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Robert Rozema
Grand Valley State University

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The Problem of Autism in Young Adult Fiction

ROBERT ROZEMA, LAJM CO-EDITOR

Each April, hundreds of cities around the world commemorate World Autism Awareness Day by participating in the Autism Speaks Light It Up Blue campaign. Iconic buildings and landmarks in Chicago, Rio de Janeiro, Sydney, and Hollywood are illuminated in blue light, creating a spectacle at once beautiful and true: the blue lights bathing the Willis Tower and Christ the Redeemer statue are reminders that one in 68 children is diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) (Wingate et. al. 2014).

The campaign, now in its fifth year, is part of a larger global movement toward autism awareness, a cause shared by advocacy organizations, taken up by high profile celebrities, and in the publishing world, reflected by a recent wave of autism-themed fiction and non-fiction. Many of these new books are written for young adults, and often—though not always—they feature autistic narrators. Representative titles in this genre include *Marcelo in the Real World* by Francisco Stork (2009), *Mockingbird* by Kathryn Erskine (2010), *The Half-Life of Planets* by Emily Franklin and Brendan Halpin (2010), *The Silence of Murder* by Dandi Daley Mackall (2012), and *Colin Fischer* by Ashley Edward Miller and Zack Stentz (2012). These and a handful of other titles for adolescents and juveniles suggest that autistic fiction may be an emerging trend, not unlike the fantasy, vampire, and dystopian novels that have recently dominated the young adult market.

The rise of autistic fiction, however, poses questions that *Harry Potter*, *Twilight*, and *The Hunger Games* never had to answer. These questions center on the issue of representation. How are ASD adolescents being portrayed in titles such as *Colin Fischer* and *The Silence of Murder*? What responsibility does young adult fiction bear for showing ASD in a positive light? Or perhaps, to borrow a metaphor from the Light It Up campaign, how are these titles illuminating autism and those affected by it? As a father of a nine-year-old boy with high functioning ASD who will soon see himself reflected in the pages of young adult fiction, I am deeply concerned with

these questions. As English teachers, we all stand to benefit from knowing what impressions of autism our students are receiving from these popular books.

We can begin with a survey of how others have evaluated juvenile and adolescent literature featuring characters with developmental disabilities. This involves broadening our scope beyond autism, a neurodevelopmental disorder, to include other developmental disabilities such as mental retardation and fetal alcohol syndrome. 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. (p. 310)

Using these criteria, the study rates over 40 adolescent and juvenile works, including both chapter books and picture books. Seventy-four percent of these books were found to be realistic in their representation of developmental disabilities, while only 40.5 percent were positive, with an additional 40.5 percent mixed (some positive characterizations, some negative) and 19 percent negative (no positive characterizations of developmental disabilities) (pp. 308-310).

This dual emphasis—on both positive and realistic representation of developmental disabilities—has guided similar evaluative studies of young adult and juvenile fiction. In an early treatment of the issue, for example, Heim (1994) makes a strong case for realism, arguing that authors “should be familiar with current research” and use the correct

terminology when writing about individuals with mental disabilities (p. 139). At the same time, Heim calls for positive portrayals that avoid stereotypes while showing mentally disabled character experiencing growth—and importantly, not serving solely as a catalyst for other characters’ moral improvements. Landrum (1998, 2001) offers expansive criteria for evaluating intermediate and adolescent novels featuring characters with mental and physical disabilities, but the themes of realism and positivity are prevalent. Landrum gives high marks to books in which the “data pertaining to the disability [are] accurate;” disabled characters are “strong and independent” and “speak for themselves;” the focus is on “what they can do rather than on what they cannot do;” and the larger message about disability is uplifting: “If the story is a tragedy or leaves a feeling of hopelessness, it is due to the human condition in general, not a character’s disability” (2001, p. 254).

