

December 2019

Book Review: Neurodiversity Meets the Apocalypse: *On The Edge of Gone* by Corinne Duyvis

Sarah Frisch



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/ought>

Recommended Citation

Frisch, Sarah (2019) "Book Review: Neurodiversity Meets the Apocalypse: *On The Edge of Gone* by Corinne Duyvis," *Ought: The Journal of Autistic Culture*: Vol. 1: Iss. 1, Article 15.

DOI: 10.9707/2833-1508.1023

Available at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/ought/vol1/iss1/15>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Ought: The Journal of Autistic Culture* by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gvsu.edu.

Book Review: Neurodiversity Meets the Apocalypse: *On The Edge of Gone* by Corinne Duyvis

On the Edge of Gone by Corinne Duyvis (Amulet, 2016)



What would happen if the inclusive, humanizing philosophy of the neurodiversity movement became widespread—and then got thrown into the apocalypse? That’s the story told in *On the Edge of Gone* (2016) by the autistic novelist Corinne Duyvis. Set in 2034, this science fiction young adult novel features an autistic narrator, Denise, and a diverse cast of characters who are thrown together when a massive comet is about to impact the Earth. The wealthy and the powerful escape the impending catastrophe via special spaceships bound for another solar system, but those not lucky enough to have secured passage must

wait out the devastation on Earth—and survive in its aftermath. In the Netherlands, Denise and her family are among those who are supposed to stay, assigned to a shelter where they will be safe from the initial chaos and destruction of the impact. When circumstances change, she and her mother end up as unwelcome freight aboard the *Nassau*, the last ship to leave earth.

Denise, a 16-year-old autistic girl of mixed race, is not an amazing autistic detective who saves the day with her magical autism powers, nor or a brilliantly skilled technosavant. Nor is she a pure moral presence whose very existence guides those around her to become better people. She’s complicated. Early in the story, for example, Denise seems willing to abandon her mother on Earth, to guarantee her own safe passage:

And then I scream: I say they promised us until tomorrow, that they’re murdering us, murdering us. I say it’s Mom’s fault, I never

drank a drop and never took a bite. That I had a chance here, that they should kick her out and let me stay if that's what it takes. (69)

Many of the characters are like Denise, somewhere between good or evil. Like real life, each one is a mix, making decisions based on who they are and what they believe, and trying to do the best they can under very poor circumstances.

Everyone experiences autism differently, but Duyvis gives us the full spectrum of Denise. In the course of the story, she accomplishes a lot, exceeding the expectations of those around her. She also experiences sensory overloads, echolalia, meltdowns, and being overwhelmed to the point of being nonverbal. She stims to calm herself, consciously or subconsciously. She rambles on and on about subjects she loves. Sometimes she takes much longer than usual to respond to the questions of others. As an autistic person, I found the description of Denise's thought processes very relatable. Like me, she tends to make goals and then hyperfocus on them. The excruciating mental calculations she makes to interact properly with the people around her are also extremely familiar. I envy the comfort she gets from stimming, though. I personally have no such coping mechanisms.

Another thing that stuck out about this novel was the diversity of its characters. The main character, visibly dark-skinned, mixed race, poor, and autistic, is only the beginning. There's a trans character, a lesbian couple, a polyamorous group, some followers of Islam, at least one person in dire need of mental healthcare, and a slew of major and minor characters from other countries, including plenty of people of color.

At first, I found all of this diversity somewhat jarring, but perhaps it's simply that I hail from a much more uniformly white area of the world, or that I'm simply unaccustomed to polyamory and juggling pronouns for the past and present of a M-to-F trans person. Either way, it was practically a diversity parade. Most of these identities are not particularly explored, but they're not really the focus of the plotline, either. Brief though the mentions may be, it's definitely an improvement for a genre that normally features white men front and center.

In the end, it wasn't the spaceships, the highly advanced 3D printers, or the widespread use of hologram-emitting wearables that made this book science fiction to me. It was the basic humanity shown to the autistic protagonist: in the future that Duyvis creates, it is as if the medical model of disability had been rendered all but extinct. People treated Denise like she was just another person, even when she displayed echolalia and other behaviors that confuse neurotypicals and scream "not like me."

This basic assumption of competence is extended to her by almost everyone, even before Denise has a chance to prove she deserves it. This assumption is usually afforded to neurotypical 16-year-olds, but not always to autistic teens. The characters around Denise shrug off echolalia, wait patiently through long pauses in conversation, and accept her unusual responses to their questions. No one stares, gets annoyed, or asks Denise to repeat herself. No one gossips behind her back, warns others that she is weird, or ostracizes her. Denise's agency and actions are respected. In this future Duyvis envisions, the acceptable range of behavior has been widened, such that while autistic differences are still noticeable to the characters in the novel, these differences are not attacked or vilified at any point, even when natural disaster after natural disaster makes it harder and harder to survive.

This type of autism-accepting culture is one that could only have come from a person who truly believes neurodiversity is the future. At the present time, mainstream society focuses on compensating for autistic deficits. We are told to blend in with others, but few consider blending in with us. Some of the autism community dare to dream bigger than that, though. They dare to believe that differences not only make the world better, but are essential to making the best possible world. Not just autistic differences either, all of them: race, gender, nationality, sexual orientation, religion, and others. Characters with these differences are also accepted, with each playing their part, without a care for skin color, gender, nationality, or sexuality. Thus, despite being a tale about the end of the world, *On the Edge of Gone* is immensely idealistic.

On the Edge of Gone is set in 2035, about 15 years from now. Fifteen years was enough time for the majority of people in the US to go from being uncomfortable with same sex marriage to accepting and supporting

equal marriage as a basic human right. The process was not easy, nor is it over, but it did happen. The same kind of revolution could possibly happen with autistic and other neurodiverse people.

I truly hope it does, but it seems unlikely that a neurodiversity revolution will occur, even with climate advocates such as Greta Thunberg and authors such as Corinne Duyvis imagining alternative futures for humanity. For one, neurodiverse people are often infantilized by neurotypical society. It is sometimes presumed we need to be protected from the world. Granted, our needs can be many and varied, from constant one-on-one support in a work environment to help managing our schedules, to lightbulbs that do not set off our sensory issues. But having such different, sometimes intensive needs does not mean we are not fully adult.

Few people in life are as driven and formidable as a parent protecting their child. Sadly, that tenacious parental ferocity can be turned against a young autistic person looking to begin making their way in the world. Shielding us from the world often also means shielding us from making personal choices, making mistakes, and learning from those mistakes. Because some of us do need a lot more support and help to make our way in the world, this limiting protection seems justified and right to many parents. This is particularly true in a country like the US, where the illusion of self-reliance is valued so highly. *On The Edge of Gone* features a parent with some of this protective mentality, though she has her own problems as well. While family dynamics and relationships are a theme in this story, a bigger theme is grappling with authority and its value and place in society. The novel explores questions like: Who makes decisions? Should these decisions be abided by?

I recommend *On the Edge of Gone* for neurotypical and atypical readers alike. The world was a very plausible near-future scenario with an interesting, diverse cast of characters. The main character provides an authentic and unflinching look into what life can be like as an autistic person. The story itself is small in scale, fairly realistic, and somewhat grim. However, for a tale of the apocalypse, it contained a surprising amount of idealism, humanity, and hope.

Sarah Frisch is an autistic self-advocate and the author of *The Realistic Autistic*, a blog that explores autism in research and books through the eyes of personal experience.