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Cover Page Footnote

I am grateful to Robert Rozema for his support and guidance throughout the process of developing this article.

An Analysis of Self-published Novels by Autistic Authors as a Form of Advocacy

Jennifer Nelson

As awareness and acceptance of autism has grown over the past two decades, so has the depiction of autism in the media. Yet it has been a challenge to locate specific intersectional identities within the autistic representation in media. Oftentimes when there is a depiction of autism, it does not reflect the diverse population impacted by autism, including gender, race and ethnicity, age, co-occurring disorders, sexual orientation etc. Previously there was no single tool or reference work to organize the media portrayals of autism. Several scholars (e.g., Irwin et al., 2015) have assembled partial annotated bibliographies. Irwin et al., 2015, for example, compiled an annotated bibliography with 107 books included that was the most thorough reference up until this point. Additionally, other scholars have critiqued autistic representation, including James McGrath in *Naming Adult Autism: Culture, Science, Identity* (2017) and Sonya Freeman Loftis in *Imagining Autism: Fiction and Stereotypes on the Spectrum* (2015).

In the spring and summer of 2021, with the support of the Grand Valley State University Undergraduate Research Office and Professor Robert Rozema, I began work on the Autistic Representation Database (ARD), an online resource that attempts to index all works of fiction, auto-biographical non-fiction, film, and television that feature representations of autistic individuals (<http://autrep.org>). The project aims to showcase autistic characters and examine how art imitates life—in this case, autistic life. When developing the ARD, I focused on the user experience to filter through items using specific categories, or tagging. My intended result was to assist both the casual reader/viewer and scholar of critical autism studies to find autistic representation and further research on authentic autistic portrayal.

Still a work in progress, the ARD is organized alphabetically by title, with each entry including the title, author/director, date, publisher/production company, ISBN number (if applicable), cover image, a brief description, and, most critically, a series of content tags. Each item is tagged to identify the type of work (fiction, autobiographical non-fiction, film, or television), the

genre (e.g., science fiction, romance), and the intended audience (children, tween/adolescents, adults), as well as how the autistic character is identified. This in-depth tagging aids in finding specific representation that has not been utilized before. Including and tagging these works also reveal trends, such as self-published autistic authors, which I will examine at length in this article.

Figure 1



An Unkindness of Ghosts by Rivers Solomon, an entry in the ARD.

The ARD also tags autistic characters based upon their age, gender identity, race and ethnicity, and sexual orientation. In addition, the autistic character’s significance to the plot is identified as narrator, secondary character, or other. Each entry also records whether the identification of autism is explicit within the text or if it was “coded” (Rozema, 2020). In certain works, autistic characters may be coded rather than identified because of the genre (e.g., science fiction or historical fiction), because of retroactive identification, or the deliberate intention of the author to avoid the label. Additionally, the ARD contains works of fiction if creators (authors, illustrators, etc) identify themselves as autistic, even when the subject matter is not related to autism. Likewise, for film and television if the actor portraying the autistic character is autistic or neurotypical, I included the work in the ARD. Certainly there are more autistic creators than I accounted for because not every creator publicly self- identifies as autistic.

Figure 1 provides an example of how works are tagged in the ARD. The tagging in this example indicates that River Solomon’s (2017) science fiction

novel, *An Unkindness of Ghosts*, is intended for adults. The narrator, Aster, is an adult African-American female who identifies as bisexual. While the text does not state that Aster has autism, numerous instances throughout the novel highlight Aster's autistic behaviors, and accordingly, the novel is tagged as autism (coded). Rivers Solomon is herself autistic and is tagged as an autistic author. The ARD is a particularly powerful tool for searching multiple tags at once. For example, if I wanted to find a book written by an autistic author with a character who is African-American and part of the LGBTQA community, *An Unkindness of Ghosts* would be one of the search results.

Unlike many academic databases, the ARD considers self-published works about autism and by autistic people as instances of autistic representation. Many of the works included in the ARD are thus tagged self-published. Tagging self-published works, in fact, led to a discovery that this article is grounded in—namely, that a higher ratio of autistic authors are self-published in comparison to neurotypical authors writing about autism. I discuss this finding at length below, in addition to examining the benefits of self-publishing as they pertain to autistic advocacy. Autistic self-publishing, I argue here, is a form of advocacy which manifests itself in two ways: first, implicit advocacy, which seeks to normalize autism; and second, explicit advocacy, which aims to confront and correct stereotypes. This article examines three representative self-published novels by autistic authors. Drawing on these works and the personal interviews I conducted, I analyze the implicit and explicit advocacy in the novels.

