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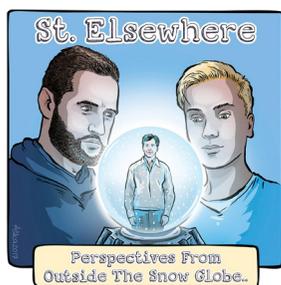
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The *St. Elsewhere* Podcast: Autism in Popular Culture and *Atypical*

Hector, Courtney Coulson, and Chris Bass, *Ought* Co-Editor



St. Elsewhere: Perspectives From Outside the Snow Globe is a podcast hosted by two self-described “pop-culture obsessed autistics,” Courtney Coulson and Hector (no last name by request). The pod’s title is a tongue-in-cheek allusion to the finale of the television medical drama *St. Elsewhere*, which ended, infamously, by revealing that the entire show was the dream of an autistic boy gazing into a snow globe. With this precedent, each episode of the pod

reviews the depiction of autism in a specific movie or show. New episodes were posted between 2017–2019 and are now all available via the show’s blog and through podcast services.

Ought’s Co-Editor-in-Chief, Chris Bass, reached out to one of the *St. Elsewhere*’s hosts, Hector, asked for some insights about putting together a podcast series. After the brief interview, we include excerpts from our transcription of Episode 11, a critique of the Netflix show *Atypical*, in its first season at the time of the recording.

Chris Bass: What was the main motivator to get that podcast series up and running—any specific reason that you chose to focus on the 1988 film *Rain Man* for the first episode?

Hector: I was diagnosed with autism (or Asperger’s as we were still referring to it back then) well into my adulthood. It seems ludicrous looking back that it was somehow missed by everyone associated with me, I was such an eccentric child and preternaturally wise beyond my years. But I guess that because I was for the most part functional and indeed even successful in the metrics we use to assess and judge children of a certain age (academics, sports, theater etc.), my many socialisation and relationship issues were just filed away in the “problem for another day” bucket. I had a vague inkling

there was something different about me and the way my brain worked from my fellows, but given the aforementioned successes, I was assured by all and sundry that this was a good thing and was actively encouraged to ignore my growing litany of personal problems in the pursuit of yet more and more academic and extra-curricular achievements.

So I did. I had no word for what it was I thought was different about me. I had no examples I could readily compare myself to. No representation in the media I consumed of any meaningful kind. I had seen *Rain Man* in the cinema when it was first released, but I did not for any moment identify with this person before me (the first “autistic” person I had ever really encountered to my knowledge). So those questions I had about my own identity/makeup/reality would stay as nothing but a vague itch in the depths of my brain for years to come.

But of course nothing good comes from burying or ignoring actual problems. While I learned to mask my inner turmoil and differences from the outside world, it all continued to fester and boil and simmer and gnaw at me below the surface of my artificial veneer. It would all eventually come spewing out in the first of many mental breakdowns, the toll of which would ultimately force me to probe more deeply into what it was that made me: me.

When I was officially diagnosed years later (after a random and surprising and enlightening visit to the “Asperger Syndrome” Wikipedia page), I looked back on the things I had to that point known about autism, what I had consciously and unconsciously absorbed via my consumption of media and my schooling—and it wasn’t good. It was completely lacking.

The articles and journals and viewpoints I now read of and about autistic people are light years from what I had come to think of as authentically autistic through watching, say, Dustin Hoffman as Raymond Babbitt. I wondered at the damage such inaccurate and misleading representations of autistic people had done to me and perhaps others like me. Would I have sought a diagnosis sooner if I had seen a more accurate representation of myself in my formative years? What of the folk who even now are asking themselves similar questions about why they feel . . . different?

So that's what inspired me to cast a critical eye over some of the more renowned examples of autistic representation in media, and why I chose *Rain Man* as our first episode.

Chris Bass: In your opinion, is there anything particular about the nature of a podcast that makes it an ideal format for the diverse set of autistic voices and perspectives?

Hector: I'm not sure that entered our considerations. I supposed we could have produced the episodes as a video series. Or given how much I basically wrote my scripts for our episodes like an essay, I could've just put this out there as a blog. But we both had experience with various guest hosting stints on some pop culture podcasts at that point in time. And so that's what we gravitated towards.

