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“I Don’t Want to Be Human”: The Neurodivergent Reader Response to Martha Wells’ *Murderbot Diaries* Series

Rachel S. Anderson

Reddit users who spend any time at all on the subreddit forum r/PrintSF, a sprawling online discussion board devoted to discussing science fiction stories and books, are sure to find a recommendation for Martha Wells’ enormously popular series called *The Murderbot Diaries*. The series is narrated by the titular Murderbot, a machine-human hybrid security bot, or “SecUnit”, who, we learn in the first paragraph, has hacked its governor module and attained a level of autonomy in its bleak, corporate, far-future world. But rather than engaging in, well, murder—all it really wants to do is watch all the media that it’s downloaded. What it really doesn’t want to do is deal with humans. Except it sort of likes the humans its tasked with protecting. But it doesn’t want them thinking that it wants to be like them at all.

In this article, I’ll be exploring how readers have responded to Murderbot as a neurodivergent character and the developing ways in which the author has responded to questions about the character—and herself—as potentially autistic. While initially resisting this reader-supplied diagnosis, Wells has more recently acknowledged her own neurodivergent identity. Interestingly, she continues to argue against claiming that Murderbot is autistic, as that’s a “human diagnosis” and Murderbot is not human. Yet by examining how Murderbot hacks its internal “governor module,” or part that keeps it enslaved to the company that owns it, we can see how this text engages with some deep concerns of the autistic community, namely on the role of societal expectations in determining “acceptable” behavior and the psychic/emotional cost of masking to maintain such behaviors. Through this analysis, we will explore our current moment’s interesting relationship with human/machine intelligences and how we define such concepts as “neurotypical” and “human.”

A Science Fiction Tradition: Reader Feedback

Since the birth of the genre in early 20th century American pulp magazines, popular science fiction has deliberately engaged with its readers and fans. In science fiction pioneer editor Hugo Gernsback's second issue (May, 1926) of his magazine *Amazing Stories*, he opens with a "Thank You!" article to the readers of the first issue (April, 1926). He thanks them not just for buying and reading his magazine— he specifically quotes readers who enthusiastically wrote to him praising the issue. For example, he cites a Michael H. Kay (of Brooklyn, New York) who says that "You will generally find that when one has read your magazine he will become so enthusiastic, so elated over his discovery, that he will deem it a pleasure to extol its virtues to his friends. Even now my wife is anxiously waiting for me to finish this first issue, so that she may read it herself." (Gernsback, 1926, p. 99)

Subsequent issues contained a form for readers to fill out, asking for specific comments about the stories, noting that "This is YOUR magazine. Only by knowing what type of stories you like can we continue to please you." ("Readers' Vote of Preference," 1926, p. 669) By the April, 1928 issue, there is a lively "Discussions" section where reader letters, commentary, and criticism are printed along with editorial responses. ("Discussions," 1928) These printed letters enabled editors like Gernsback to get valuable insight into what his readers liked and disliked; however, they had a longer-lasting effect that would influence how science fiction would grow and develop as a genre: these letters enabled readers to start talking to each other.

Contemporary science fiction (hereafter referred to as SF) fan culture is a complex ecosystem; however, it is not overstating its origins to say that it was Gernsback's and other early SF editors' decision to print reader letters (often complete with home addresses!) that enabled these readers to connect with each other and form distributed communities around a shared interest in a literary genre. (Hellekson, 2015, pp. 153–156) This level of reader involvement and fandom influenced the development of SF in countless ways; in this article, I am particularly interested in how this tradition of reader commentary persists today in an online/social media environment. I will be looking specifically at the social media platform Reddit, which has a myriad of "subreddits" devoted to sometimes remarkably narrow topics. (For example, r/tacobellonmichigan only contains posts complaining about a single franchise location in Grand Rapids, Michigan.) One of the more expansive subreddits, however, is r/printSF which was started in August of 2010 and as of September, 2023, contained 295,792 members, and is in the top 1% of forums on Reddit (ranked by size). Posters (commonly called "redditors") write and publish commentary about a variety of topics related to SF and speculative fiction, much like their intellectual predecessors did in the early pulp era. While these redditors are often careful to remain anonymous, it is clear than many of them view the forum as a community space in which their common, shared interest allows them to connect meaningfully—and this forum had redditors that were enthusiastic about Martha Wells' M*urderbot Diaries* series from the publication of the first novella about the eponymous protagonist.