Developmental disabilities and other exceptionalities are often included in the larger sweep of multiculturalism, and similar calls for both realism and positivity run through examinations of multicultural literature (Oswald & Smolen, 2010). It goes without saying that culturally responsive English language arts instruction should take care to recognize and respect differences, both cultural and developmental. In the case of Autism Spectrum Disorder, however, young adult fiction faces unique problems in depicting autistic adolescents both realistically and positively. These problems are manifested in six recent young adult novels with autistic characters—*Mockingbird*, *Marcelo in the Real World*, *The Half-Life of Planets*, *The Silence of Murder*, *Colin Fischer*, and *Gone*.

The Problem of Realism

In their portrayals of individuals with ASD, all of these young adult novels accurately present the symptomology of the disorder. Many of the authors have an extensive experience with autistic children—often, their own—and their characters exhibited behaviors typically associated with ASD. In Miller and Stenz’ *Colin Fischer* (2012), for example, the title character is overwhelmed by the ringing of a cell phone. His distress results from a sensory integration disorder that is often comorbid with ASD:

A cacophony of sound drowned out the rest of his words. The cell phone again. Loud and shrill. Not stopping. Not music, not a ring, not anything pleasant—just noise. Colin put his hands to his ears to shut it out . . . (p. 28)

Similarly, in Stork’s *Marcelo in the Real World* (2009), Marcelo is obsessed with religious texts, exemplifying the narrow interests that typify an ASD individual. So too Hank, the main character of *The Half-Life of Planets* (2010) constantly practices guitar chords with his fingers, his repetitive behavior illustrating another key characteristic of ASD.

Of course, like other neurodevelopmental disorders, autism expresses itself differently in different individuals. Symptoms vary widely, so that one ASD adolescent may demonstrate easily recognizable autistic traits, such as severely impaired verbal skills and repetitive twirling or hand-flapping, while an ASD classmate may be almost indistinguishable from his neurotypical peers. Accordingly, the most recent definition of the autism spectrum is deliberately broad: the 2013 *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM 5)* removed the diagnosis of Asperger syndrome, long considered a distinct, milder form of the disorder, in favor of the term Autism Spectrum Disorder, which now encompasses the entire range of the disability. The autism community has a favorite saying that reflects the diversity of the autism spectrum: “If you know one child with autism, you know one child with autism.”

In its portrayal of autistic adolescents, however, young adult fiction has thus far known only *one* child with autism: the high-functioning, hyper-verbal savant with Asperger syndrome. The prototypical Asperger character is Christopher John Francis Boone from Mark Haddon’s *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (2003), the crossover novel that pioneered the use of an autistic narrator. Soon after, Jonathan Safran Foer’s adult novel *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005) featured Oskar Schell, a nine-year-old narrator with with Asperger-like tendencies, though Oskar claims his diagnostic tests were inconclusive. Today, as a recent New York Times review of Ciaran Colins’ 2013 novel *Gamal* tells us, “the quirky yet remarkably perceptive points of view of autistic narrators have become increasingly familiar in every category of fiction, from young adult to science fiction to popular and literary fiction” (Weber, 2013). Not surprisingly, *Gamal*, an adult work, is narrated by a high-functioning, hyper-verbal narrator with Asperger syndrome

That narrators with Asperger syndrome have become their own kind of literary trope is forgivable: they are hard to resist, at once innocent and unfiltered, literal-minded and verbose. Most of all, they are given to quirky, unconventional observations. I am charmed by the 17-year-old Marcelo (*Marcelo in the Real World*), for instance, whose father demands that he work for a summer in the mailroom of his law firm.

The Problem of Autism in Young Adult Fiction

The new position, a world away from the secluded horse farm where Marcelo had previously worked, allows all of his endearing naïveté come through:

... Jasmine says, "I'd stay away from the secretaries if I were you."

"How can I deliver the mail to them if I stay away from them?"

"I mean, I wouldn't let them get too friendly with you, especially the ones that are single and desperate, like Martha back there."

"Why?"

"Martha for one would not hesitate to jump your bones."