Methodology: The Making of the ARD

Of the 800 entries I added to the ARD, about half were taken from existing compilations of autistic literature, and the remaining half through personal research consisting of various methods. In the Spring of 2021, I found collections of autistic representation were compiled by three distinct groups of curators: autistics, people who have a parental or professional interest in autism, and unspecified contributors.

I found that oftentimes the curators who make these autistic book lists are autistic authors themselves, and they frequently comment on how their books present a more authentic autistic experience than the books they have listed. An example includes speculative fiction author Ada Hoffmann,

whose works include *Monsters in My Mind* (2017), *The Outside* (2019), *Fallen* (2021), and *Million-Year Elegies* (2021). Hoffmann curates and reviews autistic speculative fiction books online at Autistic Book Party. Weekly blog posts of the Autistic Book Party focus on speculative fiction books with autistic characters and/or autistic authors. She begins with a description of the plot and autistic characters followed by her thoughts on the representation.

Hoffman also uses a rating scale that ranks works as Highly Recommended, Recommended, Marginal, or YMMV [shorthand for an opinion is purely subjective], and Not Recommended. This scale lets readers understand what kind of representations are approved and accepted by an autistic person. However, it should be noted that just because a book was approved by one autistic person does not mean it would be approved by another. Still, it is a valuable measure. Websites and blogs run by people like Ada Hoffmann are my preferred method of finding books, as they are verified by the representative audience.

People who are autistic-adjacent are those who have a close family member, often a child, or people whose professional careers involve people affected by autism (Caldwell, 2021). This kind of curator may be part of a greater organization or community surrounding autism. For example, one autistic adjacent curator is Meghan Ashburn, an educational consultant, professional development facilitator, and writer. She blogs on Not An Autism Mom and founded That Au-Some Book Club. That Au-Some Book Club is a platform for people who are interested in autism to discuss autistic representation. Thus the titles included on the list have been “vetted by a large group of autistic adults and allies” (Ashburn, 2020, para 1). Organizations and communities like That Au-Some Book Club bond autistic voices together to amplify the call for #actuallyautistic and #ownvoices in autism literature.

Collections of autistic characters in fiction books are also common in other online locations, compiled by entities with unspecified identities. These crowd-sourced lists may be added to by people who have nuanced knowledge of the autistic community, or, in contrast, those who have little to no personal experience with autism. Because of the format of the sites these lists are commonly housed on, contributors rarely have the ability to leave commentary on the books. As a result, I treated these sites with some caution about the presence of autistic characters and analyzed the

books individually. The most common examples of this form are Wikipedia and Listopia on Goodreads. I found the benefits of various Listopias on Goodreads often are focused on specific issues regarding autism. Two representative examples are “Women of Colour Aspergers’ Group Book Club” or “Queer Books With Neurodivergent Characters.” These lists may be distinct in the intersectionalities of autism, but the neurological identity of the curator can be difficult to verify.

Additionally, books were included from libraries, academic books, and scholarly journal articles focusing on autistic representation in literature. These were credible collections that were easily inputted into the database as they had already been analyzed. Some had a focus of the representation like Indiana Institute on Disability and Community Library with “Contemporary Picture Books about Children and Families of Color” which centered on the intersectionality within autism. Academic books like Irwin et al. (2015) *Autism in Young Adult Novels* focused only on intermediate and young adult fiction. These sources are important contributions to understanding how other autistic representations are analyzed and the current themes within the representation.

The other half of works in the ARD Autism and Fiction library resulted from my scouring of sources like Amazon algorithms and social media, locating disability-focused publishing houses, and finally, having personal conversations with informed people in the field. When analyzing a book to consider adding it to the database, I found it beneficial to peruse the comments of readers for a gauge on the caliber of the book. These reveal who is reading the book: autistic, autistic-adjacent, unspecified, or no prior knowledge, as well as other recommended reading. I added a significant number of books through these comments as well as Amazon’s algorithm for “Frequently bought together,” “Products related to this item,” and “Customers who viewed this item also viewed.” These trends were valuable yet also cyclical in nature as the algorithm continued to emphasize the same books.