Murderbot Diaries

In 2017 Martha Wells published her novella *All Systems Red: The Murderbot Diaries*. She quickly followed this with four further novellas, a full-length novel, and second full-length novel released in November of 2023. All are narrated from the point of view of the titular character, a cyborg "SecUnit" who would much rather binge watch media than do almost anything else—especially talk to or interact with humans. The novella opens with our protagonist explaining that "I could have become a mass murderer after I hacked my governor module, but then I realized I could access the combined feed of entertainment channels . . . " (Wells, 2019, p. 9) It concludes, "As a heartless killing machine, I was a terrible failure." Nevertheless, it calls itself (very privately) "Murderbot" and the dissonance between this name and the nature of the being we come to know through the course of this series is a key characteristic of both Wells' sense of humor and, I would argue, a significant factor in the overwhelmingly positive reader response to it. (A quick note on pronouns: Murderbot has no gender; it refers to itself using it/its pronouns. Therefore, this article will do the same.)

One of the places where this positive response manifested itself was in the Reddit forum r/printSF. Readers immediately started recommending the book to other readers, and other, more mainstream review sites like Tor.com followed suit. A key aspect of this positive response for many redditors was a recognition of neurodivergent traits in the ways in which Murderbot described its experience, especially in the context of human relationships and emotional responses. For example, in response to a request for SF featuring "neruo-atypical [sic]" characters, user affictionitis responded:

> The Murderbot series, by Martha Wells. Far-future SF in which a cyborg construct created by a corporation as expendable security takes control of its own future. Technically Murderbot isn't even human, but in every other respect it ("it" is its preferred pronoun; it's nonbinary) qualifies, with massive social anxiety and a lot of behaviors that correspond to autistic stimming and discomfort with eye contact, etc. (secret_cetacean & affictionitis, 2021)

Redditor TombSv is a bit more to the point: "The autistic character bit is why I keep coming back. I'm autistic and feel Murderbot just gets it." (PermaDerpFace & TombSv, 2022) The response has moved into the mainstream, as well. In a recent article, Robin Anne Reid, who identifies as autistic, expands on her response:

> I read Murderbot as an autistic character because I am an autist who strongly identifies with the character's reaction to and emotions about its experiences. My interpretation draws on my lived experience as a queer autist although I make no claim of being representative of any other, let alone all other, people who are queer and/or who are autistic. (Reid, 2023, p. 96)

Reid then goes on to read Wells' narrative in "the context of some of the changing discourses around autism such as gender and sexuality; how to interact with humans and deal with emotion; and strong attachments to media." (Reid, 2023, p. 96)

In a Tor.com blog post, C. N. Josephs, who also identifies as autistic, recognizes that the "machine" stereotype is often employed when describing autists, and this can lead to harmful assumptions; as they note,

> There's a common misconception that autistic people are completely devoid of feelings: that we're incapable of being kind and loving and considerate, that we never feel pain or sorrow or grief. This causes autistic people to face everything from social isolation from our peers

> to abuse from our partners and caregivers. Why should you be friends with someone who is incapable of kindness? Why should you feel bad about hurting someone who is incapable of feeling pain? Because of this, many autistic people think that any autistic-coded robot is inherently "bad representation." (Josephs, 2022)

This is not the case for Wells' Murderbot, however, Josephs quickly notes, and proceeds to delineate Murderbot's more overt autistic characteristics. These include a dislike of being touched, even by people it likes, a discomfort with most (all) social situations involving humans, and a desire to avoid direct eye-contact, preferring to hack into security cameras to observe the humans it can't avoid interacting with. Josephs also notes that if this technology existed in our world, they would engage a similar hack "in a heartbeat." Josephs' above characterization of the "bad representation" of the "robot autist" intersects with Damion Milton's "double-empathy problem" as it relates to the autistic experience. (Milton, 2012) In short, it describes the communication difficulty "that occurs between people of different dispositional outlooks and personal conceptual understandings when attempts are made to communicate meaning." (Milton, 2012, p. 884) What Milton is expressing here, and what Wells continually shows in her series, is the rejection of the hypothesis that an autistic person/SecUnit has no empathy; instead, it redefines empathy through engaging with the problem of "different dispositional outlooks" that complicate communication and mutual understanding. (Milton, 2012, p. 884)