I don't know if there is an ideal format for autistic people—our experiences and preferences are all so varied. I know there are autistic people for whom the podcasting format is not the best option. We were asked once about providing actual transcripts for people whom might have auditory processing issues. Had the podcast continued (or if we'd had funding or assistance), I would have looked more into this. As it was we were just two enthusiastic amateurs doing this on our own time for a not huge audience and in a niche realm.

Chris Bass: Do you have any recommendations for other podcasts that promote autistic experiences?

Hector: Sadly, I do not. Part of the reason I had the idea to start recording a podcast about autistic representation in media was because I could not find one at the time the idea struck me.

Editor's Note: What follows is an arranged, edited selection from Episode 11 of the podcast. Courtney and Hector begin with a brief overview of the show. Then, they focus on the lack of autistic input in creating, writing, or casting the show. Courtney notes, "after all, considering that the motto for the autistic community is 'Nothing About Us Without Us,' that motto should have extended to *Atypical*, too." They also address the lack of diversity in autistic representation exemplified by the character of Sam.

St. Elsewhere, Episode Eleven: *Atypical*

Hector: So today, we are talking *Atypical*, that little 2017 series. You may have heard of it, and if so, may God have mercy on your eternal soul. It is a pile of shit.

Courtney: Yeah, you can just turn it off, we'll save you a lot of time. It's shit. Good night. This is the one that made us want to do this podcast in the first place . . . we were basically inspired to do this podcast because I saw the trailer for *Atypical* on the Netflix Facebook page, and I was scrolling through, trying to see if anyone else had the same reaction.

Hector: So I avoided this travesty for as long as possible, intentionally, and I can now safely say I was right to do so. If there were a way to pluck that green infinity stone from Thanos' thick gauntlet and send myself back to pre-*Atypical* times, I would gladly do so.

Courtney: See, if I had Thanos' gauntlet, I would just erase this show from existence entirely, or 50 percent of it, because the sister, her story is fine. Her plot is great. That's the only redeeming aspect of this. So if we could keep 50 percent of this show, it'd be fine.

Hector: It'd just be a standard, inoffensive, bloody high school romance kind of a thing. Just give her a job on something else. She's a good actress.

Courtney: Yeah, it's Stockholm syndrome, where we're watching this absolute pile of crap, and this one sort of okay part suddenly becomes really good by comparison.

Hector: We've rambled enough that we've successfully avoided starting the conversation on *Atypical*. We better begin, lest we begin to develop a reputation for excessive rambling. Let us now delve into the treacle-thick mess of filth that is *Atypical*.

It's the somewhat controversial dramedy centered on Sam, a high-functioning (and I'm doing the quotation marks, so don't fucking write in and tell me off for using the label), an autistic male teenager—or is that a male teenager with autism? Teenage autistic with maleness? Don't worry if you're

not sure—this is the kind of series in which a character will pop up soon enough to lecture you on handy autistic factoids like person-first language, etc. Anyway, this Sam deezer one day announces to his family that he is ready to start dating, i.e., lose his virginity. Shock and horror: an autistic with a dick and an urge to use it. Thus begins something: a romp, a clusterfuck, a less comedic version of *American Pie* but with autists? Who the fuck knows.

So *Atypical* was originally known as *Antarctica* in pre-production, which as I read it, is a sentence with way more “aaays” than a *Happy Days* convention. I laugh at my own jokes. Groan at my humor if you must, but that is literally a better joke than anything in this dull and plodding television show.

Atypical was created and written by Robia Rashid, who had previously worked on *How I Met Your Mother* and *The Goldbergs*, which is somehow a 100+ episode TV show I’ve barely ever heard of. It’s produced by Seth Gordon, who may or may not be a more recognizable name. He’s got a bit of a mixed, spotty cinematic record. On the plus side, he’s directed the cult-credentialed *The King of Kong: A Fistful of Quarters*, produced the best doccer Oscar winner of 2012, *Undeclared*, and the decent-ish *Horrible Bosses* . . . Seth Gordon is also the producer of *The Good Doctor*, which is another autistic-themed recent program, so he was involved in pooping out two programs with an autistic main character in 2017, neither of which are played by an autistic.

About Us, Without Us

Hector: There’s apparently a personal autism link with *Atypical* creator Robia Rashid, although this is how she answered a question about it in an interview [*Vulture*, August 15, 2017]. She was asked “Did you have any personal experience with autism? Are you close with anyone that is autistic or has autistic kids?”