I found a generous portion of books through my prior personal interest in autistic voices, which was reinforced by my involvement with the ARD. In person and online, I engaged in conversations with autistic people, educators, and inclusive bookshop owners. Representation and advocacy may have fewer barriers on social media with Instagram accounts like

Activate4Autism, WeWorkWithAutism, and MyAutisticSoul. Being involved in conversations about autistic literature begets more conversations and advocacy.

Finally, select publishing companies are making purposeful strides to elevate autistic stories and autistic authors. I looked at specific publishing houses who promoted autistic fiction to find autistic books. The publishing industry should take note of Jessica Kingsley Publishing and Orca Book Publishers, both of which work to promote neurodivergent authors. Not all of their books accentuate autistic voices, but they make it a priority to do so. There is a push for change in the publishing industry, but real inclusion is still in the distance for a majority of publishers. In response, many autistic stories and autistic authors seek to share their narratives through other avenues like self-publishing.

Self-Publishing by Autistic Authors

As I found, read, and tagged works, I noticed a clear trend from the Autistic Representation Database: a higher ratio of autistic authors are self-published in comparison to neurotypical authors writing about autism. Data from the ARD show that 24% of the authors included in the database are autistic (Table 1). Therefore, 76% of the authors writing about autism are neurotypical or unspecified. This data shows that the majority of autistic representation in literature is not written by autistic individuals. This, of course, does not align with the motto ‘nothing about us without us’ that the disability community proclaims. Table 1 also shows that there is a greater percentage of autistic authors who self-publish (33%) than neurotypical authors writing about autism who self-publish (24%). This is a significant difference, given the quantity of novels in the ARD. Autistic authors use self-publishing services like Amazon more so than neurotypical authors writing about autism. One may think this is solely because of the barriers in traditional publishing like gatekeeping and the querying process. However, I will describe in this article that these barriers are certainly a contributing factor, but there are several advantages in self-publishing for autistic authors as well.

Self-publishing serves as an alternative route to producing a book. And while self-published books do not have the backing of an editorial, design, and marketing team, they can get to the market as fast as desired (Hviid

et al., 2019). Self-published authors also avoid the arduous path of finding a literary agent, an interested publishing house, and an understanding editor (Laquintano, 2016). Notably, self-published does not necessarily mean “poorly written,” the book may be as well-crafted as those published by large imprints. With the lack of the support of a publishing house’s marketing team, the reception and impact of a self-published book often has a limited audience.

Table 1
Autistic and Neurotypical Authors, Method of Publication

	Autistic Authors	Neurotypical Authors	Total
Traditional Publishing	134	480	614
Self-Published	65	156	221
Total	199	636	835

Still, autistic authors may self-publish because of benefits such as total creative control and flexibility (Baverstock & Steinitz, 2013b). Put simply, authors may self-publish because it allows them to write the stories they want to write (Baverstock & Steinitz, 2013a). Autistic authors may also self-publish, however, because of the current preferences and practices of traditional publishing houses. The industry seems to favor novels with autistic characters who reinforce stereotypical autism narratives. An example of this is *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* by Mark Haddon (2003), a best-selling novel and a popular play which critical autism studies scholars (McGrath 2017; Loftis 2015; Murray 2008) nevertheless criticize as a stereotypical autism narrative. Self-publishing, however, allows autistic authors to express their character’s autism how they would like it to be expressed.

Many of the self-published autistic authors included in the ARD write about autistic people with multiple, intersectional identities, and/or autistic characters who feel no need to mask their neurodiverse identities, portrayals still relatively rare among mainstream offerings of Christopher Boone look-alikes. While self-published novels may reach a smaller audience, they are

able to discuss more nuanced themes, which is a benefit for advocacy within autistic culture.

Self-publishing also allows for flexibility and reduces difficulties in navigating the complex structure of traditional publishing (Baverstock & Steinitz, 2013a). Self-publishing is on the author's schedule, even if that means they have to fulfill roles that traditional publishing would provide such as editing, marketing, and distribution. Traditional publishing practices such as the querying process may also unintentionally exclude autistic authors. Despite their desire to carry diverse authors, mainstream publishers have yet to confront their ableist structures. Autistic author and sensitivity reader Matthew Broberg-Moffitt (2020) critiques this structure:

If you are issuing the call for Own Voices neuro-diverse writers, you are openly saying that you want to see work that breaks the mold from writers that aren't mainstream. If you issue such a call, but then use the same process that you apply to all queries and proposals, you're being unintentionally disingenuous" (para. 4).

