideas (e.g. faith, *Marcelo* 303).

However, while Grace can stop herself, Ted is actually more concerned about Salim being bored because his sister is talking about nail polish. Ironically, while he does remember his teacher's rule for recognising boredom, he cannot fathom that people would be bored by topological maps. This form of enthusiastic talking about a certain topic is often called info-dumping, yet also being considered a 'love language' within the autism community, as autists argue that they only offer up this much information on their special interest(s) to people they trust and care about (Whelan).

On the other hand, oversharing may also include breaching taboos and non-free topics (see Chapter 4.4), i.e. mentioning topics in the 'wrong' circumstances. Such instances relate to honesty and literalness, cf. Ted talking to his aunt:

> 'Aunt Gloria,' I said. I took a slice [of bread] for myself. 'Wouldn't it be better for your health to give up cigarettes?' Dad coughed as if something had gone down the wrong way. 'I read some interesting figures yesterday. If everyone in Britain gave up smoking, the National Health Service would safe –'
> 'Ted!' Mum said.
> Aunt Gloria chuckled. 'No, Fai, Ted's right to ask. …' (*London Eye Mystery* 26)

Ted is both, honest and blunt when he asks his aunt why she keeps smoking even though it is bad for her health, but he does not stop there and continues to reference the NHS and statistics about the topic until interrupted, showing how he is unaware of any wrongdoing. His parents, meanwhile, are mortified by his faux pas, indicating how it is a non-free or even taboo topic to breach. On the other hand, his aunt's reaction is calm and positive, she even laughs at the situation. Now, Ted not only breached a taboo by being too honest, but he presumably also would have continued to reference statistics he read about. I can thus state that the character is a) unaware of any social taboos relating to this topic, b) unaware of any emotional harm his question could have potentially caused, e.g. if Gloria had unsuccessfully tried to quit smoking before, and c) breaches of taboos or non-free topics may be received very differently. While oversharing is not a criterion for autism portrayals, it could be considered a disposition of the individual's Cooperative Principle: because they are so fascinated by a certain topic, they will make this topic a priority in their communication because they will assume that other people enjoy talking about this as much as they do themselves.

However, generally speaking instances of under- or oversharing will naturally contribute to the impression of a certain clumsiness when it comes to social interaction, mostly due to the communication barrier.

While undersharing could be attributed to pragmatic difficulties, oversharing is more likely a disposition of the individual.

ii. Literalness

I have previously mentioned literalness in connection with the stereotype 'Childlike', and it is in fact a common stereotype outside of literature that "autistic people are terribly literal" (Draaisma 1478). Thomas states that

> a speaker who is not operating according to the standard grammatical code is at worse condemned as 'speaking badly', the person who operates according to differently formulated pragmatic principles may well be censured as *behaving* badly; as being an untruthful, deceitful, or insincere person. (Thomas, "Cross-Cultural Pragmatic Failure" 107)

There are many instances in which we do not expect to be taken literally, such as when we inquire how somebody is (Thomas, "Cross-Cultural Pragmatic Failure" 107), yet if someone were to take us literally, both sides would be upset. Yet, for somebody operating under the assumption that there are but literal utterances, flouting a maxim will give the appearance of disregarding them completely. Such perceived 'insincerity' could be interpreted as a lie. Jokes, too, are linked to pragmatics, since they exploit the different levels of literal and non-literal meaning, including sarcasm, irony, puns, or other word plays.[9] Taking statements literally may thus also result in difficulties in understanding humour and cause the individual to appear like a killjoy. However, no character is portrayed as exclusively literal, and there is no common measurement for this either. We all know that one person who is incapable of recognising sarcasm, and we have all met somebody who has an utterly incompatible sense of humour compared to our own. Because 'being literal' touches upon so many different aspects of communication, including metaphors, I am

9 The topic of humour is altogether too big to discuss here; it is also not only related to the character portrayal but the reader's reception, too.

hesitant to make it a generalised criterion. Autists may very well be capable of sarcasm, humour, lying, or the use of figurative language. In fact, all these instances are portrayed in the novels[10]:

The State of Grace:

> [Gabe:] 'Jesus. What are you doing up here at this time of the morning?' …
> 'It's a bridle path. And this –' I indicate the highly unimpressed Mable, still stock still, who gives a well-timed huff of disapproval – 'is my horse. Wearer of a bridle. Hence the path.' …
> 'Right,' he [Gabe] says, and he's laughing. 'Did you have sarcasm flakes for breakfast?'
> I thought I was simply stating the obvious. (27f.)

Since this is not a movie, a reader has to imagine their body language and tone of voice, both of which would have given us clues about Grace's implicature. However, the reader is likely able to deduce some of it by Gabe's reaction; because he thinks Grace is being sarcastic, they are inclined to (re-)read it as such. Nevertheless, Grace's response to Gabe's question is funny if only for the dry way she points out the obvious. However, she is infringing rather than flouting the maxims, as she is in fact not intentionally being sarcastic but 'stating the obvious'; Grace is simply being literal. On the other hand, Gabe uses figurative language ('sarcasm flakes'), which Grace has no difficulty understanding, thus demonstrating a certain level of pragmatic competence. The misunderstanding thus arises from different Cooperative Principles that weigh the observance and non-observance of maxims differently.

Another example of literalness in conversation is the following dialogue between David and his sister (*What to Say Next*):

> 'So if you want to kiss Kit, that means you want her to see you like a *real guy*,' Miney says …

10 I forwent the analysis of *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* because of the controversy surrounding it (see Chapter 5.4).

> 'I am a *real guy*.' How come even my own sister seems me as something not quite human? Something other. 'I have a penis.'
> 'And just when I think we've made progress you go and mention your penis.'
> 'What? Fact: I have a penis. That makes me a guy. Though technically there are some trans people who have penises but self-identify as girls.'
> 'Please stop saying that word.' …
> 'Do you prefer member? Shlong? Wang? Johnson?' I ask. 'Dongle, perhaps?'
> 'I would prefer we not discuss your man parts at all.'
> 'Wait, should I text Kit immediately and clarify that I do in fact have man parts?' I pick up my phone and start typing. 'Dear Kit. Just to be clear. I have a penis.'
> 'Oh my God. Do not text her. Seriously, stop.' Miney puts her coffee down hard. She'll climb over the table and tackle me if she has to.
> 'Ha! Totally go you!' I smile, as proud as I was the other day for my *that's what she said* joke.
> 'Who are you?' Miney asks, but she's grinning too. I'll admit it takes a second – something about the disconnect between her confused tone and her happy face – and I almost, almost say out loud: *Duh, I'm Little D*. Instead I let her rhetorical question hang, just like I'm supposed to. (100–101)

This dialogue shows the fine interplay of oversharing and breaching non-free topics, as well as literalness and humour. David obviously has a history of oversharing, something I can deduce from the fact that his sister reacts panicked because she fully expects him to see through with his plans. Moreover, David is aware that he is not supposed to talk with Kit about this, but he has no qualms about teasing his sister about the topic in front of their father. Moreover, while others would already have considered the word 'penis' a taboo – his sister tells him to stop mentioning it – David adds to the list. Thus, he obviously sees no harm in it but has internalised the rule not to talk about this with others. Although I technically cannot be sure at what point David becomes aware that he is breaching a non-free topic, or if he is all along, I know for certain that

he never intended to write Kit this text message. However, I can also deduce that he anticipated his sister's reaction. Therefore, David not only has the pragmatic competence to mislead his sister, but he is also aware of the norms that make certain topics taboo. On the other hand, the fact that he talks freely about penises shows how his Cooperative Principle diverges from his sister's.

Additionally, this moment is indicative of a Theory of Mind. A lack thereof is often made responsible for a lack of humour in these individuals since they are incapable of anticipating the reactions of others and figuring out their mental state. David obviously is neither, though he seemed to have struggled with it in the past, too. Whether this is due to a lack of Theory of Mind or differing principles that guide non-free and free topics remains in doubt. In the wake of his achievement of fooling his sister, he nearly trips upon her rhetorical question, which could also be considered an instance of literalness. However, David realises that it is merely rhetorical and lets it hang as he is 'supposed to'. Here, it must be mentioned that David in particular struggles with rhetorical questions, though this is not a common occurrence in all portrayals. It could thus be considered a pragmatic difficulty for him. Furthermore, the dialogue demonstrates how he actively has to reflect on the conversation to react 'appropriately', and how he has more or less internalised the rules. Such behaviour can be considered camouflaging. Here, David's development is mirrored in Miney's reaction, first her (slightly exasperated) 'and just when I think we've made progress', indicating how she has worked hard with David to explain implicit rules, as well as her happiness when she realises that he has in fact made progress and can now even surprise her. Grace's utterance was merely literal, i.e. she had no intention of being funny or sarcastic. In her case, I will assume that she was operating under a different Cooperative Principle. On the other hand, David's conversation started out as somewhat serious, but he proceeded to tease his sister, pretending to take their dialogue literally when in fact he was intentionally building up to a joke. This demonstrates pragmatic competency. However, he subsequently struggles with a rhetorical question and the dialogue is also characterised by different Cooperative Principles.

Another difference between these two excerpts is their conversational partners, with Gabe not expecting Grace to be 'merely' literal but interpreting her matter-of-fact utterance as sarcasm, whereas Miney assumes David to be literal based on her experience. Of course, David's joke would not have worked if Miney had seen through his act, and he nearly trips up on her rhetorical question. Indeed, characters usually struggle with understanding the non-literal meaning of different aspects, i.e. sarcasm *or* lies *or* humour *or* figurative language but not all at once and also not in every situation. Although it might be helpful to characterise autists as being literal, it should also be considered that they will not trip upon every non-literal aspect of language, or the reading experience would not be enjoyable (cf. *Figurative Language*).

iii. Body language

Although rather negligible for literary analysis, I wish to comment on body language in the context of communication, since it plays a vital role. Because body language such as other implicit rules for social interaction does not come naturally to many autists, they may be perceived as stilted or puppet-like. Most commonly, characters were reminded to look their conversational partners in the eyes or reported having difficulties with this.

Mockingbird:

> [Teacher:] *Look at me.*
> I do.
> *Not that way. Look in my eyes.*
> I sigh and fold my arms. *Fine*. I glance at her eyes. They are black and white and brown. Like Devon's. I never noticed that before. I'm so surprised that I actually stare instead of looking away.
> *Good! That's very good, Caitlin! That's how you show people you're interested in them and that you're listening to them. Can you see how happy my eyes are right now?*

> I nod. I'm still staring at her eyes or where her eyes used to be when she turs her head to look where she's walking. When she turns back I catch the eyes again and keep staring. I'm getting good at this.
> *Okay, but you don't have to stare quite so hard or quite so long.*
> I close my eyes.
> *You can just look away briefly and then come back to my eyes again.*
> I do.
> *Try to make it a little smoother so you don't look like you're about to jump on top of me when you stare into my eyes.*
> *See? It's too hard!* (95f.)

