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May Tomorrow Be Awake: On Poetry, Autism, and our Neurodiverse Future by Chris Martin

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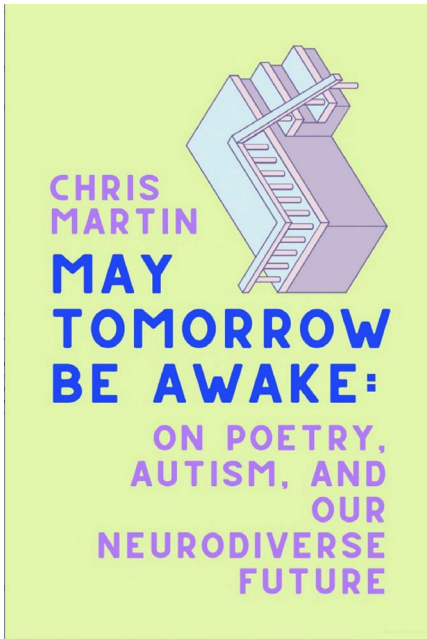
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Autistic Poetry Love



In *May Tomorrow Be Awake*, Chris Martin—a prolifically published and roundly acclaimed poet—narrates his experiences of working with a range of young, neurodivergent (mainly autistic) students, enabling and assisting them in creating and completing poems. Written mainly in the lockdown of 2020, Martin describes in fine detail the processes and experiences of these (mostly one-to-one, mostly online) sessions. He emphasizes the poets’ own varied and (crucially) diverse approaches poetry, and the ways in which he encouraged these. Thus, while the book is enjoyably autobiographical, Martin puts his students at the center of each chapter.

Chris Martin. *May Tomorrow Be Awake: On Autism, Poetry and Our Neurodiverse Future*. HarperCollins, 2022.

Profiled across the book, culminating with a chapter anthologizing their work, the poets featured in *May Tomorrow Be Awake* are Mark and Max Eati; Adam

Wolfond; Matteo; Brian; Max 2; Wallace; Zach E.; Bill Bernard; Will Corkins; Hannah Emerson; Max Zolotukhin-Ridgway; Lonnie Shaw; Imane Boukaila; Sid Ghosh; Amelia Bell; Daniel; Khalil; Dylan; Tarin; and Daqwhan. Most of the poets are, or are at times, “non-speaking”: the term Martin refreshingly favors term over the outdated and misleading “non-verbal”. The students’ communications with Martin were mostly typed.

A small number of students in the book had previously been exposed to ABA (Applied Behavioral Analysis). Martin periodically conveys an ethical and methodological distance from any such practices in regard to his pedagogy (pp. 136, 221, 238, 315). Most illuminating on this matter is the perspective of Mark Eati, who was diagnosed autistic at 20 months old, and weeks later, began (in Martin’s emphasis) “a full year of all-day ABA therapy” (p. 26). Mark

received ABA for 17 years and contrasts his experiences with Martin against the said therapy:

I did not willingly express myself until I was shown how to focus and how to express. Typing skills and feeling listened to helped the most. ABA and other therapies were boring and they did not focus on my strengths. I was subjected to boring classes. I was taken for granted because I could not express myself. I hated being taken for granted. People assumed I did not know anything. (p. 28)

As well as working with Martin, Mark frequently collaborates on poems with his non-speaking, non-binary sibling Max Eati. Their poems frequently celebrate their mutual empathy as autists. “A Volcano Named Eati” in particular is a highlight of *May Tomorrow Be Awake*. It begins:

A volcano named Eati
erupts inside our bellies
at the sound of a pattern
Family member’s pattern of joy
or pattern of worry.

Many of the poems (and discussions) in the book similarly celebrate the natural world as both an extension of and relief from the confines of physicality. *May Tomorrow Be Awake* may, therefore, add significantly to the burgeoning field of research and creativity connecting autistic subjectivity with ecological consciousness (see Mitchell, 2022, for instance).

Martin describes writing this book in the aftermath of George Floyd’s murder in Minneapolis, just minutes away from the author’s home (pp. 3-4). In direct response to Floyd’s death and the events surrounding it, Lonnie Shaw—a seventeen year old autistic Black trans activist (and author of several chapbooks before meeting Martin)—presents one of this book’s most haunting poems. Titled “Ode,” this 36-line piece is dedicated to “every Black boy,” including:

the ones going to college
and playing football
and being who they are

and not letting people get to them
even the racists (p. 168)

as well as:

the Black boys
in foster care
who survive everything

and finally:

to the Black boys
who are artists
I see them
I am proud of us
and we're all
gonna find somebody
to love us

Martin himself is a highly self-reflective author, frequently pausing the narrative to contemplate his own subjectivity. He is “a White male who can selectively pass as cis, straight, able, and neurotypical” but adds, “The truth that I have never felt like I belonged in the neurotypical world, much less amidst the callous materialism and masculinity that seek ever to make me complicit in their conditioning “ (p. 5).

Martin does not directly identify as autistic, but through his own neurodivergence (ADHD) he closely identifies with autists. Intriguingly, Martin cites the interpellation “sensitive,” and how this word was repeatedly used to describe him by teachers and others adults. In retrospect, he now, reasonably, views the term as a synonym for neurodivergent. Martin also cites the term HSP (highly sensitive person), “denoting someone who has deeper central nervous system sensitivity’ or similarly, the term “emotional synesthete” (p. 308).

And what is resplendently clear throughout Martin’s chapters is his sensitivity—that is, alertness, empathy, kindness—towards the autistic students he profiles and quotes in *May Tomorrow Be Awake*. Thanks to the

wit and insights of these students, the book introduces a series of memorable autistic coinages, including “jamming,” “assembling,” and “rallying” as terms for Zoom communications and the movements involved with these (Adam, p.1). “Poetry love,” meanwhile is talking about poetry (p.2). The poems that emerge from Martin’s one to one sessions with the students are mostly free verse. Many of the poets, he notes “don’t need to seek out [poetic] constraints,” reminding us that “When they haven’t been negotiating the constraints of their own sensorimotor complexity, they have been struggling against the constraints of a society built to minimize the complexity of their intellect and expression” (p. 8).

My only quibble about *May Tomorrow Be Awake* is a minor one, and concerns the order of content (or the order in which I read it: that is, from start to finish). I sense I might have found this commendable and timely book even more immersive had I read the (closing) Anthology of the students’ finished poems before the chapters detailing how certain poems were created (and Martin’s own input in these). If using this book as a teaching resource, which I likely will, I might therefore encourage students to read the final section first.

That structural question aside, I highly recommend *May Tomorrow Be Awake* as an indispensable book for English and/or Creative Writing teachers—and not just to teachers of autistic students. Martin and the poets critically decimate the very notion of “normal,” positioning it as an enemy to that which is natural. As he elucidates, “My dream is for you to realize that you are not normal, because such a thing does not exist. Normal is a concept that labors in diametrical opposition to liberation” (p. 245).

The tenor throughout maintains the cautious yet clear optimism of the title *May Tomorrow Be Awake*. “School, as kids have recognized for hundreds of years, is anything but natural”, Martin muses, before pointing out: “Luckily, a generation of new educators and administrators is out there trying to change that” (p. 195). *May Tomorrow Be Awake* could assist many of them in doing so.

—James McGrath

References

Mitchell, A. (2022). Resonant relations: eco-lalia, political ec(h)ology and autistic ways of worlding. *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space*.