Autistic authors may prefer to self-publish, avoiding the mainstream practices that would otherwise discriminate against them. The current self-publishing industry could not exist, of course, without the internet, which has long been a favorite communication platform of the autistic community. In his online essay, Dekker argues that self-advocacy is a central facet of autistic culture (Dekker, 1999). According to Dekker, self-advocacy is propelled by the internet. The internet has shaped and given connection to people within autistic culture that otherwise would not have been bound together. The culture has been influenced by shared features of autism, preferred communication style, and similar special interests.

Self-publishing novels online is one method of self-advocacy within autistic culture. It is a supremely useful medium to engage in autistic culture and advocate for the culture itself. In what follows, I analyze the authors' novels and their reflections on advocacy, arguing that that self-published novels evidence implicit advocacy to normalize autism and explicit advocacy to confront and correct stereotypes.

Autistic Authors Reflect on Self-Publishing

For the purpose of this article, I interviewed three self-published autistic authors: Chloe Liese, Tom Brooks, and Xan West.

Originally self-published and now represented at Root Literary, Liese writes romance novels. She began selling her series *Tough Love* (2019) and *Bergman Brothers* (2020-2022) on Amazon. In our correspondence, she explained the advantages of self-publishing:

With self-publishing, I could write what I wanted, irrespective of whether some higher publishing force thought it was “marketable” or “sellable.” I got to refine my craft, hone my voice, and build a readership that supports my writing, which is steamy, slow-burn romance that aims to portray people with real lives, bodies, and experiences (mental health struggles, chronic illness, life-changing injury, trauma, disability, neurodivergence, etc.), finding love and happiness for who they are (personal communication, November 21, 2021).

Liese’s 2020 novel *Always Only You* is the first book in the *Bergman Brothers* series and an example of the “steamy, slow-burn romance” between a nerdy, late-blooming hockey star, Ren, and his tough cookie coworker, Frankie, who keeps both her soft side and her autism diagnosis to herself. *Always Only You* was a book with an autistic main character that Liese wrote. In her acknowledgements in *Always Only You*, Liese describes her purpose:

Autism needs to be loved and better understood, and that as an autistic woman, I am the best person to write stories that affirm that . . . autistic [people] . . . are not caricatures or cliches, but . . . who have so much to gain from and give this world not in spite of being neurodiverse but because of it. (2020, pp., 345-346)

Liese is straightforward in her advocacy, desiring to instill in her readers that autism should be loved and better understood. In our correspondence, she expressed her thoughts on autistic advocacy with depth and eloquence: “In writing romances that normalizes human realities . . . I am advocating for us individually and societally to unpack our internalized ableism and embrace the truth that all of us are worthy of happy endings” (personal

communication, November 21, 2021). Liese promotes this advocacy and confronts internalized ableism both implicitly through plot and explicitly through directed awareness. Liese both shows and tells readers that autism should be loved and accepted within book pages and in everyday life. Liese's writing and advocacy showcases that she believes books are vehicles for shifting perspectives, particularly about autism.

As Liese's work evidences, self-publishing is a viable option to circumvent traditional restraints on marginalized or autistic authors and characters. Autistic authors who self-publish are not only increasing authentic representation, but are also affecting change for more autistic stories to be accepted in traditional publishing by the market success of their novels, which gain small but crucial followings.

Tom Brooks, author of the action adventure series *Normal Citizen* (2013), explained that self-publishing lets him "still maintain control of the book." The premise of the *Normal Citizen* trilogy, published from 2013 to 2016, is that after World War III, a device was created to remove a person's disability, or to Normalize them. Luke Rossettie, a cunning soldier with autism, and his girlfriend Areva, who is blind, are on the run and must evade authorities who wish to Normalize them. I corresponded extensively with Brooks about his insights on autism for both himself and his books. Brooks elaborates about his decision to write an autistic hero: "Using my knowledge of autism both from my own experience of having it and seeing others with it I decided there aren't many autistic heroes in literature, so why not make my book have a hero who has autism?" (personal communication, September 14, 2021).

Brooks noticed that autistic characters are under-represented, especially as the hero character. Brooks wants his readers to accept autistic individuals without attempting to change them. In the climax of the plot, Luke makes a speech to the Council refuting the idea of the Normalizer. His speech changes the minds of the Council and he escapes the process that so many had endured previously. As the central theme, Brooks advocates for a perspective shift of what is normal regarding autism.