This dialogue points out behaviour most of us intuitively engage in, but which does not come naturally to Caitlin. It is the first time she actually looked her teacher in the eye and she does not look away solely because their eyes remind her of her brother. Caitlin then misses the mark when she keeps staring in the direction her teacher's eyes were, resulting in the teacher feeling uncomfortable. It is a fortunate setting, in that the teacher is explicitly trained to explain these behaviours to Caitlin and help her refine them. However, if this were to happen in a conversation with somebody else, they would likely react confused, scared, or angry, feeling provoked by Caitlin's stares or, incidentally, her lack of eye contact. Finally, Caitlin gets frustrated because she is trying really hard but has no intuitive grasp of what is expected of her. Similarly to how body language appears somewhat unnatural to her, she also has difficulties interpreting this form of communication. Without exception, all characters are portrayed as struggling to understand facial expressions, posture, gestures, or subtle shifts thereof.

Grace (*State of Grace*) describes body language as follows:

> For a split second I feel like I'm on the outside of some unspoken conversation – but then I often feel like that. I think it's probably how it feels when you're really fluent in a language but you're with native speakers. I speak human as a second language, and there's always a subtext that I miss. (8)

Grace recognises a change in her opponents' body language but she cannot decode it, not even consciously. She also mentions how this happens frequently and makes her feel like a foreigner, or, indeed, not even human, which refers to the alien stereotype. Her comparison also indicates that she has to make a conscious effort to translate body language in general, given she has the means to do so.

For those struggling to display and read body language, it might give the impression of being superfluous to communication. However, some facial expressions or gestures appear to be universal, hence the alien metaphor. Incidentally, a lack of body language was also associated with a lack of ToM and, consequently, a lack of emotions, which leads back to the communication barrier.

> Some scholars have suggested that this mirror mechanism is disrupted in ASD, leaving individuals with ASD without this automatic flow of shared felt experiences of self and other behaviours and with, instead, 'disembodied' and declarative social knowledge (based on explicit inferential reasoning) as the primary foundation for social understanding and social learning … . (Vivanti and Rogers 3)

Even if the theory concerning autism and the mirror neurons remains disputed, I believe it helpful to consider body language as well as social knowledge in autists as explicitly learned rather than intuitively grasped. Other instances portrayed in the novels include facial expressions and stimming (see Masking and Camouflaging, Chapter 6.4).

Body language plays such a vital part in our everyday communication that it might even lead to false assumptions being made about those who are not proficient at it. Displaying unusual body language can be obstructive in more than one way since it is a form of visible deviance. In 2022, a study with adult participants examined

> whether autistic individuals would be perceived as more deceptive and less credible than their neurotypical peers due to their demonstration of unexpected or atypical behaviors that are commonly judged as indicative of deception: specifically, gaze aversion, repet-

> itive body movements, literal interpretation of figurative language, poor reciprocity, and flat affect. (Lim et al. 500)

Gaze aversion, especially, is commonly associated with lying or deceiving (Lim et al. 501), yet researchers found no significant differences when it came to displaying the behaviours mentioned above (500). Despite this, "[a]utistic individuals were indeed judged as more deceptive and lower on perceived competence and character compared to neurotypical individuals" (500); with researchers speculating that autists are "more likely to display a unique combination of behaviors and nuances that discriminate them from neurotypical individuals and result in unfavorable impressions" (501). Consequently, autists may be perceived as dishonest or deceiving even if they are being honest, or at least as if there is something 'off' about their body language, but the study also demonstrates how autistic adults have learned to display 'appropriate' body language.

iv. Honesty and Lies

Being honest is more of a character trait and could be considered part of the Cooperative Principle, i.e. because an individual values honesty more highly in a conversation, they will also adhere to this rule when communicating themselves. On the other hand, deception requires pragmatic competence. Autists especially are often described as more honest and less inclined to deceit (Bagnall et al. 301). In *What to Say Next*, Kit even calls it David's honesty disease (177). A recent survey of studies on this topic came to the conclusion that it is likely related to age and ability. Researchers found that although "many autistic children have difficulties with deception", autistic adults are not typically incapable of deceiving others (Bagnall et al. 302).

> This therefore leaves room for the possibility that deception ability may develop later in life for autistic individuals without co-occurring ID or significantly delayed verbal ability. (Bagnall et al. 301)

Honesty would thus be linked to cognitive and verbal abilities, though in regard to the portrayals analysed, I can state that all characters are capable of deceiving others, e.g. by lying, evading the question, or violating a maxim, even if they are unwilling to or not very skilled at it. For example, in *The London Eye Mystery*, Ted starts out as being very honest and incapable of lying but learns to do so during the course of events (175). Marcelo (*Marcelo*), too, decides to go behind the back of his father to pursue something he deems right. When at some point he is forced to lie about leaving the office and claims a doctor's appointment, his lie catches up with him: when asked about the doctor's appointment, he reacts confused, indicating his lack of experience in not telling the truth. "For a moment I do not know what she is talking about. Lying requires an incredible amount of mental effort" (*Marcelo* 198).

Finally, David in *What to Say Next* is capable of lying but not very practised.

> 'Can I be excused?' I ask [the teacher].
> 'Excused? This is a classroom, not the dinner table. Let's get back to work.'
> 'I meant can I go to the nurse? I have a migraine,' I say, though this is a lie. Miney would be proud. She says I need to practice not telling the truth. That lying gets easier the more you do it. (24)

David's first attempt fails as he makes a wrong choice of words, indicating how he is not used to finding excuses for skipping class. If he were more proficient at it, he likely would have been successful at the first attempt. Instead, his utterance violates unspoken conventions, leading to his teacher reacting with indignation and a reprimand. Only at his second attempt and by clarifying what he meant earlier, David makes himself understood and succeeds in credibly telling his story. He then reflects on his sister's attitude towards lying and how she keeps encouraging him to practise it in order to become better.

All three characters have the pragmatic competence to lie, but they do not have the disposition to do so or only developed one later. Here, pragmatic difficulties might be intertwined with the Cooperative Prin-

ciple, e.g. a character could potentially value honesty higher because they are aware of their inability to engage in deception and consequently also have more difficulties recognising it in others.

The evaluation of the fictional portrayals in Chapter 3.4 has shown that all characters are portrayed as honest, at times too honest, but also capable of deceiving others, though usually in harmless situations.[11] Honesty is also often combined with literalness, causing friction in social situations when characters are too blunt or too honest. It is therefore most likely that the Cooperative Principles of these characters emphasise honesty. However, in reality, autists are often seen as more deceptive than others because of their differences in body language. Although they might generally be more honest, they are not necessarily perceived as such. Thus, perhaps 'being overly honest' to the point of face-loss is indeed a characteristic of fictional autism portrayals, or at least one that is exploited for various (humorous) effects.

v. Figurative Language

Researchers suggest that

> [F]igurative language processing and comprehension taxes the language system, but also involves appreciation for the communicative context and the integration of multiple sources of information from different modalities. (Vulchanova and Vulchanov 9)

Medical studies have found that neuroatypical individuals usually show difficulties interpreting figurative speech. However, researchers have also found that the ability to correctly identify figurative language increases with age (Beriault, Ditmars & Klatt), although usually lagging behind same-aged neurotypical individuals (Vulchanova and Vulchanov

11 As a side-effect, if a character is regularly portrayed as overly honest, to the point where it causes face-loss, they may also be given the benefit of the doubt when they lie, thus they would have a small advantage up to the point where other people realise they have acquired this skill.

6).[12] On the other hand, atypical adults scored similarly to control groups (Kasirer and Mashal; Vulchanova and Vulchanov 9), possibly indicating

> that conventional expressions are acquired in the course of development, and that with time, adults may increasingly rely on stored chunks for the purposes of processing. (Vulchanova and Vulchanov 3)

Thus, understanding and using figurative language can be attributed to pragmatic competence. For story-telling purposes, I can infer that autistic characters might struggle with figures of speech, but increasingly less so the older they are. These characters are also likely to have built some memory of common figures of speech thus speeding up processing. Semino theorises in her study that taking figurative language literally "defamiliarize[s] everyday conversational interaction, potentially resulting in some degree of 'schema refreshment'" (Semino 155). If I felt generous, I would give the author the benefit of the doubt, especially in younger characters. However, it often appears to be the proverbial rabbit drawn from the hat, for the mere amusement of the reader or viewer, since having characters misunderstand figurative language is the easiest way to create hiccoughs in conversation and demonstrate how literal-minded they are. At times it seems that it has also become an unofficial running gag when portraying autists. Of all the novels examined, only *The State of Grace* does not participate in this unofficial convention, although I could place the other characters on a gamut. For example, Trueman (*Trueman Bradley*) is exceptionally bad at recognising figurative language and tends to take everything literally.

> '… You're too naïve, kid. New York will eat you alive!'
> 'Eat me?' I asked. 'Are you saying there are cannibals in New York City? Cannibalism is illegal in the United States!'
> 'No, Trueman!' said Buckley. 'I don't mean that literally. I mean you can't succeed as a detective! Not with your condition! You gotta be able

12 Interestingly, autistic individuals were not only able to come up with their own metaphors but also showed more creativity in this area (Vulchanova and Vulchanov 6).

> to read between the lines and be cagey as a cat, and you can't if you take everyone literally.'
> I didn't understand what a cat or a cage had to do with any of this, but I could understand enough of what he was saying. (*Trueman Bradley* 31)

The first use of figurative language (eat you alive) confuses Trueman to the point where he cannot make sense of it. He jumps to the conclusion of cannibalism, although one might argue that a city cannot possibly eat anybody. On a semantic level, this sentence does not make sense and cannibalism is Trueman's next-best explanation. He has no difficulties understanding the next metaphor (reading between the lines), or at least he does not get stuck on this utterance. Instead, Trueman focuses on 'cagey as a cat', which in itself is a simile and not a metaphor. However, because he apparently does not know the translation for cagey, he cannot make sense of this utterance either. Although his response is appropriate when he defends his own abilities, he would not have needed to understand this part of Buckley's utterance, since the latter explicitly stated that Trueman would not succeed as a detective because he takes everything literally. Because this novel is also intended as autism advocacy, I will assume that this discussion is supposed to be exemplary; Trueman is portrayed as able to compensate for his shortcomings in language competence with his extraordinary abilities. Unfortunately, while having a character stumble over (almost) all instances of figurative language they encounter certainly creates awareness of their difficulties, the refreshing momentum wears off quickly to the point where it becomes cumbersome. It may also tip to the point where the reader becomes suspicious of the character. In *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*, Christopher is portrayed as struggling with figurative language, albeit more because he is unwilling to participate in the use of it, insisting that metaphors are in fact lies:

> I think it should be called a lie because a pig is not like a day and people do not have skeletons in their cupboards. And when I try and make a picture of the phrase in my head it just confuses me because imagining an apple in someone's eye doesn't have anything to do with liking

> someone a lot and it makes you forget what the person was talking about. (*Curious Incident* 20)

Although this is meant to portray Christopher as very literal-minded, especially when he describes visualising these idioms, the reader is left to wonder whether his refusal to use them is simply principle-based. Generally speaking, while this may be idiosyncratic to Christopher's portrayal, most characters examined do not refuse to use figurative language.

The examples of Trueman and Christopher demonstrate how pragmatic difficulties can bleed into the Cooperative Principle. Especially in individuals who do not struggle with language on a general basis but figurative language in particular, this can be easily attributed to an unwillingness to adhere to social and cultural expectations. Both characters might arguably have more difficulties understanding figurative language, to the point where they would have to explicitly learn the meaning of idioms; however, they are also intellectually able to do so. Thus, by not including figurative language in their Cooperative Principle, they willingly distance themselves from what is considered 'normal'. Here, it could be said that these characters simply operate under a different CP, yet because figurative language is such widely used, they only succeed in cementing their deviance.