I think of the passage in the Bible where the prophet Ezekiel jumps up and down on a pile of skulls and bones. The rapidity with which I am encountering new concepts is making me dizzy. (p. 54)

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The narrators of *The Half-Life of Planets*, *Colin Fischer*, and the intermediate novel *Mockingbird* are not identical to Marcelo, but the differences are slight, suggesting an interchangeability that belies the rich, even wild variety of the autistic spectrum. Colin is a math savant given to socially awkward observations: "Your breasts got bigger!" he announces to a middle school classmate (p. 22). Hank (*The Half-Life of Planets*) is a musical genius given to socially awkward observations: "Look Liana," he tells his girlfriend at a party, "it's no big thing. I told [other girls at the party] that the note that said you're

a slut doesn't mean anything, okay?" (p. 185).

All of the Asperger narrators also play with language in sometimes delightful, sometimes distracting ways that reflect the exceptional verbal skills possessed by many—but not all—individuals on the autism spectrum. In *Mockingbird*, the ten-year-old narrator Caitlin must come to terms with the violent death of her older brother, Devon. As the novel progresses, Caitlin tries to understand the concept of closure through the lens of language:

I look up CLOsure and it says: the state of experiencing an emotional conclusion to a difficult life event such as the death of loved one. I do not know how to get to the state of experiencing an emotional conclusion so I ask Mrs. Robbins, How

do I get to the state of experiencing an emotional conclusion to a difficult life event? (p. 67)

Christopher, the teenage narrator from *Curious Incident*, has a similar interest in language:

The word metaphor means carrying something from one place to another, and it comes from the Greek words **μετα** (which means from one place to another) and **φερειν** (which means to carry), and it is when you describe something by using a word for something that it isn't. This means that the word metaphor is a metaphor. (p. 15)

But Asperger narrators aren't just good with language; they are all-around brilliant. Their intellectual prowess makes them a natural fit for the mystery genre, as in *Extremely Loud*, *Curious Incident*, *Colin Fischer*, and *Marcelo*, all of which feature an extraordinarily observant autistic character discovering clues—about a missing parent, a murdered pet, a school shooting, or the unethical practices of a law firm—and figuring out the truth. Even the romance *The Half-Life of Planets* is presented as a mystery, as the perpetually clueless narrator attempts to figure out the nature of adolescent love.

To be fair, some young adult works do include ASD characters who are lower functioning than the typical individual with Asperger syndrome. In the *Gone* fantasy series by Michael Grant (2008), the minor character Little Pete is a four-year-old boy with severe autistic impairment. He speaks only rarely and engages in self-stimulating behaviors; after seeing a violent incident, "he [begins] to rock faster and faster. His hands flapped as if he were warding off an attack of bees" (p.51). Similarly, *The Silence of Murder* by Dandi Mackall features a low-functioning autistic teenager who is on trial for murder. Both works are narrated, however, from a neurotypical perspective, raising the thorny question of whether a non-verbal ASD individuals like Little Pete or Jeremy could feasibly narrate their own stories. On one level, this is an aesthetic consideration for literary critics: can a person with limited cognitive ability perform the complex task of narrative without violating the tenets of realism? For Faulkner, Daniel Keyes (*Flowers for Algernon*), and other writers who have represented the inner minds of the mentally impaired, the answer has been yes.

On another level, however, this question gets to the heart of the problem with autistic fiction: the under-representation of the low-functioning, non-Asperger characters. There are no hard figures telling us what percentage of autistic adolescents have been diagnosed with Asperger syndrome, or how kids many would still qualify today, were the diagnosis

still in existence. But presenting all autistic kids as quirky, crime-solving savants marginalizes those who may have more severe cognitive impairments, as many on the spectrum do. As Meyer (2013) argues,

The Curious Incident . . . praises intelligence in its principal character; it also allows that character to separate himself from his intellectually disabled peers based on that intelligence. So, while these texts encourage readers to empathize with disabled narrators and to understand disability as a political and heterogeneous identity, like the books discussed previously they, too, push intellectual disability to the margins. (p. 279)

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. Whether young adult fiction can recognize and represent this side of the autism spectrum remains to be seen.