Courtney: [reading *Vulture*] “I do have personal experience with it, yeah. I don’t want to talk about it much because I want to protect their privacy, but yes, I do.”

Hector: There you go.

Courtney: That's like saying, "Yeah, I know a black person. I'm not a racist." Or it's like, "I have a girlfriend, but she's in Canada."

Hector: Robia saw an autistic person through an open window once or something. And she didn't have time to catch their name, but she did have time to write a complete TV series about them. When asked about the inspiration behind *Atypical*, Robia said:

Courtney: [reading *Vulture*] "I was very aware that more people were being diagnosed with autism, and it was interesting to me that a whole generation of kids were growing up knowing they were on the spectrum and wanting independence. That point of view seemed so interesting to me, and such a cool way to tell a dating story. You've seen the story of someone looking for independence and looking for love before, but not from that specific point of view . . . I had to do a lot of research. If the main character were a half-Pakistani, half-white girl, it wouldn't have been as hard because that's me."

Hector: It also would have been more interesting because that's a different perspective that we haven't seen.

Courtney: Yeah! Make a half-Pakistani girl with autism TV show, please. [reading *Vulture*] "But with an autistic teenage boy, I had to do a lot of real learning and listening to people. It was a voice I had to learn, and once I started diving into this world, the voice came naturally. I would just write and the words would come out."

Hector: That's because you're just quoting penguin facts. At least she didn't *Curious Incident* it, I guess. She could have not researched anything.

Courtney: She tried, I guess.

Hector: She is actually claiming that she did some research.

Courtney: [reading *Vulture*] "I was very conscious of doing this right and being careful about it, and it's not something I took lightly. It definitely influenced me emotionally and intellectually. It made me really want to do it justice." Really?

Hector: So she threw herself into research—she listened to podcasts, she read books and blogs written by individuals on the spectrum, she says. She also says she invited input from people on the cast and crew who had personal experience with autism:

Courtney: [reading *Vulture*] “There are a lot of people on our set who have kids who are autistic, people who would start crying on set, like the scene in the first episode where Casey stands up for Sam, and she says, ‘Nothing is wrong with him! Get away from him!’ People were crying.”

Hector: It’s a show made by autism moms for autism moms.

Courtney: It’s very much that outsider perspective, looking from the outside in. I never once in this show feel like Sam is a real person. It’s very much the emphasis on how it affects everyone else.

Hector: It’s how autism moms see an autistic person. A burden.

Courtney: Yeah, Sam’s supposed to be a punchline.

Hector: It is always told from an outsider’s perspective of him and his behavior, not any interest in how he himself might view these situations.

Courtney: Exactly. He’s not really a character.

Hector: So apparently Rashid brought in a woman named Michelle Dean, a California State University professor who worked at UCLA’s Center for Autism Research and Treatment.

Courtney: [reading *Vulture*] “She came and talked to the cast on set and answered questions, and then she read every script and watched every cut, letting us know when language was incorrect or something didn’t seem realistic.”

Hector: Apparently, no actual autistics. What the fuck do we know about the reality of being autistic? Why not ask someone who stares at us for a living? An autie whisperer.

Courtney: This is so strange to me. How could you have done that much research or have some expert come in who actually doesn't understand how this works?

Hector: They still think that we can't fucking advocate for ourselves. People have a view of us being these totally mentally disabled people who don't know about ourselves, and what we want and all the rest of it. And then when you have people like ourselves, who are verbal, who can advocate, who can talk and speak and explain shit, we just get fucking ignored . . . A real autism expert would say, "Hey, why don't you talk to an autistic person? I know a couple. I've got some on speed dial." . . .

There is actually an autistic supporting actor, in Anthony Jacques, in an extremely minor role, he plays Christopher, a friend of our main man Sam. Apparently he auditioned for the role of Sam, along with a bunch of other ASD actors, we are told.

Courtney: Ugh. [reading *Vulture*] "Keir Gilchrist ended up being the right fit, and he was amazing." Because he was white and had brown hair and looked like Sheldon . . .

Hector: They even called him Christopher.

Courtney: I know. That's why I slowed down, because I thought "Hang on!" [reading *Vulture*] ". . . we found [Jacques] during the process, so we wrote the role for him because we loved him so much. I didn't think he was Sam, but I felt we needed to write a role for him." I don't even remember this kid.