Difficulties with figurative language do not necessarily have to result in an aversion. Several characters like or enjoy figurative language and meaning. For example, in *What to Say Next*, David writes idioms down in his notebook:

> [David:] 'I like that expression. Eat your feelings. I keep a list of idioms. I'll have to add that one.'
> 'You're an idiom.' She says, and at first my stomach drops – she is making fun of me – but then I look up and see she's wearing a friendly smile. This is good teasing, I think. (41)

David has never before encountered this saying ('eat your feelings'), but he was able to deduce its meaning without having to ask. It is also left

up for interpretation whether he keeps a list for easier remembering or because he enjoys idioms. Here, the first could point to pragmatic difficulties when it comes to implicitly understanding figurative language. However, the fact that he keeps a list shows his acknowledgement of this socially accepted use of language. Additionally, David is able to understand what Kit wants to communicate when she calls him an 'idiom', although he expects an insult rather than a compliment.

Ted in *The London Eye Mystery* is another example of a character who enjoys metaphors, especially those linked to meteorology. At times, he even invents new ones to describe his own emotions or those of other people (*London Eye Mystery* 64, 188, 198…). I can thus state that the understanding of figurative language is portrayed as character- but not age-related. It can be used to further define a character and their interests but overused will lose its schema-refreshing moment and make a character appear limited in their ability to use language, as well as pedantic to the point where their CP is no longer considered 'normal'.

vi. Politeness

> Politeness, broadly defined so as to encompass both polite friendliness and polite formality, is concerned with any behaviour including verbal behaviour of an interlocutor to constitute and maintain his or her own face and that of the people he or she is interacting with. (Huang 6)

However, when it comes to impoliteness, research is "still in its infancy" (Huang 8) and apparently has been for the last decades. Generally speaking, it is altogether too complex and culturally diverse to be reduced to simple rules or even a definition. I will assume politeness to be a (rather fuzzy) principle that may come into conflict "with other, deeply held values, such as truthfulness or sincerity" (Thomas 106). Indeed, it is a common occurrence that one has to choose between different pragmatic principles. Put lyrically by Thomas, "we must navigate linguistically between the Scylla of tactlessness and the Charybdis of dishonesty" (Thomas, "Cross-Cultural Pragmatic Failure" 108). As mentioned before,

being too blunt, too honest, or too curious will often reflect negatively on the character. Yet, being 'a bit' blunt, honest, or curious is not only socially acceptable but encouraged. Here, this concept would need further demarcation.

Semino quotes Culpeper, in that

> Situated behaviours are viewed negatively – considered 'impolite' – when they conflict with how one expects them to be, how one wants them to be and/or how one thinks they ought to be. Such behaviours always have or are presumed to have emotional consequences for at least one participant, that is, they cause or are presumed to cause offence. (Culpeper, qtd. in Semino 151)

In other words, if one party in the conversation ends up offended, impoliteness occurred. I am unsure to what extent it would be beneficial to analyse impoliteness based on this definition in relation to the portrayal of autism. I may investigate violations of the Cooperative Principle, non-free topics/taboos, literalness, and bluntness. However, involuntary impoliteness in autists mostly seems to be but the symptom of different pragmatic principles, e.g. valuing truthfulness over social conventions. I fear that assuming autists (and therefore their fictional portrayals) to be rude or impolite could all too easily be generalised into a character trait and thus attributed to malice. In her study, Semino falls into this trap, when she states that

> the protagonists potentially cause offence not out of malice, but because of a partial lack of awareness of the potential consequences of what they say for others' feelings, and, in turn, for their own social image. (Semino 151)

Out of this partial lack, Semino concludes "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). Thus, impoliteness is reduced to putting one's own values over the opponent's feelings, in essence being selfish over being com-

passionate. Of course, I may unintentionally be impolite. However, if "intentions and recognition of intentions are involved, then rudeness rather than impoliteness occurs" (Huang 7). In my opinion, it is significant whether a person has the intention of being rude. If somebody continually puts their foot in their mouth, I may call them a dork, yet if I know they are intentionally offending others, I will attribute it to malice. Since the investigation of impoliteness could inadvertently label autists as generally rude, which would implicate liability, I will rather focus on deviance in general.[13]

Concluding the topic of pragmatics, it can be stated that different aspects of autism portrayals such as literalness, under- and oversharing, honesty, deception, and figurative language can be conveyed on a textual level. Such idiosyncrasies can enhance the representation of autism in literary characters. However, the 'schema refreshment' of such misunderstandings will quickly wear off when overused, resulting in one-dimensional portrayals of characters that appear intellectually able but unwilling to adhere to social and cultural norms of language.

In some instances, it is difficult to ascertain whether misunderstandings arise from pragmatic difficulties, different Cooperative Principles, or even a general inability or unwillingness to communicate, including shyness and other communication barriers. Authors must be careful when portraying such pragmatic difficulties, as they can be easily re-read as a character's intentional disruption of communication. When positioned against background characters that represent social and cultural norms of language use, characters operating under a different Cooperative Principle will appear deviant and potentially unreliable.

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13 That is not to say that unorthodox behaviour may not cause offence and that autists are never rude or impolite. Rather, I believe it wrong to focus on 'rudeness' and go hunting for any remarks that may cause offence; for if one were being honest, there are a lot of intentionally rude people out there, as well as a myriad of situations where utterances or actions could be considered rude if one were to scrutinise them.

Unreliable Narrators?

Upon encountering a character that struggles with understanding pragmatics and body language, I might be inclined to consider their testimony unreliable, after all, they are likely to miss the subtext or even misunderstand the whole situation. Similar to the other topics in this chapter, there is a whole discourse hidden behind the innocent term 'unreliable narrator', which was first coined by Wayne C. Booth in 1961. For this section, I will refer to Ansgar Nünning's *Unreliable, compared to what?* (1999), an essay in which he concludes that it is ultimately "not so much a character trait of a narrator as it is an interpretive strategy of the reader" (Nünning, "Reconceptualizing Unreliable Narration: Synthesizing Cognitive and Rhetorical Approaches" 94–95). In other words, conceptualising the narrator as unreliable can be seen as a "strategy by which the reader naturalizes textual inconsistencies that might otherwise remain unassimilable" (Nünning, "Unreliable, compared to what?" 69). Thus, according to Nünning,

> [t]he term ›unreliable narrator‹ does not designate a structural or semantic feature of texts, but a pragmatic phenomenon that cannot fully be grasped without taking into account the conceptual premises that readers and critics bring to texts. (Nünning, "Unreliable, compared to what?" 66)

I have previously established that pragmatics work according to the Cooperative Principle, i.e. the assumption that others are operating according to the same rules on which we base our utterances (Thomas, *Meaning in Interaction* 62). In essence, then, a narrator becomes unreliable when I – as a reader – realise that they are indeed not abiding by our Cooperative Principle, or, in Nünning's words, when there is a "distance that separates the narrator's view of the worlds from the reader's or critic's world-model and standards of normalcy" (Nünning, "Unreliable, compared to what?" 61). Thus, I have re-entered the discourse of normality, if ever I really left.

When contrasting (un-)reliability to the reader's understanding of 'normal', it is unsurprising that I have to discard textual 'proof', at least to a certain extent. After all, "'normal moral standards', 'basic common sense' and 'human decency'" (64) do not have as solid a core as one would perhaps like or theorise them to have (see Chapter 4.2, flexible normalism). Consider the following dialogue from *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*:

> The policewoman put her arms round Mrs Shears and led her back towards the house.
> I lifted my head off the grass.
> The policeman squatted down beside me and said, 'Would you like to tell me what's going on here, young man?'
> I sat up and said, 'The dog is dead.'
> 'I'd got that far,' he said.
> I said, 'I think someone killed the dog.'
> 'How old are you?' he asked.
> I replied, 'I am 15 years and 3 months and 2 days.' (7)

In her study, Semino reasons that Christopher's breaches of the maxims of Quantity and Relation render him deviant:

> Competent readers … are likely to infer, … that the character's/ narrator's communicative behaviour reflects a cognitive impairment that they may identify as high-functioning autism or Asperger syndrome. At the level of character–character communication, however, the characters' responses are sometimes perceived to be puzzling or deliberately uncooperative, resulting in misunderstanding and/or conflict. (Semino 147)

I cannot simply agree with this. For one thing, 'identify' suggests that this 'inferred cognitive impairment' is some idiosyncrasy of autism portrayals. And secondly, it disregards the primacy effect of framing a portrayal as an autism narrative. Indeed, I would argue it is the latter that allows the reader to reframe the character's behaviour instead of puzzling over it, such as Semino suggests for character-character relations.

If Christopher and the police officer were considered on par, one could equally accuse the police officer of not catering to Christopher's utterance. If one were to take that primacy effect away by taking the dialogue out of the context of this story (I am aware of the irony), one would have a police officer talking to a teenage boy who is coiled up on the ground next to a dead dog. Upon being asked what is going on, the boy states 'the dog is dead', an utterance one could very well attribute to disbelief, desperation, or grief. Equally, if Christopher were six years old or a non-native speaker, the officer likely would have reacted less confused (and possibly more compassionate). In other words, Semino attributes the 'failure' of this dialogue to Christopher alone, both in his role as hearer and speaker, because she has already established his 'cognitive impairment' and yet it is but a conviction without a trial. I also argue that the dialogue enforces Christopher's 'impairment' when the officer reacts confused and asks Christopher's age, indicating a discrepancy between his appearance and his utterances.

Obviously, Semino aims at the fact that the police officer is asking for information about the progression of events under the false assumption that Christopher knows more about it or even killed the dog. Semino's findings operate under the same Cooperative Principle (CP) as the police officer's, who could be considered representative of the CP under which other characters in the novel operate. Perceived breaches of the maxims outline the CP ex negativo, simultaneously cementing Christopher's deviance. Thus, when Semino states a breach of a maxim, I conclude that Christopher's reaction fails to cater to her CP. In her eyes, as well as the police officer's, for that matter, Christopher's account is unreliable, in that he would be considered old enough to understand what the officer is asking for and could consequently offer more information on the situation (e.g. how he found the dog, that he is innocent, etc.).

However, when the dialogue continues, it becomes clear how Christopher's conversational principles differ:

> 'And what, precisely, were you doing in the garden?' he [the officer] asked.
> 'I was holding the dog,' I replied.