Self-published authors have the freedom to write stories and intersectional characters that traditional publishing might reject. Xan West writes queer erotica and romance centering on kinky, trans and non-binary, fat,

disabled, queer trauma survivors. West's more recent novels center on Jewish characters, asexual and aromantic spectrum characters, autistic characters, and polyamorous networks. Self-publishing has allowed West to find a niche audience with a dedicated following. West's 2019 self-published *Their Troublesome Crush* is a polyamorous, kinky queer romance novella about metamours [in a polyamorous relationship, one's partner's partner, with whom one is not directly involved] realizing they have a mutual crush on each other as they plan their shared partner's birthday celebration. As West describes, *Their Troublesome Crush* features "Ernest, a Jewish autistic demiromantic queer fat trans man submissive, and Nora, a Jewish disabled queer fat femme cis woman switch." West explicitly identifies Ernest's autism, along with their own in the afterword:

I'm autistic, and I poured a lot of myself into writing Ernest. I really cared about having Ernest be as autistic as he was, and not mask that for the reader or have him mask much for other characters. Being autistic is something that deeply shapes Ernest, how he sees the world, how he thinks and solves problems, how he writes music and acts in relationships. It felt very important to me to write a character who was deeply in those experiences and not trying to hide them or diminish them for others, who has other autistic people in his life that he cares for and seeks support from. (2019, p. 86)

West writes Ernest deeply living his autistic experience so that others, both inside and outside the novel, can accept all of him. A main focus of West's advocacy is to encourage autistic individuals to not have to mask.

Artistry and advocacy have a complicated relationship. Some artists want to assert their beliefs in their art; others may simply want to create their art and let it be as it is. With every work, marginalized artists feel pressure to say something important about their community. It is a difficult balancing act, yet so worthwhile for the impact their art has on its audience. The three books I analyzed do both well: they have intricate, dynamic stories while fostering a better understanding and love for autistic individuals. Liese elaborates: "Ultimately, I've endeavored to write individuals who happen to be autistic, to respectfully, authentically portray their strengths and struggles, and to also write people who love these neurodivergent characters for exactly who they are, not in spite of it" (personal communication,

November 21, 2021). The three authors each approached advocacy within their novels differently, as they had different outcomes in mind. It is also important to emphasize that autistic authors advocate broadly for autistic people in their novels. It is equally important to ask what they are specifically advocating for. Self-published novels add nuance to their advocacy. Returning to Liese, for example, we can see her particular goals about the language used to diagnose and describe autistic individuals:

I want readers to learn how individual and varied autism is, that it isn't a matter of "low" or "high functioning" . . . but instead about human beings whose brains and bodies navigate life differently. I want them to absorb that nuance and unpack their biases and preconceived notions, and be better at . . . [being] more inclusive of folks who may be neurodivergent in their shared environments and in their lives. (personal communication, November 21, 2021).

Liese writes books to give the reader an extended interaction with autistic characters and to provide nuance about autism that can be applied to daily life.

Implicit Advocacy: Normalizing Autism

In addition to what self-published, autistic authors say about writing, the works themselves suggest two main methods of advocacy: implicit and explicit. Implicit advocacy is narrative-based with the character deeply in their autistic experience, so that autistic differences are normalized within the story and the greater world. Explicit advocacy specifically names autism and is directed toward the reader, or another character, to educate them. The outcome of implicit advocacy is to bring about awareness, acceptance, and normalizing autistic differences. Explicit advocacy is utilized to raise awareness or correct a misconception about autism. Of course, these kinds of advocacy overlap and complement each other.

A primary result of implicit advocacy is normalizing autistic differences. The word *normalize* is not directed towards autistic people becoming 'normal' in the way that Brooks' *Normal Citizen* envisions, but rather shifting culture's perspective on what is acceptable. Autistic individuals should not have to mask who they are to meet society's expectations; society should be

understanding and loving towards them. However, neurotypical people (and ableist social institutions) sometimes lack the experience and education to accomodate for and accept autistic differences. Implicit advocacy is found in narratives that display autistic differences, allowing neurotypical readers to learn why autistic characters engage in these behaviors. The reader may see a person with autism stimming or rapidly talking about their special interest, but that autistic person may not be able or willing to communicate about why they are doing what they are doing. Including autistic behaviors in novels has a dual purpose to normalize autistic actions and provide context for why those actions are taken.

