

Narrating Autism

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The rapidly rising tide of autism diagnoses has brought with it a large collection of autism stories. Despite the widely divergent abilities of persons with autism, however, many of these stories are strikingly similar. In this chapter, I outline a set of rules that these stories follow and that have threatened to collapse autism's diversity into a menu of formulas. But these formulas constitute only one aspect of what I call "the narrative problem of autism." A second element lies in the nature of autism itself. Because autistic people often tend to think less linearly than neurotypical folks, and because their habits and preferences may strike neurotypicals as repetitive or inexplicable, nonfiction books by and about autistic people frequently display a tension between the demands of narrative cohesion and the obligation to tell the truth. As a result, most nonfiction autism books maintain a conflicted relationship with narrative, often either lapsing into convention or eschewing narrative cohesion altogether. Perhaps, I suggest, the written word is an unsuitable medium through which to portray autistic lives. Instead, visual media, because of their flexibility in capturing the human experience of time and their capacity to render atypical states of consciousness, offer a more adequate means to narrate autism.

Following the Rules

Before the current flood of autism stories arrived, the best-known depiction of an autistic person was in Barry Levinson's Oscar-winning 1988 film *Rain Man*, in which Dustin Hoffman plays Raymond Babbitt, an autistic adult who has lived for many years in an institution. Hoffman's closely observed performance and Ron Bass's script create an engaging tale. But the film also established a number of stereotypes about autistic people that have hardened into formulas. In one scene, as Raymond

prepares to leave a diner with his brother, Charlie, we learn that Raymond has memorized half of a town's phone book in a single night and can instantly count the toothpicks that fall from a jar. These abilities have yielded *Rule #1: The autistic person must be a savant*. This rule has been followed slavishly in most cinematic portrayals of autistic persons, from 1994's *Silent Fall* (featuring a young autistic boy with extraordinary echolalia) to the 2005 film *Mozart and the Whale*; it even marks, to some degree, the otherwise compelling 2010 biopic about Temple Grandin, as well as popular books such as Daniel Tammet's *Born on a Blue Day* (2006). It is likely that only a small percentage of autistic persons exhibit savantlike abilities; but even if, as one recent study suggests, a higher percentage of autistic people possess such extraordinary skills, the main problem here is not inaccuracy. Rather, it is the implication that, as Anthony Baker has noted, autistic people are valuable *only* if they are geniuses (2008, 236; see also Hacking 2010, 642; Happé and Frith 2009, 1346).¹

In the scene cited from *Rain Man*, Raymond is first "othered" by certain aspects of his condition, such as his rigid insistence that he must have syrup for his waffles; then he is rendered strange in the opposite way—that is, depicted as superhuman—by his savant abilities. But despite his trying moments (such as when Charlie attempts to get him on a plane), Raymond is generally portrayed as endearing and unintentionally funny ("Course, I'm an excellent driver," he maintains, though he has never taken the wheel). Humor can be an indispensable tool for maintaining one's sanity in life with autism, but portrayals of autistic people as lovable eccentrics do them no favors, because they imply that such people may not need long-term support or therapies. Such depictions barely hint at autism's linguistic problems, behavioral difficulties, and sensory issues. Out of these stories also comes *Rule #2: The autistic must be charmingly quirky but not too severely disabled*.²

Raymond's brother is selfish and arrogant and, until late in the film, uses Raymond mostly as a means to obtain what he believes to be his rightful inheritance. We are meant to condemn Charlie for using his brother as a tool. Yet the film does the same thing, for *Rain Man* is less a character than a device to humanize Charlie. In stories like this one, autistic people chiefly serve as what disability theorists David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder call a "narrative prosthesis": a "crutch on which . . . [to] lean for . . . representational power, disruptive potential, and social

critique” (2001, 17). Such autistic persons exist only to reflect the values or growth of the neurotypical characters. This pattern yields *Rule #3: The autistic person must be a catalyst to advance, or a yardstick to measure, the moral progress of nonautistic characters.*³