> 'And why were you holding the dog?' he asked.
> This was a difficult question. It was something I wanted to do. I like dogs. It made me sad to see that the dog was dead.
> I like policemen, too, and I wanted to answer the question properly, but the policeman did not give me enough time to work out the correct answer. (*Curious Incident* 7)

Christopher is struggling because he is trying to find the 'right' answer to the question. The reader learned earlier that his communication is generally dominated by the principle of honesty, to the point of being overly correct:

> I decided that the dog was probably killed with the fork because I could not see any other wounds in the dog and I do not think you would stick a garden fork into a dog after it had died for some other reason, like cancer for example, or a road accident. But I could not be certain about this. (*Curious Incident* 1)

Because Christopher is so afraid of making assumptions and accidentally not telling the truth, he can only state the obvious, consequently being an obstacle to the conversation. Yet, most of Christopher's difficulties in communication can be explained by the simple principle 'truth above all', including his distaste for metaphors and lies (19f.), because he confuses truth and literal meaning. Thus, even though as a reader I might be inclined to consider him slow and rather simple-minded (based on his language), his account is not unreliable, once I am aware that he operates under certain pragmatic principles, which might differ from my own, or not. Consequently, even pragmatic competency is a matter of perspective, and its definition is a question of power. I suggest, the author counts on the reader to abide by a similar Cooperative Principle. In terms of normality and deviance, the deviant character is contrasted not to one but most or all other characters with whom they interact. These characters usually reflect common pragmatic principles (and social values, for that matter), giving them the benefit of the doubt. Consequently, a character's deviance cannot be easily renegotiated. Ironically, then, the

reader may render every narrator unreliable, if they wished to do so, although they might as well extend the courtesy of flexible normalism and, perhaps, empathy. However, finishing on such a vague note is dissatisfactory and overall rather unhelpful.

There are two more things on which I wish to elaborate. The first is that of truthfulness in a narrator's report. As Lanser suggests, "a narrator may be quite trustworthy in reporting events but not competent in interpreting them" (Lanser qtd. in Nünning, "Unreliable, compared to what?" 57). The following example was taken from *Mockingbird*, where Caitlin's classmate Rachel had a bike accident.

> Finally Rachel asks if her face looks really bad and Emma says, *Of course not. It looks totally fine.*
> Rachel says, *Really?* She looks around and her eyes stop at me.
> I look away because I wasn't staring at her like those other girls.
> *What?* She asks. Her voice is soft and shaky. *Does my face look bad?* …
> I wonder how she knows that honesty is one of my skills. *Yes*, I say. *It looks bad. It's purple and puffy and really gross.*
> Rachel starts crying and runs out of the room.
> *CAITLIN!* Emma yells. *That was so mean! Didn't anyone ever tell you how to be a friend?*
> That's when I realize that maybe I should listen to Mrs. Brook when she talks about friends. Now that Devon isn't here to tell me. (126f.)

For one thing, this is a prime example of politeness working under different pragmatic principles. Caitlin's 'I wonder how she knows that honesty is one of my skills' already forbodes drama because the reader – given they are assuming the same Cooperative Principle as Emma represents – can now anticipate Caitlin's blunder. Caitlin misunderstood Rachel's utterance as a request for the truth, while everybody else knew that Rachel was seeking reassurance. Consequently, Caitlin's honesty is perceived as brutal and uncalled for, thus Emma reprimands her for her harshness. Since this is not the reaction Caitlin expected, she re-evaluates the situation and realises that she has made a mistake, from which she then concludes that she needs Mrs Brook's help to prevent further mistakes

in the future. Indeed, I believe this is what makes Caitlin *reliable* as a narrator. Had she not reflected on her mistake even though her utterance clearly caused others to be upset, but instead considered herself to be right regardless, the reader would likely have been more cautious of future reports. In fact, because Caitlin reported this event and admitted her blunder, I know that she is not trying to hide anything from us, but lets us see her shortcomings, too. Thus, I have no reason to suspect that her account is untrustworthy in terms of reporting the events.

However, Emma's reprimand serves another function, i.e. that of voicing the background characters' opinions and consequently indicating what would be considered normal. In terms of narratology, the protagonist is contrasted against the background characters. I suggest that autistic characters are often 'equipped' with a *ficelle* as defined by Henry James. It "serves to set off, contrast with, dramatize, and engage the protagonist" (Hochman 87), although in its original sense denoted a confidant/e who "exploited as a means of providing the reader with information while avoiding direct address from the narrator" (Baldick 127).

> Because he is, so to speak, the reader's delegate within the story, the ficelle can often take on a generalized and representative value. He is so often a type because the reader needs precisely the comfortable recognition of the typical. Because of this the ficelle may often bear the weight of a good deal of symbolic value which can in various ways extend the story of the protagonist. (Harvey 67)

Without overcharging the role of the ficelle, I maintain that it is representative of a neurotypical worldview, which happens to be considered 'normal'. The protagonist will thus run many of their questions about 'how to behave normally' by them, which not only assigns them some authority on this subject but renders them into a representation of this novel's normality. In essence, the protagonist's 'unreliable' worldview is contrasted against the ficelle's reliable neurotypical perspective, allowing the autistic character to reflect on their behaviour and gain new insights. In the context of autism narratives, the ficelle is often a 'trustee'

for normalcy and usually a close friend. In Caitlin's case, her brother Devon was her most trusted friend and advisor. He put into words what other children might have grasped intuitively or done differently. Although he is dead, Caitlin refers to him several times throughout the novel, often in connection with the rules and explanations Devon made for her.

Finally, I wish to introduce Riggan's not-so-flattering categories of unreliable narrators (picaro, madmen, naïfs, clowns, idiot-narrators, neurotics/psychopaths). In my opinion, the category of naïfs fits the stereotype 'Childlike' rather perfectly (see Chapter 3.3). Riggan defines the naïf as

> a figure who by definition lacks experience with people and society and is thus unequipped to deal in any far-reaching manner with the moral, ethical, emotional, and intellectual questions which arise from his first ventures into the world and from his account of those ventures. (169)

Obviously, for my study I have to take into account that these characters are children or young adults, thus the observation of childlikeness is not 'stereotypical' as such; it just is. However, a character might be portrayed as stereotypically childlike to demonstrate they are less advanced than their peers. Here, I must stay cautious with terms like 'childish' or 'naïve' since they are tinged. Riggan himself uses Huck as an example, describing him as "a mere youth" (Riggan 148), his style of narration as "vividly direct and evocative without resorting to elaborate romantic conceits or to the overly contrived abstraction and metaphoric style to which Twain falls prey" (148). Instead, Huck's description of a sunrise is "simple, sense-oriented, and restricted to comparisons with his own previous experience with nature rather than delving into metaphysical reflection" (148). Casting aside that Riggan is trying to make a point about Huck's connection to nature, the 'simple', 'sense-oriented', non-metaphorical style can easily be compared to what I have previously defined as 'literal'. This is not to say that Huck is incapable of understanding utterances on a non-literal level but that he is prone to keeping it lit-

eral. Riggan also states that "[f]or the most part, Huck is … unreflective regarding the events and characters about which he narrates" (149), i.e. he does either not voice an opinion about somebody, or does not have one in the first place (149).

In a sense, this relates to honesty; the protagonist reports encounters in an un-reflected way, which is both truthful and at times unintentionally self-deprecating. Again, this is what I observed in Caitlin's report, too. Autistic characters, especially, are portrayed as very honest, usually resulting in instances of bluntness and an aversion to lies. However, their lack of pragmatic competence will at times render them 'inferior' to the average reader in terms of interpreting the events according to the Cooperative Principle proposed by the background characters. For example, whenever a character struggles with understanding figurative language, the neurotypical reader is expected to be 'in' on the joke. In other words, although Nünning discards this metaphor, there is something "going on 'behind the narrator's back'" (Nünning, "Unreliable, compared to what?" 57), or, as Chatman suggests "the implied author establishes 'a secret communication with the implied reader'" (Chatman qtd. in Nünning, "Unreliable, compared to what?" 57). Giving non-autistic authors the benefit of the doubt, I will assume that any (overall positive) portrayals of autistic characters are intended to entertain and educate, without rendering them into caricatures. Based on this premise, I can discard the idea that the (implied) author wishes to communicate secretly with the (implied) reader, at least not in order to make fun of the character's shortcomings. However, continuous failure of a character to understand figurative language, jokes, or other instances of non-literal use of language might ridicule a character even if unintended by the author.

I believe, one usually assumes their opponents to operate under the same Cooperative Principle as we do. Thus, if the protagonist deviates from my expectations but is opposed by background characters who operate under the expected rules, I am more likely to align myself with them, simply because we both oppose the protagonist's principles. While I could technically deduce different pragmatic principles from evaluating the reactions of other characters, I would have had to have formed an opinion on the protagonist's competency (or lack thereof)

first, a premise on which I would base my future findings. Assuming, then, that portrayals of autistic characters are not so much guidelines for pragmatic principles (despite their schema-refreshing tendencies), I conclude that the authors of these portrayals do indeed assume pragmatic competency in their readers, and thus also a shared Cooperative Principle. Put starkly, the reader needs to be pragmatically competent or they will miss out on the 'inside jokes'. This raises the question of how entertaining such portrayals are for individuals who lack pragmatic competence, and whether they are in fact patronising to a certain degree, despite their good intentions.

For Riggan, the naïve narrator is intended to convey social critique, and again, this is perhaps what Semino termed schema-refreshment, i.e. an outside view from somebody who "has not yet entered the social world and who is largely unfamiliar with it on any direct experiential level" (Riggan 169). Personally, I do not see portrayals of autistic characters as a critique of social norms and values, but rather a way of raising awareness for a) the struggles, especially for those lacking natural pragmatic competence, b) their unique perspective, and c) the various ways these individuals are discriminated against. While the latter could be seen as a social critique in a strict sense ('there is discrimination in our society'), it is also an argument, *ex negativo*, about how (not) to treat neuroatypicals. However, returning to Nünning's question *Unreliable, compared to what?*, the answer would be 'compared to the reader's own experience, worldview, and pragmatic principles'. After all, unreliability is not so much a criterion on which I can base my analysis of autistic characters, but a way of triggering the audience to read the novel cross-eyed, i.e. from the perspective of the protagonist and their own, which often manifests itself in utterance made by background characters.

Niches, Genres, and Roles – *Trueman Bradley*

So far, this chapter discussed several narratological aspects of autism portrayals. I lastly return to the stereotype 'Genius' and how it carved out a contested niche. Rozema criticised how autistic characters are por-

trayed as quirky but will still manage to save the world, demanding that the representation should become more diverse in terms of role models. Bumiller, too, takes issue with how "portrayals tend to focus on the extraordinary abilities, or what is often called the savant qualities, of autistic persons" (Bumiller 970)[14]. It thus seems as if special abilities are meant to compensate for social shortcomings. On one hand, the outsider position of autistic characters is cemented in pragmatic incompetence and inferior abilities to negotiate their deviance, but they can redeem themselves if only they get a chance to prove their worth. On the other hand, this only seems to apply to neuroatypicals, since 'normal' people are allowed to be losers, psychopaths, or socially inept. One only needs to imagine a child growing up with superheroes as their sole role models.

Trueman Bradley is an example that fits Rozema's criticism to the dot. Intended to raise awareness and advocate for autists, the novel features a young autistic adult who moves to NYC in order to become a private detective like his comic book hero Slam Bradley. Having grown up in a small town in Illinois, as well as being home-schooled by his grandfather, he is ill-equipped for the busy streets of New York. However, he soon finds a group of four trusted friends who will cater to his needs, including a landlady who cooks, and a chauffeur, paid for by his inheritance of over five million dollars. Trueman faces several difficulties, including harassment by others who are less understanding of his needs but proceeds to invent several formulas and gadgets that help him navigate his surroundings, as well as a crime-solving equation which, once time, place, and type of crime are entered, will lead straight to the culprit. By the end of the novel, Trueman has discovered that the NYPD police chief is doing business with the mafia and consequently becomes a famous detective in NYC. The story is awfully contrived, and while there are several instances in which Trueman explains himself and his needs, thus fostering an understanding of his weaknesses, he simply is not a realistic role model. Granted, this may be a nod toward superheroes in comics, however, the novel turns into another unrealistic depiction, including the fact that he

14 The term ‚savant' is inaccurate, see Chapter 3.3.

can buy himself everything he wants. Additionally, the motherly tendencies of his friends do not render him equal, despite their assertions, but rather into a child prodigy whose needs are catered to back-to-back. Of course, this does at times remind the reader of portrayals such as Sherlock in the BBC TV series, not least because of his landlady Mrs Hudson who mothers him, seemingly inept police officers who are in dire need of his help, as well as people catering to his whims but equally regarding him as a child (e.g. Mycroft).