Implicit advocacy may be found when the included autistic difference simply describes the action which serves to standardize the behavior. For example, in *Their Troublesome Crush*, Ernest is watching a movie with Nora when he “. . . grabbed his favorite fidget toy from the bowl on the table next to him and began to rock, not even trying to be slow with the fidget, staring at the screen intently” (p. 66). Here, West does not explain *why* Ernest wanted the fidget or to rock, and the behavior becomes normalized after a few recurrences. Excerpts like these show rather than tell, though West does eventually reveal why Ernest stims, including the antecedent, the stimming action, and the resulting feeling:

It made him agitated, which meant he probably needed to stim. And to be alone, so he didn't have to manage input from other people. He said goodnight to Judith and went into the room he shared with Gideon. Ernest put on the Original Broadway Cast album of *My Fair Lady* and lay in bed, hugging his pillow. His feet were especially agitated, so he lay on his side and let his legs run and his arm tremor as he listened. There was something comforting about a familiar sequence of songs, one he listened to for much of his life. They were like an unbroken chain in his brain, one song linked to the next, and tracing the links felt good. By the time Julie Andrews was singing that she couldn't go to bed, his feet had stopped needing to run. (2019, p. 22)

This passage serves as an explanation for why Ernest needed to stim and how it was calming for him. Reading about autistic features may reduce the stigma of viewing autistic behavior in real life and the explanation of the feature may help readers understand why and how it is necessary. This nuance is best left

for later in the novel, after readers have had an extended period to become familiar with the neurodiverse characters and the autistic features they present.

Furthermore, not all autistic behaviors may be observed; however, novels can show how autistic individuals process, think, and converse. While at a diner in *Always Only You*, Frankie info-dumps about a special interest with her friend Willa:

I tend to fixate on something, then talk longer than most people about it, which I've learned annoys people sometimes, bores them others, and every once in a while, manages to interest them similarly. Unfortunately, I usually only recognize in retrospect when I've monologued. I swear, I'm not making that up. . . . Because this isn't my first time around Willa, though, I know she and I are comfortable enough around each other that she'd shut me up or change the subject if she wanted to. (2020, pp. 8-9)

Frankie explains info-dumping, an element of autistic expression, while providing an actionable step neurotypical readers may take in their lives when engaging with an autistic person. This passage is an example of normalizing autistic features through narrative—the description of the behavior, its motivation, and the appropriate response a neurotypical person could make. This form of implicit advocacy is the most effective method literature can have in shifting society's stigma about autistic behaviors. Including autistic features in novels minimizes the unexpectedness of the action while also providing context for why the behavior is occurring.

Explicit Advocacy: Confronting and Correcting Stereotypes

Explicit advocacy specifically names autism and attempts to educate readers or other characters directly. This form of advocacy is most often used to raise awareness or correct a misconception about autism. Liese frequently addresses stereotypes and ableism prevalent in our society and literature. In correspondence with her, I asked how her work confronted these stereotypes:

I address these stereotypes simply by writing from my own experience, crafting nuanced autistic characters and occasionally having them call out these stereotypes in my stories. I don't want to waste energy spotlighting harmful stereotypes and misrepresentations more than minimally necessary to negate them, so I focus my energy on positive, authentic representation in my work (personal communication, November 21, 2021).

As Liese notes here, explicit advocacy attempts to correct representations that are not authentic to the autistic experience. I found less explicit advocacy in the self-published works I analyzed, outside of a few potent sections confronting misconceptions. In books written by autistic adjacent or neurotypical authors, the autistic characteristics may form a caricature or amalgamation of autistic behaviors, as in *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*. In contrast, autistic authors replace stereotypical representations with their life experiences best informing their explicit advocacy. A frequent stereotype of autism in fiction, for example, is that autistic people do not like to be touched. In Haddon's novel and its many imitators, Christopher Boone hates being touched so much so that he and his father created their own form of a hug:

He held up his right hand and spread his fingers out in a fan. I held up my left hand and spread my fingers out in a fan and we made our fingers and thumbs touch each other. We do this because sometimes father wants to give me a hug, but I do not like hugging people so we do this instead, and it means that he loves me (2003, p. 16).