Hector: Yeah, he's in the last two episodes. He's the one that's obsessed with boobs and stuff. Rashid said it was important that the show to have those on the spectrum involved. Yeah, he had trouble making eye contact with the camera. From an article detailing her being presented the 2017 Writers' Guild of America West Evan Summers Memorial Award, which also wins the award for longest fucking title of any award, honoring the individuals showcasing the disability narrative—basically by hiring an autistic actor, I guess.

Courtney: [reading *Respect Ability*, November 18, 2017] "By hiring an actor who has autism, Rashid sent a clear message that people of all abilities have

a place in the acting industry. ‘It’s an amazing time for stories of inclusion and diversity,’ she said. ‘I just feel so lucky and honored to tell this story that feels so personal and real, like nothing I’ve ever written before or really seen before.’”

Hector: Personal?

Courtney: It’s all about them.

Hector: It might be the irrepressible cynic in me, but that [casting Anthony Jacques] seems slightly tokenistic. One autistic of all those who, we are told, auditioned was worthy of being given two or three lines about boobs and comic books. I mean, that’s enough for us, isn’t it? Meager table scraps thrown to the only autistic worthy of representing us on the television screen. Not worthy of representing us with someone with four lines, of course, or even to be asked a question about how an autistic person might behave in a certain scene. No no, that sounds like a job for the autie whisperer. Quick! Someone switch on the autie spotlight and project that huge jigsaw puzzle piece through the night fucking sky.

Here’s an aside: do you ever wonder how an allistic feels pretending to be an autistic person in a scene with an actual autistic actor? Surely that’s not comfortable. It gets dangerously close to mockery, doesn’t it?

Courtney: Yeah.

Hector: I don’t know how NTs generally regard the world around them or if they think about this stuff like we do, but . . . if you’re sitting there acting alongside an autistic person, you’re taking on more visually recognizable, reproducible tics and quirks, and you’re copying them back to him, these unconscious or uncontrollable betrayers of our disability, and you’re reflecting them right back into our little autistic faces while we sit there directly in front of you. Do ever wonder how actors feel in these situations? Do they not feel?

Courtney: Well, they’re autistic, so of course they don’t have feelings.

Hector: It's kind of ironic when you consider all the stereotypes about us being cold, emotionless robots, but I don't know.

Courtney: Yeah, I'm trying to think how I would feel if I was in a show acting as an autistic character and then there's another character that's autistic but played by an allistic person. That would be very weird to me, because I would feel like, "Are they trying to copy me?"

Hector: As my Twitter pal Sarah Kurchak has said, "People who are directly involved in creating a narrative and bringing it to the screen are almost always only guessing about an autistic character's internal life. If you're serious about authenticity and being real and personable about autism, then surely you would avail yourself of autistic people in key creative roles."

Another Straight White Boy with Brown Hair

Hector: And isn't it refreshing that an under-represented group of people such as we, the autists, should once again see ourselves reflected up on screen as a white male teenager? They're really are no other kinds of autistics. According to Hollyweird, at least.

Courtney: Yeah. He's the most stock, standard autistic character you can imagine. He's Sheldon [*Big Bang Theory*]. He's a Sheldon clone.

Hector: Yeah, he's Sheldon or a teenage Rain Man. That same haircut. Same look. Same wardrobe.

Courtney: Up until now, we've done well keeping [discussed shows and characters] fairly diverse, but that's an active challenge we have to overcome. We're trying to find the POC autistic characters or the female autistic characters because by and large, they're just white boys with brown hair.

Hector: Find me an autistic type, and that's pretty much what you get. You get Keir Gilchrist.

Courtney: For God's sake! We do come in different shapes and sizes. Like the two of us.

Hector: Yeah. I'm a white boy with brown hair.

Courtney: You've got black hair, you got a beard, and you're a giant, and I look like Steve Rogers before the super soldier serum.

Hector: A lot of criticism from the autism community, apart from the casting decision which we've already discussed centered on the lead character being such a familiar caricature, which was also mentioned previously. While yes, Sam is not representative of everybody on the spectrum, he is still a very familiar representation of a current and limiting view of spectrum dwellers, nearly indistinguishable, in fact, from the vast majority of all the autistic characters we've had previous exposure to on the films and TV. It's not like we're over here drowning in autistic characters in all of the media, but the small puddles that we have encountered have definitely most often been a) white b) male and c) heterosexual. We ourselves have covered our fair share on *St. Elsewhere Pod*. We've deliberately covered a few outside of this range, but that's our particular pool that's almost dry.