Returning to Trueman, I can state that in terms of pragmatic competence, he is as inexperienced as his educational background would suggest. Unfortunately, this cements his childlike status.

> "Okay, dear," she [the landlady] said. "Well, maybe I should get out of your hair, then. I really should be getting home for lunch."
> I touched my hair.
> "My hair?" I asked. "What are you going to do to my hair?"
> "No, I didn't mean that, dear!" she said. "Bless you! It's just an expression! 'Out of your hair' means I'll go off and leave you alone. Don't tell me you never heard it before?"
> "Oh, I see," I said. "Of course I heard of it before. I just didn't immediately realize you were using an expression. I don't understand why you need to talk about my hair if you are actually talking about leaving me alone. Next time, can you please just tell me that you are going to leave me alone? I prefer for you to speak with me using clear language, Mrs. Levi. Expressions and idiom are confusing to me sometimes." (*Trueman Bradley* 9–10)

Mrs Levi, the landlady, generally reacts understanding and friendly towards Trueman's shortcomings, however, in this case, she also expresses some incredulity ('don't tell me you never heard it before?'), indicating that she would have expected Trueman to react differently considering his age. I may also read her reaction as a little condescending ('bless you'), thus I can assume that she does not take Trueman seriously. Furthermore, Mrs Levi's expression leads Trueman to touch his hair, indicating that he took her words literally, something Christopher reports in terms of figurative language (7.3). It is one of many conversations throughout

the novel in which Trueman struggles with non-literal meaning, often resulting in people not taking him seriously or becoming angry. Additionally, Trueman forfeits reputation, being called 'stupid', 'naïve', or a child. Nonetheless, Trueman often tends to admit to his lack of understanding, thus not even trying to hide his pragmatic deficits. Obviously, this characterises him as both naïve and childlike, dependent on an adult for explanations, even though he simultaneously appears very honest. Ironically, he detests being treated like a child (cf. 31) but remains oblivious to many of the rules that guide social interactions. Partly this can be attributed to his upbringing, partly to the fact that he apparently does not need to assimilate himself because he can expect his surroundings to cater to him. For example, the novel does not mention one instance in which he prepares himself a meal, cleans his apartment, or goes to the shops, everyday tasks I would consider vital to independent living. In this instance, I would also argue that he is slightly condescending towards Mrs Levi ('I prefer for you to speak with me using clear language, Mrs. Levi.'), with the air of someone who is used to people catering to him (likely on the base that they are paid to do so). However, his (pragmatic) deficiencies are reduced to the question of whether or not Trueman can become a detective; which in turn is portrayed as something he can compensate for by being rich and mathematically gifted. Furthermore, although Trueman has to face some instances of severe harassment, these mostly boil down to 'mean people', i.e. criminals, or, in less severe cases, incredulous people who need further convincing. In essence, Trueman has found his niche, or in his case, partly paid for it. He does not need to change and assimilate to fit in but can expect others to consider his shortcomings. On one hand, this is sending the right message, since in general people want to be accepted and liked for who they are, and we all have deficits in some area or another where we demand compassion from others. It is a characteristic of young adult fiction that the protagonist is in search of their identity, thus the struggle to 'fit in' is not solely confined to autistic characters. However, this particular novel seems unbalanced, in the sense that Trueman has to put very little effort into actually socialising with people and understanding 'their' ways, since ultimately, Trueman only succeeds because he has the money and the ex-

traordinary (superhuman) abilities. On the other hand, finding a niche as well as our own identity usually requires us to work hard and reflect on our own life stories in regard to ideal life curves.

On a general note, the "genius detective, … is invariably depicted as a reasoning and observing machine …" (Scaggs 39). I have mentioned it briefly in relation to the stereotype genius, however, it seems as if the idea of a genius detective with asocial tendencies has enamoured present-day media and since brought forward Spencer Reid (*Criminal Minds*), Holly Gibney (*The Outsider*), or Saga Norén (*Bron/Broen*), as well as modern re-interpretations of Sherlock Holmes (*Sherlock*). It is usually their attention to detail, their ability to focus, and their outstanding memory that makes these characters exceptional sleuths, while their drive towards justice (or just solving the puzzle) excuses any social blunders. After all, these are crime-solving machines, working for the greater good of humanity. What is worrisome with these portrayals is the fact that these characters appear to be their work; they are undeniably outstanding at it, but they also have little else in life. They are, in fact, machines, thus also reinforcing the stereotype 'Robot' when linked to autism. It is this one-dimensionality that makes these portrayals come closest to a literary type or even a stock character. The 'Autistic detective' would consequently be closely related to the 'genius or Holmesian detective', thus any interpretation of Sherlock Holmes as autistic reinforces these ideas. The special interests of these characters lie in crime-solving only, leading people to not only associate autism with crime-solving but with very narrow interests. Perhaps it was their schema-refreshment that was so welcomed by the crime genre since these detectives not only have an undeniably unique perspective but also do not have to stop for niceties. While Doyle's original Sherlock apologises for his blunders (*A Study in Scarlet* 18), the BBC series features a Sherlock who will unapologetically insult most people he meets (e.g. "Anderson, don't talk out loud. You lower the IQ of the whole street." *Sherlock*, created by Mark Gatiss and Steven Moffat, season 1, episode 1, Hartswood Films, 2011). However, what is funny in fiction or TV would be less so if I found myself at the receiving end of such insults.

Perhaps it was also a logical evolutionary step from the 'genius detective' towards one whose genius is flawed by their inability to find and maintain meaningful relationships; one for whom one feels sorry because of the 'lesser' lives they lead, such as the brooding detective who has a tragic past and drowns their sorrows in alcohol.

Although less pronounced in young adult fiction, for obvious reasons, the extraordinary abilities that are linked to the character's autism diagnosis tend to be combined with loneliness. It is a recurring theme that the protagonist has a deep wish to find friends (cf. *Mockingbird*, *The London Eye Mystery*, *What to Say Next*). That said, autists should not need to have 'superhuman' abilities in the first place to prove their worth[15]. Fortunately, the majority of young adult fiction does not portray superheroes but individuals who struggle to build and maintain meaningful relationships. Even Trueman is happy to make friends along the way (*Trueman Bradley* 107). However, there is an undeniable tendency towards portraying them as making a significant contribution to their community, particularly in the form of solving crimes. Unfortunately, while such portrayals are entertaining, they do not supply adequate life curves for adolescents or young adults and they will also reinforce stereotypes.

Obviously, assumptions should not be generalised, but I believe that portraying autistic characters as seeking meaningful relationships rather than saving the world should be considered normal, especially in fiction that serves the purpose of representation and identification. Yes, society could benefit from a genius' abilities to solve crimes or make inventions, but portraying autists as machines that serve the greater good is harmful and dehumanising. I do not wish to deny these characters their special abilities, extraordinary memories, or other forms of giftedness, but they should not be all-defining for the portrayal. As human beings they do not have to prove their worth, nor should they be considered void of emotions. After all, everybody encounters social hiccoughs and misunderstandings without having to withdraw from society.

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15 On a related note, these characters are not usually set in a science-fictional world where their abilities would be 'normal'.

Conclusion

A growing number of characters in novels, movies, or TV series are labelled autistic, either within the work itself or by the audience. This poses the question of how autism is portrayed, to what end, and why some characters are reinterpreted as autistic when the author or producer had likely no intentions of presenting them as such.

In my study, I focused on characters in young adult fiction, but the ideas of character theory can be applied across different media. Characters differ from living human beings in that they are simultaneously larger and lesser than life because they are words which become alive in the readers' minds. Their teleology lends them a certain determination, thus characters are always representative of something larger than life, such as an idea or a concept. On the other hand, however, fictional characters are very much like dead people, because they cannot create new memories and are trapped within narratives. Consequently, even autism autobiographies feature literary characters. However, such characters cannot be autistic because they only exist as 'glimpses' with large gaps in between. Both aspects, i.e. their teleologically heightened purpose and their limited 'existence', coincide with their synthetic and thematic components as theorised by Phelan. The synthetic component of a character makes them artificial, therefore they cannot be real and consequently also not autistic. On the other hand, the thematic component makes them representative of a class of people or a concept. In the case of autism portrayals, these characters are therefore representative of the concept of autism, but only to the extent that they match the reader's understanding of the latter. Thus, whenever hobby psychologists engage in

'diagnosing' characters, it throws more light on their individual understanding of autism than on the characters themselves.

On a linguistic level, such ascriptions can also not be considered 'diagnoses' because they were made by laypeople. Instead, they are labels. In general, labels refer to the concepts a person holds, i.e. the 'building blocks of our thoughts'. All knowledge is thus organised in these concepts. However, when it comes to processing our surroundings, we will not consult all knowledge (memories, experiences, facts) we have on a certain concept. Instead, we tend to rely on stereotypes. Lippmann, who coined the term in its modern sense, stated that 'for the most part we define first and then see'. Stereotypes can thus be considered automated responses that allow us to simplify and quickly judge our surroundings. They can be understood as abbreviated, i.e. condensed, versions of the concepts a person holds. These semi-automatic responses do not usually allow us to reflect on everything we know about something or someone. Therefore, stereotypes can make us biased, to the point where our confirmation bias will turn them into self-fulfilling prophecies. If (negative) emotions are involved, stereotypes may even become prejudices. Literature also contributes to the perpetuation of these stereotypes, since readers apply them to literary texts and characters, too. The explicit labelling in a text will naturally trigger the stereotypes a person holds on this concept, thus activating the primacy effect and the confirmation bias. However, the same can happen if a character gets retrospectively labelled, making readers biased to the point where they will discard textual evidence in favour of their interpretation. This can lead to a vicious circle that will slowly replace knowledge with prejudices.

Generally speaking, stereotypes can only be counteracted by knowledge. Additionally, readers will only abandon their interpretation if the textual 'evidence' is irreconcilable with it. Here, it is important to note that readers will never decode characters the way they were encoded by the author. Because of the aesthetic nature of these portrayals and the fact that readers rely on their understanding of the world to make sense of a character's motifs, there is no 'one' character but a kaleidoscope of interpretations. Therefore, discussions on whether or not characters are representative of autism will never come to an end, not

even for intentional portrayals. However, if a text explicitly uses a label but the portrayal does not coincide with the reader's understanding of this concept, it will be considered bad or unrealistic. However, sometimes stereotypes are the only information a person has on a certain concept. This can lead to instances of carelessly labelled characters. Secondly, readers may have only become acquainted with certain concepts through literature or other media. I suggest that readers are able to recognise similarities in characters based on Wittgenstein's theory of family resemblance. In other words, because these characters share overlapping features, they are attributed to the same concept. Thus, even though a reader might already be acquainted with the concept of autism, every autism portrayal will extend and change the outline of the concept. A layperson's understanding of a concept such as autism can thus be very limited, either because it solely consists of stereotypes or because it is based on (stereotypical) fictional portrayals. Again, stereotypes do not necessarily have to be wrong or pejorative, but they will always be limited. Consequently, stereotypes affect how autists are seen and treated in real life. Since literature has the power to change or perpetuate stereotypes, autism portrayals should not be considered purely fictional but with an educational impact.