Josephs'—and Reid's—main point, however, isn't that Murderbot is coded as autistic. It is rather that Wells allows Murderbot to express its own sense of self apart from the humans it has to interact with. As Josephs notes, " [t]hrough the course of the series, Murderbot never starts considering itself human and it never bases its wants and desires around what a human would want. Rather, it realizes that even though it's not human, it's still a person." (Josephs, 2022) This resonates with Josephs, who strongly resists the narrative foisted upon them that neurotypicality is the "right" way of being, and that all neurodivergent brains are deficient and the goal for all neurodivergent people is to move toward a neurotypical way of being, much like robots have been depicted as wanting to move towards a "human" way of being. For example, Isaac Asimov's prototypical robots in his *I, Robot* compilation showcase an optimistic, Golden Age view of this form of robot desire, Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* complicates and darkens that desire, and *Star Trek: The Next Generation*'s Data recasts these same debates for an end-of-the-millennium TV audience. (Asimov, 1950; Dick, 1968; Scheerer, 1989)

The association of autists with machines has a long history in the field. Problematic scholar Bruno Bettelheim infamously wrote the 1959 Scientific American article "Joey: a 'Mechanical' Boy" about a child who presented himself as a machine, and whom Bettelheim described as a being "robbed of his humanity" as a result (1959, p. 16). The metaphor has persisted and intersects with the Theory of Mind (ToM) debate surrounding autism, and frequently finds its way into contemporary and clinical discussions of autism. For example, Kathleen Richardson, in her *Anthropology Today* article "The Robot Intermediary: Mechanical Analogies and Autism" looks at how roboticists working on engineering social robots look to autism studies to approach the ToM issue for humanoid robots. Examining the research of PhD student Brian Scassellati, Richardson (2016) notes how Scassellati and others used the deficit model of autism as a blueprint for "improving" robotic social communication (p. 18). She researched how robots could be used in a clinical setting for helping children with autism; she notes that her study was mostly inconclusive. Her understanding of the machine model, however, seems to have moved on from Bettelheim's soulless suffering child. Instead, she notes that "the machine model that was thought to exist in the lifeworlds of children with autism, exists more in the frameworks used to describe and treat autism" and "[m]oreover, anthropological frameworks that equate persons with thing are inherently problematic as persons are different from things, just as children with autism are different from robotic machines" (p. 20).

It is clear to even a casual reader that Murderbot is not neurotypical, even if it has a (mostly) human brain. The series doesn't elaborate on how SecUnits are produced, but from various clues, we know that they have both machine and biological parts that are inextricably fused together (for example, Murderbot's arms contain weapon ports and the human tissue is cloned, rather than augmented after birth (Wells, 2019, p. 11). SecUnits are designed to specific physical specifications—they all are the same height, for example. In *Artificial Condition*, when Murderbot needs to hide its SecUnit status, one of the main alterations ART (an intelligent ship's AI that befriends

Murderbot) engineers is a change in height. (Wells, 2018a, pp. 40–44). In the universe of the novellas, SecUnits are not “people”—they have no rights and are commodities owned by corporations who rent them out to clients. They are controlled by “governor modules” that punish them for errors and will kill them if they are separated from their client (Wells, 2020a, pp. 239–241). Additionally, SecUnits “going rogue,” or escaping from this control, features as a plot point in many of the popular serials that Murderbot consumes; it often notes this negative representation as influencing how humans interact with it.

Murderbot’s interactions with humans are affected both by this negative public perception and by its own antipathy toward humans in general. Since the series is narrated by Murderbot from a first-person point of view, we, as readers, are fully aware of its thoughts, reactions and feelings. As previously noted, readers like Reid and Josephs have found connections between Wells’ narration of Murderbot’s experience of the world and their experiences as autists. These authors ably outline these congruencies; what I would like to focus on in this article, however, is the aforementioned governor module and how Murderbot’s hacking of it creates a series-long meditation, I would argue, on the nature of social control and functions as a metaphor for how social institutions restrict and punish autistics in the world.