The Problem of Positivity

Published 40 years ago, Robert Cormier's young adult classic *The Chocolate War* (1974) remains a disturbing examination of the male adolescent psyche. The book is still widely taught, so its plotline and characters are part of our cultural conversation. Jerry is an incoming freshman at a Catholic preparatory school, all but run by a ruthless gang of students known as the Vigils, who are led by a sadistic young man named Archie. In a hazing ritual, Archie and the Vigils force incoming freshman to perform pranks called assignments. Their assignment for Jerry is simple—refuse to participate in the annual chocolate sale, a fundraiser on which the financial survival of the school depends. Initially, Jerry complies with Archie and the Vigils, even under high pressure from faculty and students.

When the Vigils about-face and demand that Jerry begin selling the chocolates, however, Jerry stands his ground and refuses—in the language of Prufrock, he dares to disturb the universe. For defying the Vigils, Jerry gets beaten senseless by the thuggish Emile, while the bloodthirsty student body watches and cheers. The book ends as Jerry, almost unconscious from the fight, tries to warn his friend Goober about the dangers of non-conformity:

It's a laugh, Goober, a fake. Don't disturb the universe, Goober, no matter what the posters say . . . I'm floating, floating above the pain. Just remember what I told you. It's important. Otherwise, they murder you. (p. 187)

In its unapologetic pessimism about humanity—*they murder you*—the novel compares to canonical texts such as *Heart of Darkness* and *The Lord of the Flies*, two widely taught and much-revered catechisms of total depravity. *The Chocolate War* also established a precedent for young adult fiction: like its adult counterpart, it can be dark, even hopeless, and full of savage characters like Archie. Most critically to this argument, *The Chocolate War* makes it clear that young adult fiction bears no obligation to show adolescents in a positive light. This is true, I believe, even if those adolescents have disabilities.

Many adolescents today are drawn to “dark fiction,” the subgenre of young adult literature that focuses on realistic and often graphic depictions of human behavior, including substance addiction (*Crank* by Ellen Hopkins), sexual abuse or assault (*Scars* by Cheryl Rainfield), suicide (*Thirteen Reasons Why* by Jay Asher), homophobia (*Sbrine* by Lauren Myracle), domestic violence (*Dreamland* by Sarah Dessen), self-injury (*Cut* by Patricia McCormick), or school violence (*Hate List* by Jennifer Brown). These kinds of subjects have long been the province of young adult fiction. For teens, works such as these may offer more than just lurid appeal. As Jeff Wilhelm and Michael W. Smith observe, psychoanalytical theory suggests that dark fiction provides adolescent readers with psychological containers, or safe places where they can address culturally taboo subjects (p. 144).

For all of the popularity of dark young adult fiction, none of the novels featuring autistic characters could be considered dark. They are, in fact, broadly affirming in their depiction of adolescents with disabilities. In the novels I read, characters with ASD consistently use their unique cognitive skills to win the girl, solve the mystery, or salvage broken relationships. In the romance *The Half-Life of Planets*, Hank is a withdrawn high school senior with Asperger syndrome. When his father dies unexpectedly, Hank becomes obsessed with the record collection that he left behind. His fascination with music leads him to work in a record store, where he meets the beautiful and popular Liana, who finds him “broody and intense” (p. 116). After a few awkward dates, the two hit it off, and the book ends with Hank playing his guitar at Beachfest, a performance he could not have accomplished without the support of his new girlfriend Lianna. Hank has

The Problem of Autism in Young Adult Fiction

achieved the dream of the neurotypical teenage male—he gets to play lead guitar get with the hottest girl in school.