To prove the existence of autism stereotypes in fiction, I used stereotypes previously identified by other authors to generate criteria for the analysis of the novels. In total, I was able to single out four stereotypes: autists as disabled, as geniuses, as childlike, and as robotic. My results showed that all four stereotypes were present in every novel examined, albeit to different degrees. Three of the novels also referred to the alien trope, a metaphorical joke that autists are 'aliens' among humans. All portrayals shared as common characteristics a love for order and/or routine, hyper-attentiveness or -sensitivity, a barrier when it comes to communicating feelings, as well as a tendency to communicate very literally. Characters were also portrayed as overly honest. Since sometimes stereotypes evolve into literary types or stock characters, i.e. literary conventions with recognition value, I briefly considered the possibility of 'the Autist' as a type. However, my analysis is too limited to yield any findings about literary conventions, thus I abandoned the theory on the ba-

sis of speculation. Moreover, I gave two examples of characters who were not explicitly labelled autistic within the text but subsequently reinterpreted as such. Sherlock Holmes's portrayal (*The Sign of the Four*) alludes to only two out of four stereotypes. Thus, although the stereotypes were present in autism narratives, they did not serve as indicators for portrayals that were retrospectively labelled 'autistic'. Yet, by associating characters with the label autism, they suddenly appear to be paradigmatic, which in turn might be highly problematic if those characters are associated with or generate negative or false stereotypes and ideas. Here, one of the most controversially discussed novels is *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* by Mark Haddon. Some autists were deeply offended by the way the protagonist is portrayed as elitist and ignorant. Although the book jacket originally featured the label 'Asperger's', which has since been removed by the publisher, the portrayal is still one of the most widely quoted, which is why I have included it in my analysis.

Having determined the existence of all four stereotypes in the novels, I proceeded to explore them further. I had based my study on the premise that autism portrayals deviate in some form from neurotypical portrayals. In a way, this made my analysis biased, because I was looking for differences rather than commonalities. However, since the characters represented intentional autism portrayals, they had already been labelled and thus marked as deviant. I used discourse theory to conceptualise the workings of normality and deviance, based on Link's and Keckeisen's theories. Link suggests that the intermediary discourse – which consists of several discourses – processes ideas generated by specialised discourses and the elementary discourse. By combining these sectionalised normalities, the intermediary discourse creates a cross-section of normality. This normality can take the form of protonormality, which is defined by a narrow set of normative rules, or the form of flexible normalism, which establishes a broad normality that seeks to integrate deviations. Both forms of normality co-exist, although modern society tends towards applying flexible normalism.

The intermediary discourse is not congruent with the public sphere. Instead, Habermas theorises that the public sphere is 'a network for the communication of content and statements'. It is therefore unsur-

prising that Link locates the public in relation to discursive events, i.e. events with political and medial impact. Literature is produced by and consequently reflects the intermediary discourse, but it also influences the public opinion. The stereotypes that I previously used to analyse the novels can be considered to be part of the intermediary discourse and consequently public. The fact that they are present within the literary discourse indicates their presence within the intermediary discourse. All four of the stereotypes denote deviance in relation to the normality the intermediary discourses created. For example, the idea of disability is contrasted with 'normal' participation in society, consequently the stereotype 'Disabled' references criteria that mark a character's deviance, e.g. being dependent on others for everyday tasks. Here, the deviance of a character often results in harassment. In other cases, for example when a character appears (stereotypically) childlike and is thus perceived as 'not behaving their age', others might react patronising or outright hostile, depending on the situation. Similarly, the other two stereotypes are also linked to some form of deviance.

All forms of deviance are negotiated, per Keckeisen's definition. It is thus often the powerful (and sometimes the masses) who will influence ideas of deviance and normality, as well as public opinions. However, deviance is also negotiated on a smaller scale such as everyday conversations. Individuals who lose such a negotiation are then forced to accept their deviant status, at least within a certain community or social setting, Goffman describes this as a stigma; while stigmata can come in the form of bodily marks, they may also be invisible and thus again subject to negotiation. The institutionalised form of stigmatisation is called 'labelling' and includes diagnoses, criminal records, etc. Once an individual is stigmatised or labelled, they are categorised, and their behaviour is subsequently perceived as deviant. Therefore, labelling and stigmatisation technically refer to the same ascription of deviance, i.e. when the deviant status becomes ontological in a constructivist sense.

While the discourses that create normality and deviance have a powerful influence on societies and individuals, normalities, deviance, and stigmata must be considered fleeting, or rather, anchored in space and time. Therefore, not even scientific 'facts' are of supra-historical signif-

icance. Retrospectively applied, a diagnosis such as autism will reduce a character to their symptoms and drastically diminish their free will and the complexity of the portrayal, consequently failing to take into account their self-understanding (which did not include autism) and their interaction with others, who were equally unaware of such a diagnosis. This poses the question of how a label will affect the labelled individual. The controversy around the label *Autism Spectrum Disorder*, which was introduced by the medical discourse, generated more labels such as 'high- and low-functioning'. It can be read as indicative of the fact that labels are linked to different stigmata, thus owning a label allows a person to manage their identity and stigma more successfully. A label with negative connotations will always result in stigmatisation and perceived deviance – not least due to the primacy effect and the confirmation bias, thus labels should not be handled carelessly, especially since a deviant status can be detrimental to the mental health and the self-understanding of a person. Because of their ostracising nature, stigmata are often associated with poor mental health and bullying. However, some stigmata appear to be more 'manageable' and less disparaging than others, thus the label 'Asperger's' might be preferred over the label 'autistic'.

Still, instances of othering and harassment occurred in all novels examined, with *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* being most often criticised for normalising verbal and physical violence against autists. I believe that *Curious Incident* is emblematic of a fundamental debate about autism. I theorise that there are two movements within the autism discourse, i.e. the conservative movement that originates in the medical discourse and the activist movement. Here, autism activists are fighting for the acceptance of autism and against the idea that autism needs to be cured. Their agenda partially overlaps with the neurodiversity movement and the field of disability studies, suggesting that autism is not a disorder but a difference in cognitive function. Such claims are contrasted with accounts of severely autistic individuals, which are claimed to be 'mind-blind' and therefore shut out from the world. The conservative movement originated in the medical discourse on autism and advocates for a cure. According to Duffy and Dorner, it reframed autism as a narrative of sadness, one that defines autists

as inherently tragic beings because they lack a Theory of Mind and therefore something fundamentally human. This idea feeds into the stereotypes 'Disabled' and 'Robot'. Generally speaking, Theory of Mind is a concept that is most often associated with autism. It is theorised that neurotypical individuals have naturally developed a Theory of Mind by the age of four, thus enabling them to recognise emotional states, desires, intentions, and beliefs in others. By implication, individuals who lack a Theory of Mind are considered unaware of their own emotions, desires, etc., and thus outlined as 'emotionally thin', a theory Hacking heavily criticised because it denies these individuals not only their humanity but places them below sentient animals. Autism may cause regression, where a period of typical development is followed by the loss of previously acquired skills. This form of late-onset autism gave rise to the metaphor of a changeling and the idea that autism 'steals' the child away from the parents, both tropes that were used by the conservative movement.

Technically, the activist and the conservative movement both feed into the intermediary discourse and thus by implication the literary discourse. However, their narratives are largely divergent, which is furthered by the idea of a spectrum. The label *Autism Spectrum Disorder* is often criticised for implying that autists can be placed on a gamut, with those considered 'severely autistic' on one end, and 'mildly autistic' on the other. In novels, but also TV series and movies, those less affected by their autism are usually overrepresented. Here, autism is often paired with extraordinary abilities, allowing these individuals to be exceptional detectives, or brilliant mathematicians, scientists, or inventors. This gave rise to the stereotype that autists are naturally gifted in one area or another, sometimes interchangeably used with the term 'savant', which, however, refers to a different diagnosis. While the intermediary discourse usually aims at reconciling different incoming information, the literary discourse is dominated by overly positive portrayals. Robert Rozema criticises this idea of autists being 'quirky but capable of saving the world', which creates unrealistic expectations for autists in real life and does not serve as realistic role models for children and adolescents. Young adult fiction especially is a 'fundamentally didactic' genre thus

the significance of realistic portrayals should not be overlooked. During adolescence, people begin to carve out their identities in relation to society and its normalities; and they will continue to meaningfully integrate their selves throughout their lives, both dia- and synchronically in the form of life stories. Jürgen Link theorises that by positioning ourselves in relation to ideas of normalities, our 'live curves' align or diverge from that of socially idealised ones. Indeed, every society offers a plethora of such 'application templates', portrayed in art and literature in the form of narratives. Young adult fiction naturally addresses questions of conformity, normality, and deviance. However, the overrepresentation of high-functioning individuals with extraordinary abilities denies young autists realistic application templates for their lives, leaving them instead with neurotypical role models and the pressure to 'fit in' and 'be normal'. Indeed, the fact that autism is widely considered to be a stigma often pushes those individuals to engage in masking and camouflaging, i.e. the intentional and at times subconscious hiding of autism traits. Sometimes, autists are even trained through behavioural programs to suppress autistic behaviours such as stimming in order to appear 'normal' and not draw attention. Camouflaging refers to all conscious or unconscious strategies that allow an individual to appear 'less autistic'. They may be explicitly or implicitly learned, to the point where they become internalised. At times, this is likened to learning a second language. Other times, individuals choose to mask their autism by actually pretending to be someone else. While this also allows an individual to hide their autistic traits, it often comes at the cost of mental health problems and identity loss. Camouflaging strategies cannot be considered a form of 'healing' autism, although it is sometimes referred to as 'outgrowing' autism, to the point where individuals no longer fulfil diagnostic requirements. In these cases, an individual is able to successfully camouflage their autism through conscious and unconscious strategies, thus appearing normal. Within the medical discourse, this is referred to as the 'optimal outcome'. However, it can be difficult for individuals to lose their stigma, even if they no longer fulfil the criteria that actually triggered the stigmatisation in the first place. Both, the primacy effect and the confirmation bias will sustain the stigma. Usu-

ally, an individual will have to hide (or lose) their deviance and move to a new community in order to cast off a stigma.

I have stated before that autism has a complex and multifaceted clinical picture. Camouflaging or masking further distorts it, by enforcing ideas of normality. Indeed, the pull of normality should not be neglected. For example, it is theorised that individuals who were only diagnosed as adults had subconscious ways of 'compensating' for their difficulties, which, however, can often lead to depression or burnout. Thus, the way autism shows not only differs from individual to individual but also changes over time. On the other hand, stories in novels usually only offer glimpses into the lives of the characters, which are then cut short on the last page. Therefore, the window for any development is short. Moreover, novels usually draw their tension from unresolved conflicts. In young adult fiction, such tension often arises from social expectations and the proximity or distance of normality and deviance. Even though modern society leans toward flexible normalism, literature thus also engages in reinforcing (ideas of) normality. Most protagonists in the novels examined could be considered dynamic in that they acquired new skills, formed new relationships, and gained insights that allowed them to become more independent, improve their social standing, and obtain new perspectives. Put starkly, they moved away from being stereotypically autistic (i.e. deviant). This should not be read as me mapping ideas of normality onto autistic individuals. Rather, the protagonists in these novels were either portrayed on the threshold of adulthood or their growth stemmed from successfully reducing the communication barrier and making themselves and their needs understood by others. While the latter alludes to the double-empathy-problem, it is also a form of renegotiating the stigma.