The ”Governor Module”

The first thing we learn about Murderbot, from itself, is that it hacked its governor module—and somehow, did not end up becoming a mass murderer (Wells, 2019, p. 1.) Instead, it carried on with its prescribed SecUnit duties—albeit distractedly, because it would rather watch episode 397 of the *Rise and Fall of Sanctuary Moon*, a popular serial. Despite this distraction, when an emergency arose, it sprung to action, and managed to rescue two of his clients, Bharadwaj and Volescu, from a local threat while sustaining significant personal damage in the process. While helping the injured humans, Murderbot interacted with the survey team, led by Dr. Mensah, in a variety of ways. It was uncomfortable with close interaction and glad for the opaque visor its armor helmet afforded (Wells, 2019, p. 14). However, it also showed a strong situational awareness; it vocally prevented a crew member from going into danger, and noted that it would have been punished for this because “I’m always supposed to speak respectfully to clients, even when they're about to accidentally commit suicide. HubSystem could log it and it could trigger punishment through the governor module" (Wells, 2019, p. 15). The governor module system prioritizes human comfort and control over SecUnits, and this episode starkly illustrates the nature of the relationship between the two entities.

What differentiates this situation is twofold: most obviously, Murderbot has hacked its governor module, and so can potentially behave in ways not afforded to other SecUnits. However, the humans it is interacting with are also different; they are generally unfamiliar with SecUnits, they do not typically participate in the highly commercial and consumerist "Corporation Rim" society structure that produces and rents out SecUnits, and they default to treating SecUnits as another member of their team rather than an "appliance." After the hostile alien creature attack that starts out *All Systems Red*, Dr. Mensah comes to speak to Murderbot as it's recovering from its injuries. Murderbot acknowledges its awkwardness, explaining, "It's not paranoia about my hacked governor module, and it's not them; it's me. I know I'm a horrifying murderbot, and they know it, and it makes both of us nervous, which makes me even more nervous" (Wells, 2019, p. 20). Dr. Mensah shows clear concern for its injuries (which prompts more feelings of awkwardness from Murderbot) and its monitoring of the conversation of the rest of the crew shows they have an interest and curiosity about Murderbot that forefronts its human qualities (having a face) rather than its machine qualities (Wells, 2019, pp. 21–22). This treatment by this group, collectively referred to as "PreservationAux," the name of their world, both confuses and alarms Murderbot—it's worried that they'll figure out it hacked its governor module. However, there also is a sense of inclusion and acceptance that it finds both embarrassing and, ultimately, endearing.

As the mission continues, the PreservationAux humans and augmented humans (cyborgs who were born human but augmented with machine parts) interact with Murderbot more closely. During a lull in the action, one fully human crew member, Ratthi, asks Murderbot about itself, saying "'We heard—we were given to understand, that Imitative Human Bot Units are . . . partially constructed from cloned material" and that "it's clear you have feelings---" (Wells, 2019, pp. 53–54). This last statement caused Murderbot to involuntarily "flinch," confirming Ratthi's statement about feelings. Other crew members saw this, and chastised Ratthi for his query, even as Ratthi defended himself by saying, "'The practice is disgusting, it's horrible, it's slavery," and recognizing Murderbot as human, rather than machine (Wells, 2019, p. 54). Murderbot's reaction to this is intense discomfort, and it had to remove itself from the situation as much as it could on a small spaceship. Interestingly, Murderbot referred again to its hacked governor module here, noting that the hack let it "report" Ratthi's intrusive questions to his boss, Dr. Mensah, thus allowing it some sense of control over this breach in comfort and privacy. In this way, Murderbot shows readers how its hacking also works in a more contemporary sense, namely as a modification to one's life that enhances one's daily experience. Finally, this encounter also shows Murderbot's growing trust in Mensah's ability to understand and treat it in the way it feels most comfortable being treated.

