

Characters with Autism Spectrum Disorder in Fiction: Where are the Women and Girls?

Sadie Henderson¹, Dr Priyanka Tharian², Nataya Wathanasin¹, Nikita Hayden³, Verity Chester⁴ and Dr Samuel Tromans⁵

¹Medical Student, University of Leicester Medical School, Leicester, UK, ²Specialist Registrar in General Adult Psychiatry, East London Foundation Trust, Bart's and the Royal London, London, UK, ³PhD Candidate, Centre for Educational Development, Appraisal and Research, University of Warwick, UK, ⁴Research and Projects Associate, St Johns House, Norfolk and PhD Candidate, University of East Anglia, Norwich, United Kingdom ⁵Specialist Registrar in Intellectual Disability Psychiatry, Leicestershire Partnership NHS Trust, and Honorary Academic Clinical Lecturer, University of Leicester, UK.

Introduction

- **Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) has been historically thought of as a disorder mainly affecting males, causing a gender bias in ASD research (Werling and Geschwind, 2013).**
- Recent research suggests the gender difference is not as marked as once believed. However, the 'autistic phenotype' may be different in women (Van Wijngaarden-Cremers *et al.* 2014) as girls may adopt camouflaging or compensating behaviours.
- Fiction can play an important role in educating others about ASD; for this reason it is important representations of ASD characters are realistic (Conn and Bhugra 2012).
- Having too few female characters with ASD represented in fictional works may contribute to women with ASD feeling ostracized.

Method

- We conducted an online literature search for various forms of media depicting females with ASD, including books, television, film, theatre and video games.

Findings

General Findings

- **The search highlighted a number of female characters with ASD across a range of media types (Table 1).**
- Many were written by authors who had an ASD diagnosis themselves, or another personal experience, such as being a carer.
- Pieces largely portrayed characters with traits that are highly recognized within the academic literature. However, some also appeared to endorse outdated myths and stereotypes.
- Existing works appear to preferentially portray high functioning autistic women, with limited representation of those with intellectual disability.

Case Examples

- ***M is for autism* was created by a group of teenage girls with ASD, whose real life insight helped create an authentic portrayal of a young girl with ASD.** In the book *M* describes her hyperarousal to sensory stimuli and need for structured routine as well as displaying repetitive behaviours such as tapping of her cheek.
- **Julia in *Sesame Street* (Fig 1.) is a well known example of a female with ASD on TV.** The show has an international audience with a potential to positively impact the way young children and parents view the condition.
- **The character Poppy in the film *Dustbin Baby* (Fig 1.) is portrayed by Lizzy Clark, an actress who has an ASD herself.** When Poppy is befriended by the neurotypical character April, she demonstrates her difficulties coping with change as she goes through school.
- **Spoonface in the play *Spoonface Steinberg* (Fig 1.) features a female protagonist with ASD.** It is also suggested that she may have intellectual disability as she attends special educational needs schooling.
- **Symmetra from *Overwatch* (Fig 1.) is the first playable female video game character with ASD.** She demonstrates a need for order, frequently misunderstands jokes, and exhibits a desire to avoid excessive stimulation, including turning away in the middle of intense battles.

Media type	Number of examples of female characters with ASD identified
Television	15
Film	27
Theatre	1
Video Games	8
Books	8

Table 1. Female characters with ASD identified in different forms of media.



Figure 1. Examples of characters explored in the paper.

Julia from *Sesame Street* (top left), Poppy from *Dustbin Baby* (top right), Spoonface from *Spoonface Steinberg* (bottom left), Symmetra from *Overwatch* (bottom right).

Discussion

- **Due to the likelihood of the prevalence of ASD in females being underestimated, media representations of how it can present in females, can be useful to raise awareness and minimise stigma.**
- However some representations can be misleading as often those with 'high functioning' ASD or autistic savants are often portrayed as the norm, and this can be potentially alienating to numerous people who deviate from this depiction.
- Whilst characters in the media are fictional and are understandably not completely true to medical descriptions, some can be so inaccurate they could be harmful. One example is in the film *Molly* where it is suggested that ASD is reversible. To prevent errors such as these it should be standard practice for writers to consult those with ASD or their carers when developing characters to make them more accurate.
- This was a non-systematic review and the search through existing literature was limited, and may not reflect the whole body of literature on the topic worldwide, particularly within non-English speaking countries.

References

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