I also explored narratological features that portrayed a character's deviance. Some texts used visual rhetoric to highlight different ways of thinking, e.g. bulleted lists or timetables that were included in the text. Additionally, nearly all characters were portrayed as struggling in social situations and communication, often because they lacked pragmatic competence. Portraying characters as very literal and honest turned out to be a common stylistic device of autism narratives, often introducing

a comical aspect but also sometimes defended as schema refreshments. Other instances included over- and undersharing of information and body language such as smiling, as well as unintentional impoliteness (furthered by being overly honest), as well as not understanding figurative language such as metaphors. In some ways, these hiccoughs in conversations could be traced back to the non-observance of the Gricean maxims. Infringements of the maxims indicate that a speaker is not operating under the same Cooperative Principle as the listener. Here, misunderstandings may arise if the non-observance of the maxims is perceived as an intentional violation. Since the protagonists are usually native speakers, they are expected to adopt the same Cooperative Principle. Failing to do so will result in deviance and loss of status. Deficits in pragmatic competence therefore almost always come at the cost of the 'autistic' character, whereas the reader is expected to understand the subtext and thus be entertained. Quite often, background characters will be representative of the Cooperative Principle the protagonist (or other character) violates, thus building the backdrop for their deviance. If the reader is privy to the thoughts of the deviant character, they may still sympathise with them and gain further insights into their thinking. This allows a reader to better understand the character's Cooperative Principle, perhaps even making them appear less deviant if effects can be assigned to their cause. However, deficits in pragmatic competence might be artistically heightened in autism portrayals. While studies showed that autists in real life tend to think and communicate more literally, other researchers found that autistic individuals with average intelligence typically pick up on figurative speech and are as capable of understanding it as their peers once they reach adulthood. Therefore, such portrayals can be considered the result of neurotypical authors imagining an autist's way of thinking. Even novels that were written with the explicit intention of creating awareness and educating on autism, might easily fall into the trap of exploiting a character's deviance for humorous effects, making them one-dimensional and trite.

To avoid the fallacy of stereotypical portrayals, characters should be portrayed as dynamic and capable of change and growth, without, of course, suggesting that they should be 'cured' of their autism, which

would change the message altogether. It would, however, not be an easy fix to simply concentrate on novels written by autistic writers. For one thing, audiences seem to prefer portrayals by neurotypical writers, potentially because these perpetuate publicly held stereotypes. Additionally, however, autistic authors participate in the same discourses and have therefore adopted similar ideas. In "Autistic Autobiography", Hacking even suggests that autism discourses bleed together through shared ideas and create the language in which autism narratives are told. Therefore, autistic and neurotypical authors employ the same concepts to tell their stories. In a sense, autism narratives have thus evolved too far to be disentangled from each other merely on the basis of their authors. However, it might still be beneficial to examine whether the autism stereotypes I identified are perpetuated in fiction written by autistic authors, and if so to what degree. After all, autism narratives are permeated by narratives of autism.

Outlook

My sample size for this study was small and less diverse, considering that I concentrated on young adult fiction only. It would be interesting to apply the same criteria to portrayals in adult fiction, as well as to compare protagonists with secondary characters. I would imagine that autism portrayals where the reader is not privy to the thoughts of the character easily result in one-dimensional characters mostly introduced for comical effects or the appearance of diversity. Such characters might serve as stepping stones for the protagonist or others, and they are also likely to perpetuate stereotypes due to their lessened mimetic components.

The criteria I have established for the analysis of the novels could also be adapted to movies and TV series, which have a much larger audience and thus arguably a higher impact on society's understanding of autism. Here, it would be interesting to see what stereotypes are portrayed, how they are weighted, and what roles these characters take up within the storylines. Personally, I believe portrayals such as those in *The State of Grace* and *Can You See Me* should be considered desirable, where

the characters are not exceptionally gifted, nor expected to save the world to 'prove their worth'. It is also quite possible that 'the Autist' has established itself as a type or stock character within literature, movies, or TV series. I have offered a preliminary outline of its characteristics, but again a larger sample size would be needed, perhaps to the point of a discourse analysis. The existence of such a type or stock character would prove that 'the Autist' has ascended to an artistic realm and should therefore be considered fictional and symbolically heightened. However, I do believe that this study is a first step toward discussing autism portrayals in terms of stereotypical assumptions. Having identified some of the workings and origins behind those stereotypes, such portrayals should be re-evaluated in light of these findings. Autism awareness should entail awareness of the stereotypes, too, so that fictional portrayals can serve as realistic representations and application templates for autists in real life. Awareness of stereotypes also allows for the conscious rejection or critical evaluation of the same, thus offering a tool for a more objective discussion of autism portrayals – intentional or retrospectively labelled. Stereotypes are not necessarily bad, but prejudices and generalised assumptions can only be counteracted by knowledge, and for this, we must be aware of where our knowledge ends and our stereotypes begin.

Appendices

Appendix A

The following references of stereotypes were used for the evaluation in Chapter 3.4.

The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time by Mark Haddon (Vintage Books, 2004)

Stereotype 'Disabled'
Othering: 7, 17, 19, 56, 59f, 67f, 196, 129, 188f, 200, 207, 212f, 216f, 229, 245, 263
Dependency: 3, 57, 58, 129, 200, 85, 108, 129, 130, 144, 149, 200, 223f, 262, 263
Harassment: 33, 49f, 56, 83, 102–104, 188
One-Dimensional: –
Tragic: 59, 60f, 102–104, 133, 151, 237, 239f, 248

Stereotype 'Genius'
Gifted: 2, 12f, 14f, 78ff, 84, 96, 126f, 149, 181f, 193f, 199, 201f
Hyperattentive/-sensitive: 9, 11, 17, 21, 42, 92, 96f, 174ff, 208ff, 218ff
Combined with Loneliness and handicaps: yes

Stereotype 'Childlike'
Naivety: 1, 7, 28f, 36, 40, 56, 63, 65, 67f, 71, 72f, 74f, 76, 83, 88, 102, 114, 116, 117?, 120, 123, 130, 141, 147, 152, 160, 166, 185f, 189, 196f, 200, 211, 223, 233, 234, 236, 238, 241, 246, 247, 249, 254, 258f, 261, 265, 267f
Honesty: 7, 23, 24, 56, 85, 94, 101, 114, 186, 236, 265
Literalness & Pragmatics: Pro: 7f, 10, 19, 52, 69, 83, 97f, 101, 102, 120, 211, 229; Contra: 11, 21, 40, 97f, etc
Patronising: 83, 171, 187, 188, 197, 198, 226, 229, 245
Dynamic: no

Stereotype 'Robot'
Routine & Order: 11, 16, 21, 27, 31, 32, 39, 45, 46, 52, 68, 84, 100, 101, 105f, 146, 155, 158, 159, 160f, 179, 249, 254, 266
Lack of emotions: 21, 37, 42, 65, 94, 95, 97, 99, 109, 124, 148, 242, 264
Communication Barrier: 2, 19
Mind-blindness: 145f

Alien Trope: Christopher compares himself to a computer (147f).

The London Eye Mystery by Siobhan Dowd (David Fickling Books, 2010)

Stereotype 'Disabled'
Othering: 22, 23, 30, 36, 39
Dependency: -
Harassment: 241
One-Dimensional: –
Tragic: 30f, 190

Stereotype 'Genius'
Gifted: 31, 36ff, 91, 190, 269
Hyperattentive/-sensitive: 6, 31, 154f, 161, 215, 215, 256
Combined with Loneliness and handicaps: 21, 313, 318

Stereotype 'Childlike'
Naivety: 21, 23, 49, 88, 122f, 198f (295)
Honesty: 26, 60, 198f, 203, 261f
Literalness & Pragmatics: Pro: 5, 10f, 16, 28, 55, 65, 67, 87, 121, 151, 234, 240, 245f; Contra: 23, 25, 42, 63, 81, 249, 292
Patronising: 16, 122f, 144, 152, 190
Dynamic: 54f, 134, 175, 254, 322

Stereotype 'Robot'
Routine & Order: 6, 17, 34f., 43, 51, 70, 144, 154f, 249
Lack of emotions: Pro: 53, 77f, 186ff; No: 17, 39, 58, 295,
Communication Barrier: 6, 22, 25f, 28, 32, 46, 55, 61f, 72, 88, 91ff, 109, 122f, 146f, 198f, 259
Mind-blindness: Contra: 9, 10, 168, 253

Alien Trope: N/A

Marcelo in the Real World by Francisco X. Stork (Scholastic Inc., 2009)

Stereotype 'Disabled'
Othering: Pro: 8, 18, 20, 23, 27, 40, 55, 73, 87, 303; Contra: 119, 241
Dependency: 20, 23, 29, 51, 136
Harassment: 60, 65, 67, 77, 139, 286
One-Dimensional: –
Tragic: 19, 45, 54, 55, 63

Stereotype 'Genius'
Gifted: 9, 57, 239
Hyperattentive/-sensitive: 15, 45, 85, 98, 106, 206, 254
Combined with Loneliness and handicaps: yes

Stereotype 'Childlike'
Naivety: 23, 38, 45, 49, 51, 59, 71?, 91, 93, 94, 95, 101, 103, 111, 116, 122, 126, 130, 136, 171, 241
Honesty: 29, 55f, 58, 70, 113, 182, 185, 239, 241, 268
Literalness & Pragmatics: 4, 11, 12, 15, 50, 54, 69, 74, 95, 106, 107, 111, 113, 127, 139, 140f, 148, 150, 171, 172
Patronising: Pro: 9, 18, 28, 29, 32, 43–44, 45, 51, 60, 65, 67, 70, 71, 77, 86, 127, 289; Contra: 284ff
Dynamic: 9, 22, 57, 124, 178, 198, 249, 268, 285, 286

Stereotype 'Robot'
Routine & Order: 36, 37, 38, 54, 57, 67, 72, 82, 94, 152, 206, 247, 268
Lack of emotions: Pro: 28, 70, 87, 135; Contra: 58, 67, 87, 157f, 160, 200, 285f
Communication Barrier: 28, 44, 45, 51, 57, 59, 171f
Mind-blindness: –

Alien Trope: 39, 190

Mockingbird by Kathryn Erskine (Usborne Publishing Ltd, 2018)

Stereotype 'Disabled'
Othering: 5, 23f, 35, 37, 50, 61, 66, 79f , 95, 182, 183, 190
Dependency: 60
Harassment: 37f., 50, 66, 183
One-Dimensional: Stepping Stone: 105
Tragic: N/A

Stereotype 'Genius'
Gifted: 41, 43, 70, 91, 146
Hyperattentive/-sensitive: Pro: 16, 34f , 52, 79, 87, 188, 189, 231; Contra: 115
Combined with Loneliness and handicaps: yes