This fuels the misperception that autism only affects individuals of those particular characteristics: white skin, brown hair, male junk. But Autism Spectrum Disorder, such as we understand it, is an umbrella term, encompassing a vast array of unique characteristics, conditions, genders, skin shades, sexual preferences and proclivities.

Courtney: Yeah. It's never even a gay autistic character. Like gay is so normal to me—I'm surrounded by so many gay people.

Hector: Yeah, queer is another really high percentage thing in the autism community. We always see white male heterosexual, but there are so many who don't identify as any of those particular things.

Courtney: And a lot of autistic people are either asexual, or—and I found this out while I was doing research into incels, sorry—a majority, or 40 percent of them [incels] are on the autism spectrum. So it is very difficult. We're not going to pretend that this isn't a real issue.

It's very hard for people with autism to find relationships and stay in committed relationships and not be taken advantage of. However, it's never

played that way. It's more that he [Sam] is a fucking jerk. It's not, oh, he gave his heart to this girl, and she was just using him. It's never played that way.

Hector: Yeah. It's not about the troubles that he has; it's the trouble that he causes.

Courtney: Exactly.

Hector: What do they fucking care? They only care about stereotypes.

Courtney: That's what Sam is. They're saying he should be relatable to some people—no. I don't relate to any aspect of him. I don't see him in any other autistic people. He's complete fiction.

Hector: In a *Salon* review [August 7, 2017], Matthew Rozsa, who is autistic, said,

Courtney: [reading *Salon*] “Sam is an increasingly popular stock character—the high-functioning Aspie. Look around and you'll see them almost everywhere in pop culture these days, nearly always as a white, heterosexual male. Autism—which can affect non-white, female and LGBT individuals as well as white, straight men—doesn't discriminate in real life.”

In Sum: A Joke at Our Expense

Hector: I aggressively hate this show.

Courtney: I think I hate this more than *The Curious Incident*.

Hector: Yeah, I thought it was a pile of bloated ass. Despite [autism] being the focus, marketing lure, exploited commodity at the heart of *Atypical*, it doesn't feel like the show has been made for us. It feels like a show for those who know or are affected by us and the sheer burden of our existence. And instead of “Nothing About Us Without Us,” it's starting to feel depressingly more like “Nothing About Us is For Us.”

You shared an Autism Speaks article with me that included the following: “My son Ryan had no interest in watching *Atypical* because it's not a Japanese

show that includes anime, which is much more interesting than what you are describing. *Atypical* may not be for you or my son, but for this mother, the creators of the series did what I believe they set out to do: entertain me—ME—with the ins and outs of another family who have a child with autism. And to teach me a lot more than I ever knew about penguins and Antarctica.” A lot of *mes* in that sentence.

Courtney: Me, me, I, I, I.

Hector: The fact that *Atypical* spends so much of its time making jokes at Sam’s—and our, by extension—expense is a dead giveaway that this show’s not for us. On top of the troublesome aspects as core, and our not being the target audience, what even is this show? Its tone and its execution vary wildly. One moment, it’s an *American Pie* Judd Apatow hybrid about horny, annoying teenagers, and the next it’s Diablo Cody meets *Weeds*. The next minute it’s incorporating bizarre elements of magic realism . . . Very fucking weird.

From an *Atlantic* [August 13, 2017] review: “It’s hard to tell whether its inconsistency is due to a blurry conception of what tone it should strike, or whether producers simply wanted to appeal to as broad a swathe of potential viewers as possible—the show skews so wildly from slapstick to gritty drama to teen soap to family sitcom that it should come with Dramamine.”

Courtney: Aside from autistic representation, it is fundamentally, structurally, not a good show.

Hector: I wouldn’t like it if it was about a kid with friggin motion sickness.

Hector is a former podcaster. He now wastes too much time on Twitter making capybara memes (@hupstory) while procrastinating on various unfinished artistic projects.

Courtney Coulson is a freelance artist from Perth, Western Australia. A media analyst since age 17, she is currently covering the *Alien: Covenant Movies by Minute* podcast at Traviandesigns.com. She also speaks about her experiences as a FTMTF detransitioner on YouTube.