Colin Fischer follows a similarly positive plotline. Colin is a middle-school student who is bullied because he has Asperger syndrome. One afternoon in the cafeteria, Colin witnesses a near shooting, as a dispute over a piece of birthday cake turns suddenly violent. A gun goes off, but no one sees who fired it. Colin is the only student who knows that the school bully, Wayne, wrongly expelled for the incident, is not responsible for taking the gun to school. Through shrewd detective work, Colin clears Wayne and makes an unexpected friend.

Marcelo in the Real World is another ASD success story. When Marcelo Sandoval unwillingly takes a summer job at his father's law firm, he makes an accidental discovery: his father has been defending a windshield manufacturer that knowingly produced faulty windshields, resulting in the death and injury of many people. With the help of Jasmine, a beautiful young woman who also works in the mailroom, Marcelo tracks down one of the windshield victims and supplies crucial evidence to her lawyer. The victim wins a settlement and can afford the reconstructive surgery she needs. In the meantime, Marcelo and Jasmine have fallen in love, and as the book concludes, they are planning to move to the country and start a pony farm for disabled children.

One novel that seems darker, at least initially, is *The Silence of Murder*, a gripping mystery in which a low-functioning autistic teenager, Jeremy Long, is standing trial for the murder of the high school baseball coach. As the plot unfolds, we learn the gruesome details of the murder: Coach Johnson was found beaten to death with a baseball bat, and witnesses saw Jeremy fleeing the scene with the bloody weapon in hand. The novel is narrated by Jeremy's younger sister, Hope, who speaks for Jeremy, who has selective mutism. The story twists and turns, involves many disreputable characters, but finally takes the safe way out. Jeremy is not the killer after all. In fact, he is nearly angelic, gifted with a singing voice that he claims came from God. On his final day in court, his innocence proven, Jeremy breaks his long silence with a song:

And then I hear it. It has been ten years since I heard that sound, but I recognize it as clearly as if I'd been listening to it just this morning. I close my eyes and take in the single note that swallows every other noise in the courtroom. It drowns out shame and anger and lies. Then it slides into more notes that mingle with the words blowing around us, in the air, filling the room (p. 319).

Arguably, Jeremy is, as Meyer (2013) notes, an example of the “Secondary and angelic ‘special children’ [that] are perhaps still the most common disabled characters in adolescent novels that tackle disability . . .” (p. 273). In *Gone*, the special child stereotype repeats itself, albeit with more subtlety. Here Little Pete, the autistic child, has the ability to teleport himself and others. Many characters in *Gone* possess special gifts, but in the fourth book of the series, Little Pete alone seems to transform into an entity without a body and without autistic symptoms, suggesting he has overcome his disability completely. Moreover, in the series finale, Little Pete sacrifices himself to save others from an evil alien, furthering his “angelic” identity.

With their shared happy endings, then, their themes of individual empowerment and self-determination, and their depiction of ASD characters in fully realized interpersonal relationships, these novels clearly portray ASD individuals positively, meeting the second major requirement discussed in evaluative studies. That young adult fiction can thus counter negative stereotypes associated with the developmentally disabled is a kind of moral victory, and one not lost on me, the father of a child with ASD. Of course, I want my son to encounter positive reflections of his own image, in the same way that I want children of color to see positive images of themselves in the books that they read.

But there is also something limiting about these novels—something too pat, too reductive in the “autistic kids are really quirky but are capable of saving the world” message that is manifested in feel-good stories such as *Planets*, *Colin Fischer*, and *Marcelo*. What would happen if we reimagined autistic fiction so that Jerry, the bullying victim of *The Chocolate War*, had ASD? Would our sensibilities permit an autistic teenager to lose everything, as Jerry does? Or more provocatively, what if Archie, the amoral villain of the story, were on the autism spectrum? In other words, if 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.

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Robert Rozema is the co-editor of the LAJM. An associate professor of English at Grand Valley State University, his most recent book is *Early Career English Teachers in Action* (with Lindsay Ellis).