Stereotype 'Childlike'
Naivety: 14, 55, 60, 67f., 86, 101, 108f, 112, 116, 140?, 142, 143, 167
Honesty: 13, 15, 91, 95, 185
Literalness & Pragmatics: 14, 15, 20, 21, 37, 37f, 93f , 101, 116, 143, 169, 190
Patronising: 37, 90, 112, 218
Dynamic: 128, 129, 179, 208, 224

Stereotype 'Robot'
Routine & Order: 28, 30, 31, 32f, 35, 37, 42f, 53, 58, 79, 87, 101
Lack of emotions: 14, 20ff, 40, 56, 90, 93f, 95, 127
Communication Barrier: 19, 49, 50, 62, 93f , 105, 108, 224f
Mind-blindness: Pro: 18f, 24; Contra: 24, 104

Alien Trope: N/A

Trueman Bradley: Aspie Detective by Alexei Maxim Russell (Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2012)

Stereotype 'Disabled'
Othering: 8, 9, 11, 13, 15, 25, 38, 50, 53, 70, 91, 94, 101, 126, 133, 135, 179, 183, 203, 214, 216, 217, 218, 219, 223
Dependency: 10, 16, 21, 24f, 32, 34, 46, 51, 76, 83, 90, 103f, 109, 111, 112, 113, 125, 174, 179, 183, 189, 204, 233, 245, 273
Harassment: 8, 48, 49, 50, 53, 77, 109, 113, 126, 210, 213, 228,
One-Dimensional: 37, 58, 114, 115, 116
Tragic: N/A

Stereotype 'Genius'
Gifted: 8, 14, 15, 20, 32, 37, 44, 54, 57, 58, 66f, 113, 118, 120, 143, 158, 166, 172, 215, 234, 237, 252, 286
Hyperattentive/-sensitive: 8, 13, 14, 16, 22, 29, 35, 41, 90, 112,
Combined with Loneliness and handicaps: yes

Stereotype 'Childlike'
Naivety: 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 24f, 26, 27, 30, 31, 32, 43, 44f,

The State of Grace by Rachel Lucas (Macmillan Children's Books, 2017)

Stereotype 'Genius'
Gifted: N/A
Hyperattentive/-sensitive: 4, 5, 9, 19, 31, 37, 63, 70, 76, 78, 83, 91, 94, 103, 108, 111, 113, 118, 127, 135, 149, 180, 183, 223
Combined with Loneliness and handicaps: no

Stereotype 'Childlike'
Naivety: 4, 3–5, 95, 103, 149, 169, 134
Honesty: 7, 96, 142, 179
Literalness & Pragmatics: Pro: 6, 8, 28, 44, 54; Contra: 17, 29, 37, 56, 162
Patronising: 2, 6, 9, 49, 61, 95, 147, 149
Dynamic: 6, 19, 59, 82, 91, 103, 133f, 140, 155, 186

Stereotype 'Robot'
Routine & Order: Pro: 3, 15, 22, 24, 33, 38, 48, 59, 74, 79, 105, 106, 116, 121, 123, 125, 136, 164, 172, 174ff, 250; Contra: 43, 49
Lack of emotions: Contra: 13, 14, 97, 186, 91, 100, 154, 163, 220, 226
Communication Barrier: 1, 6, 8, 9, 13, 14, 28, 30, 39, 52, 54, 56, 91, 98, 127, 140, 154, 226, 239, 241, 260, 262
Mind-blindness: Contra: 56, 147, 155, 158, 162, 269

Alien Trope: 1, 93, 155, 262

What To Say Next by Julie Buxbaum (Ember, 2017)

Stereotype 'Disabled'
Othering: 1, 3, 4, 11, 20, 29, 59, 62, 84, 92, 133, 135, 147, 149, 169, 174, 190, 191, 193, 196, 197, 206, 231, 237, 264, 280
Dependency: 12, 19, 43, 60, 65,113, 193, 231, 251, 262f
Harassment: 2, 2, 11, 12, 20, 118, 149, 167f , 169, 187, 193, 206, 248, 280
One-Dimensional: –
Tragic: Pro: 44, 82, 149, 193, 231; Contra: 265

Can You See Me? By Libby Scott and Rebecca Westcott (Scholastic, 2019)

Stereotype 'Genius'
Gifted: N/A
Hyperattentive/-sensitive: 11f, 15, 26, 28, 35, 47, 51, 72, 101, 114, 115, 127, 143, 163, 174ff, 181, 189, 213, 280, 341
Combined with Loneliness and handicaps: no

Stereotype 'Childlike'
Naivety: 31, 33, 45, 69, 93ff, 122, 171ff, 184, 238, 239ff, 257, 261, 291, 350
Honesty: 59, 97, 195, 207ff, 223, 239
Literalness & Pragmatics: 25, 26, 29, 33, 43f, 47, 54, 55, 60, 83, 93ff, 218, 228
Patronising: 68, 100, 138, 276
Dynamic: 290ff, 296, 346f, 353

Stereotype 'Robot'
Routine & Order: 9, 43, 52, 53, 58f, 71, 91ff, 115, 183f, 223, 265, 281, 307, 330
Lack of emotions: 29, 47, 103, 159ff, 211, 241ff, 313, (323)
Communication Barrier: 11, 23, 31, 33, 41, 45, 68, 101, 103f?, 105, 107, 118, 125ff, 137f, 152f, 169, 172, 207, 241, 265ff, 286, 291ff, 297, 313, 318, 323, 330ff, 338, 350, 363
Mind-blindness: N/A

Alien Trope: 11

Appendix B

Comparison of Diagnostic Criteria for Autism Spectrum Disorder

The following table is a side-by-side presentation of the definitions of Autism Spectrum Disorder as given by the ICD-11 and the DSM-5.

ICD-11	DSM-5
Autism spectrum disorder is characterised by **persistent deficits in the ability to initiate and to sustain reciprocal social interaction and social communication**, and by **a range of restricted, repetitive, and inflexible patterns of behaviour, interests or activities** that are clearly atypical or excessive for the individual's age and sociocultural context. The **onset of the disorder occurs during the developmental period, typically in early childhood**, **but symptoms may not become fully manifest until** later, when social demands exceed **limited capacities. Deficits are sufficiently severe to cause impairment in personal, family, social, educational, occupational or other important areas of functioning** and are usually a pervasive feature of the individual's functioning observable in all settings, although they **may vary according to social, educational, or**	To meet diagnostic criteria for ASD according to DSM-5, a child must have persistent deficits in each of three areas of social communication and interaction (see A.1. through A.3. below) plus at least two of four types of restricted, repetitive behaviors (see B.1. through B.4. below).[1] A. Persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction across multiple contexts, as manifested by the following, currently or by history (A.1-A.3) B. Restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, or activities, as manifested by at least two of the following, currently or by history (B.1-B.4) C. Symptoms must be present in the early developmental period (but may not become fully manifest until social demands exceed limited capacities, or may be masked by learned strategies in later life).

1 Criteria A.1-A.3 & B.1-B.4 were shortened for better readability but will be provided below.

ICD-11	DSM-5
other context. Individuals along the spectrum exhibit **a full range of intellectual functioning and language abilities**." (ICD-11 6A02, highlighting by author)	D. Symptoms cause clinically significant impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of current functioning. E. These disturbances are not better explained by intellectual disability (intellectual developmental disorder) or global developmental delay. Intellectual disability and autism spectrum disorder frequently co-occur; to make comorbid diagnoses of autism spectrum disorder and intellectual disability, social communication should be below that expected for general developmental level. (APA, DSM-5 50–1)

Clearly, both the ICD-11 and the DSM-5 correspond in all points, except that the DSM-5 differentiates contexts only in connection with social interaction and communication, while the ICD-11 refers more broadly to deficits in functioning. However, this distinction as well as other subtleties are negligible for the examination at hand. As of now, the DSM-5 offers a more detailed description of diagnostic criteria, thus I will use it for further explanations.

Appendix C

Extended Definition of Autism Spectrum Disorder (DSM-5)
Deficits in social communication and interaction taken from the DSM-5

> A. Persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction across multiple contexts, not accounted for by general developmental delays, and manifest by 3 of 3 symptoms.

> A1. Deficits in social-emotional reciprocity; ranging from abnormal social approach and failure of normal back and forth conversation through reduced sharing of interests, emotions, and affect and response to total lack of initiation of social interaction.
>
> A2. Deficits in nonverbal communicative behaviors used for social interaction; ranging from poorly integrated verbal and nonverbal communication, through abnormalities in eye contact and body language, or deficits in understanding and use of nonverbal communication, to total lack of facial expression or gestures.
>
> A3. Deficits in developing and maintaining relationships, appropriate to developmental level (beyond those with caregivers); ranging from difficulties adjusting behavior to suit different social contexts through difficulties in sharing imaginative play and in making friends to an apparent absence of interest in people. (APA, *DSM-5* 50)

Examples of deficits in communication adapted from Seltzer et al.:

- language level
- pronominal reversal (referring to themselves as he/she/you or by their name)
- neologisms/idiosyncratic language
- lack of nodding head
- lack of head shaking
- lack of pointing to express interest
- stereotyped utterances (echolalia)
- lack of conventional gestures
- inappropriate questions
- lack of imaginative play
- lack of imitative social play (Seltzer et al. 572)

Examples of deficits in interaction adapted from Seltzer et al.:

- does not offer comfort
- does not seek to share own enjoyment

- lack of interest in people
- lack of direct gaze (looking people in the eye)
- lack of showing and directing attention (looking at people, following their gaze)
- lack of social smiling
- unusual response to approaches (willing to engage in conversation)
- deficits in range of facial expression
- lack of appropriateness of social responses
- does not offer to share (emotions/interests/personal information)
- inappropriate facial expressions
- impairment in the ability to sustain friendships (Seltzer et al. 574)

Restricted, Repetitive Patterns of Behaviour, Interests, or Activities (RRRBIAs)

> B. Restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, or activities as manifest by at least 2 of 4 symptoms:
>
> B1. Stereotyped or repetitive speech, motor movements, or use of objects; (such as simple motor stereotypies, echolalia[2], repetitive use of objects, or idiosyncratic phrases).
>
> B2. Excessive adherence to routine, ritualized patterns of verbal or nonverbal behavior, or excessive resistance to change; (such as motoric rituals, insistence on same route or food, repetitive questioning or extreme distress at small changes).
>
> B3. Highly restricted, fixated interests that are abnormal in intensity or focus; (such as strong attachment to or preoccupation with unusual objects, excessively circumscribed or perseverative interests)
>
> B4. Hyper- or hypo-reactivity to sensory input or unusual interest in sensory aspects of environment; (such as apparent indifference to pain/heat/cold, adverse response to specific sounds or textures,

2 Echolalia is defined as involuntary repetition of speech and sound made by another person.

> excessive smelling or touching of objects, fascination with lights or spinning objects). (APA, *DSM-5* 50)

Examples of RRBIAs adapted from Seltzer et al.:

- repetitive use of objects
- hand/finger mannerisms
- other complex mannerisms
- unusual preoccupations
- unusual sensory interests
- compulsions/rituals
- verbal rituals
- circumscribed interests (Seltzer et al. 575)

For further specification of severity levels and diagnostic features see *DSM-5*, pp. 50–59.

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