The PreservationAux's attitude toward and regard for Murderbot is manifested both to readers and to Murderbot itself when they are able to repair it after an attempted hostile malware takeover. When Murderbot wakes up from a catastrophic shutdown, it notes that the malware is gone, and thinks "My clients are the best clients," showing an affection toward those who risked their safety to help it (Wells, 2019, p. 78). However, moments later, it realizes that one team member, Gurathin, an augmented human, has figured out that it has a hacked, rather than functional, governor module. The ensuing conversation exposes the humans' realization that the whole time they had been interacting with the SecUnit, it had been operating without a governor module, but not in a violent, "rogue" manner.

This concept of a governor module and how Wells uses it in this series, can be mapped onto the autistic experience. One thing that autists talk about is the concept of "masking," or performing behaviors that hide/minimize the traits that would out the autistic person as autistic. Elizabeth Radulski (2022), a sociologist, makes a key distinction between "camouflaging" and "masking"; she notes, "Put simply: camouflaging is the external process of not being visibly recognised as Autistic; and masking is the internal process of noticing visible Autistic traits within oneself and acting to conceal them" (p. 114). This activity of masking is typically exhausting and prioritizes the comfort and ease of those the autist is interacting with over the comfort and ease of the autist themselves. If the SecUnit's governor module can be seen as a metaphor for these social expectations of behavior, we can see the ways in which hacking it is so meaningful for Murderbot. When engaged, the governor module enforced the mask to the point of punishment and death for even trying to evade its edicts. When hacked, Murderbot still masked so as to both escape detection and to make humans it respected more comfortable, but was able to drop the mask when the occasion demanded it—and occasionally when the humans acted with understanding and compassion towards Murderbot's communicative preferences.

Throughout the series, the role and autonomy of a Murderbot without the governor module is explored. In the fourth novella of the initial series, *Exit Strategy*, Murderbot suffers (yet another) catastrophic shutdown and must rebuild its memory/programming. One of the first things that it does is check that its governor module hack was still in place; this is obviously the key to Murderbot's sense of security and autonomy. Wells then adds a quick memory that Murderbot experiences as a part of the rebuilding process:

> ("I don't want to be human."
>
> Dr. Mensah said, "That's not an attitude a lot of humans are going to understand. We tend to think that because a bot or a construct looks human, its ultimate goal would be to become human."
>
> "That's the dumbest thing I've ever heard.") (Wells, 2018b, pp. 154–155)

This short exchange exemplifies how Wells challenges one of the core robot/AI narratives in much of SF. By having her central character not only reject the idea of being human, not because of an innate dislike or hate for humans, but because it views the idea as "the dumbest thing [it] ever heard", Wells indicates that Murderbot views itself as distinct from human, but not less than human. The key to this freedom is the hacked governor module, or personal autonomy from human stricture. To apply this to the autistic experience, what Murderbot expresses is a desire to be seen as whole and autonomous, without an imposed system of rigid social expectations that, if not followed, would result in dire consequences for the autist themselves. In this parallel, one might say that this series features a character who exhibits autistic traits and mindsets and clearly rejects the idea of being "human" (neurotypical) as a goal. Instead, Wells gives us a protagonist who becomes increasingly comfortable with who it is, surrounds it with other characters who support Murderbot's (for lack of a better term) neurodivergent traits and approaches, and presents a nuanced commentary on masking and social expectations when depicting interactions between neurotypical and neurodivergent people. Is it any wonder that readers (especially autistic readers) both responded to Murderbot as representative of their community and a positive one at that?

A Neurodivergent Author?

As noted, the Reddit and other fan communities have found Muderbot to be a positive representative of autistic thinking and social interaction. Wells, as a popular author, has therefore been asked, multiple times, about her intentions in writing this character, and how intentional the representation was. Her responses have developed over time: in September of 2020, when she was asked "Some people see autism spectrum traits to Murderbot—was that intended?" she responded: "No, the character isn't based on other people. I drew from a lot of my own experiences, my own anger and frustration and social anxiety. I didn't intend for Murderbot to have autism spectrum traits, but again, I'm drawing from my own experience" (Wells, 2020b). Wells is consistently clear that Murderbot's personality and outlook is an outgrowth of her own personal experience. In an interview about a year and a half later, Wells both elaborates and shows the way her thinking and understanding of herself has developed. In a March, 2022 interview with the St. Mary's Library (MD), she was asked by someone who self-identified as an "autistic reader" "if there was any intention in making Murderbot autistic coded or deliberately familiar . . . to an autistic reader, or was this just incidental?" Wells' reply is significantly more elaborate than her reply to the question in the 2020 interview:

> I just wrote Murderbot the way I, a lot of that is now my brain works, so, and I've never been diagnosed with anything because I'm at that age where, back then, when I was growing up, in the 70s, they didn't especially, particularly girls, they didn't worry about, they didn't, you know, you were just behaving badly . . . So, that's just . . . how my brain works, and that's how it always has been, and that's why it came out like that. I wasn't intending it to be anything, in particular, but now that I have so many comments about that . . . I should probably go in and I know a lot of older people, particularly my age who, especially women, who have gone back and, and gotten the diagnosis, because they

> realized that a lot of things they were just coping, they learned to cope with, you know, probably, actually should have been treated with they were younger. So yeah, but it wasn't intentional, it's just me. (St. Mary's County Library, 2022, p. 43:16-44:37)

It is clear that over this time period, Wells, who is obviously not insensible to the fan response, has begun the process of exploring her own potential neurodiversity, especially within the context of, as she notes, being a woman who grew up in the 1970s. At that time, ASD diagnoses were heavily biased toward male presentation, and as she notes, girls were simply just "behaving badly." As Melanie Yergeau (2018) explains,

> Girls, women, and nonbinary-identifying individuals are not only diagnosed later with autism than are cisgender boys, but many fail to be officially diagnosed at all. Autism researchers continually debate whether autism's gendered ratios—ranging from 4:1 to 10:1 male-to-female—are a matter of biology or phallocentric and ciscentric conceptions of developmental disability. Meanwhile, autistic women, as well as nonbinary and queer-identified autistics, frequently narrate their purported recovery stories as stories of closeting, masking, passing, fakery, burnout, and self-governance . . . wherein the autistic is socialized through mind-numbing repetition, reward, and aversive consequence to act like a good little girl. (pp. 123–124)

Wells' experience seems to fit Yergeau's description, and her knowledge of the bias that Yergeau describes seems to be a motivating factor for her to "go in" to be evaluated for neurodivergence. And by October of 2022, Wells' approach to this question evolved even further. As a guest on the podcast Embedded.fm, the host, Elecia White, asks Wells, "I have seen people talk about SecUnit, Murderbot, being autistic. Did you have that in mind at all?" Wells responded:

> No. I was not really thinking of that at the beginning. Murderbot is not human, so I do not think our diagnoses like that would apply to it. Part of Murderbot's perspective is just the way my mind works, and I am not neurotypical. I did not really think it was that different <laugh>, until people were telling me that. It was not something I started out thinking, "This is what I will do." It just turned out like that.

Wells' responses to this question of Murderbot's potential autistic identity are consistent in that she never claims to have written it as an overtly autistic character. However, by tracing the evolution in her response to this repeated question about her intentions, she has moved from saying that it just reflected her own sense of self to openly asserting her own neurodivergence.

Conclusion

It is often easy to dismiss readers' responses to a popular author's work as mere fandom. However, the sf community has always had a strong working relationship between reader and author; Wells' experience with her Murderbot series is not exceptional in that respect. What is interesting is the way her readers responded to a character whose neurodivergence was more apparent to them than to her initially. Murderbot's autistic traits were enthusiastically lauded by this fan community on Reddit (and elsewhere). While Wells might not have initially coded Murderbot as autistic, it was certainly read that way by a wide audience. Furthermore, Murderbot's key action, the hacking of its governor module, highlights an approach to neurodivergence that doesn't center neurotypical wants or desires in a way that parallels how Murderbot views itself as distinct from human, but not less than human. Instead, the social strictures that the governor module imposed are viewed as negative barriers to Murderbot; the mask they enforced was unbearable. Through Wells' Murderbot, neurodivergent readers were able to see themselves represented in a way that centers their experience, rather than a neurotypical one. In a recent Reddit AMA ("ask me anything"), it is clear that Wells is more than willing to connect with her readers via shared a shared identity: in response to a question about Murderbot's source and neurodivergence, Wells responds: "[It] came out of my brain and I'm some flavor of neurodivergent :)" (BeccaSedai & Wells, 2022).

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