Of course, autistic individuals may be sensory seeking or sensory avoidant, and this should be equally represented by autistic characters. *Always Only You* addresses this stereotype when Frankie is talking to Ren's sister who is also autistic:

"But I'm sensory seeking, so maybe you wouldn't like that. You seem sensory –"

"Avoidant," she finishes, staring down at her ripped-up cuticles, and biting a nail. "Yes and no. It just needs to not catch me off guard, but I like hugs. From the right people. At the right time. I'm not a robot."

“I didn’t say you were. But I understand feeling defensive about it. It’s a stereotype of autistics, that we’re these cold, emotionless shells, which isn’t true. We just feel differently. And often the case is that we actually feel so much, we have to compartmentalize it, funnel it into coping mechanisms that make it manageable.” (2020, p. 244)

In passages like this one, autistic authors directly confront and correct stereotypes by stating how they experience the world—perspectives that can be missing in books written by neurotypical authors, even if they are an autistic adjacent. All too often, the media only include representations of autistic individuals without creating space for them to show how they want to be loved and listened to. Explicit advocacy, which may be strongest when it is self-advocacy, is powerful to confront and correct stereotypes.

Normal Citizen also makes use of explicit advocacy. As the government is ‘normalizing’ or removing citizens of their disabilities, Luke resists and makes a public statement about treating people with disabilities equally:

“Though you yourselves may view those who have disabilities as not normal, the one thing you overlook is those who have disabilities are like everyone else. Those with a disability cry, sweat, breathe the same air as you, and have the same fears a non-disabled individual would have” (2013, p. 211).

Autistic authors may feel so strongly about an aspect of their autistic identity that they make that a driving force of their novel, like Brooks does with the idea of stripping people’s autistic features away. Novels that rely too heavily on explicit advocacy may seem to proselytize. Whereas when implicit and explicit advocacy are intertwined, there is a softer feel to the narrative with punctuation of direct education. Most often explicit advocacy is implemented to reduce stigma, explain why, or correct a misconception about autism that the author feels is overlooked in how people talk about autism. Alternatively, implicit advocacy is primarily about the character and progressing the story forward while promoting acceptance of autistic differences. Self-published novels written by autistic people make space for implicit and explicit advocacy as they do not have the confines of traditional publishing to limit what they desire to share about their autistic experience.

Conclusion

In preparation to give his speech to the Council about the Normalizer, Luke's friend says, "You fought hard for many years to retain your freedom and individuality. Make them understand, Luke; only you can." (*Normal Citizen*, 2013, p. 210) This friend's sentiment resonates with the advocacy self-published autistic authors express. Neurodiverse individuals are the best people to share their stories. Through self-publishing, they have the freedom to do so as it is so individualized.

As evident by the Autistic Representative Database, more autistic authors are self-published, which may be a result of barriers within traditional publishing in addition to the advantages self-publishing presents to marginalized creators. Self-published novels are a unique medium that does not attempt to censor the stories and people autistic authors desire to share. It is easier, and sometimes preferred, to share these stories through self-publishing as opposed to traditional opportunities. Authors are able to take risks that do not have established marketability, which can affect how marginalized voices are represented in traditional publishing. Novels offer an extended interaction with autistic characters allowing for undertones of advocacy to seep into the reader's thoughts.

This extended interaction provides space for implicit advocacy to normalize autistic features. Reading about autistic features may reduce the stigma of neurotypical people viewing autistic behavior in real life, and the explanation of the feature may help neurotypical readers understand why and how it is necessary. In self-published novels it is apparent that the authors deliberately do not mask their neurodiverse character's autistic behaviors. Implicit advocacy is narrative-based with the character deeply in their autistic experience so that the reader parses out what may be applied to their own lives. Explicit advocacy is directed toward the neurotypical reader to educate them while specifically naming autism. Implicit advocacy typically is a positive representation of autism and explicit advocacy typically addresses a negative stereotype or misconceptions. Implicit advocacy softly calls the reader to action by modeling, while explicit advocacy is implemented to adjust how autism is personally thought about. Both forms of advocacy are necessary and are exhibited well within self-publishing.

Finally, it is essential to cultivate more #actuallyautistic voices within literature, whether self-published or not. The type and quality of representation matters, as it has lasting effects on readers and their actions within society. Advocacy for how autistic individuals want to be loved and better understood exists within book pages but should be extended beyond them.

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