While pretending to bring us close to their autistic characters, these formulaic narratives actually dehumanize them by depicting them as freaks or turning them into instruments for the humanization of others. Instead of exploring autistic agency or presence, they pander to the needs of the majority audience, which, it seems, wants the autistic person to be something or someone else—a savant, a witty oddball, or a tool. Ultimately, then, these stories cater to the hidden desire that, as I suggest further in this chapter, may actually underlie their misrepresentations: that autism and autistic people vanish completely. Thus, in *Rain Man*, Raymond is first made strange, and then humanized, only to be taken back to the institution, where he will become invisible once again.

The explosion of autism books has included several novels narrated by young people who, like Charlie Babbitt, have autistic brothers. All of them follow Rule #3 to a tee. For example, Eli Gottlieb’s *The Boy Who Went Away* recounts thirteen-year-old narrator Denny Graubart’s final summer with his autistic older brother, Fad, humorously conveying Denny’s resentment at being the brother of what he calls an “authentic genetic fuckup” (1997, 142). But what Denny most despises is that his brother is “almost me”: that Fad embodies *Denny’s* feelings of inadequacy and alienation (2). Fad is the boy who goes away, but in a sense he is never really there except as an instrument to measure Denny’s growth. An autistic sibling plays an equally symbolic role in Martha Witt’s Southern gothic *Broken as Things Are* (2004), where adolescent female narrator Morgan-Lee develops a quasi-incestuous relationship with her autistic brother, Ginx, who comes to represent perverse sexual desire and family dysfunction. A kind of reverse prosthesis, he stands for a disability that Morgan-Lee must overcome. Marisa Silver’s novel *The God of War* (2008) supplies a similar situation. Its teenage protagonist, Ares, truly cares about his autistic brother, Malcolm, and understands him better than anyone else. But Ares is haunted by guilt over an incident, years earlier, in which he dropped Malcolm on his head and thus, he wrongly believes, caused his brother’s disability. His need to protect Malcolm eventually precipitates a violent confrontation that leads to Ares’s escape and Malcolm’s disappearance from his life. Again,

the autistic brother exists mostly as his sibling's yardstick and catalyst, rather than as a complex human character; in all three cases, the autistic character ultimately disappears.

Novels about the parents of autistic kids have followed the same rules. For instance, *Daniel Isn't Talking* (2006), by Marti Leimbach (herself the mother of an autistic child), centers on Melanie, whose three-year-old autistic son, Daniel, eventually makes implausibly rapid improvement via a mixture of applied behavioral analysis (ABA) and play therapy. Though Leimbach accurately, and at times touchingly, portrays Daniel's behaviors and Melanie's fears, she tethers this material to a trite, predictable story in which Daniel's progress toward recovery (with the help of a miraculously astute therapist who also becomes Melanie's lover) is merely a crutch with which Melanie limps to a better life. In addition to epitomizing Rule #3, this novel exemplifies a fourth rule, which obtains whenever Rule #1 does not, and which also governs most nonfiction autism narratives: *Rule #4: The autistic person must experience a miraculous cure.* This rule at least makes explicit the subtext hidden in the other rules: autism (and people with autism) must be erased.

Each of these novels is stymied by one aspect of the narrative problem of autism: how to portray autistic persons without lapsing into the conventions I've outlined. None of them, however, is narrated by the autistic person. Two other recent novels present relatively "high-functioning" autistic narrators (that functioning level may be a necessity, given that an entirely nonverbal or intellectually impaired narrator would present seemingly insurmountable challenges to storytelling). Yet the two differ radically in their presentation of autistic selfhood.

Elizabeth Moon's near-future novel *The Speed of Dark* (2003) offers a twist on Rule #4. Protagonist Lou Arrendale works as a computer specialist; though socially awkward, he is a competent fencer and is generally successful and contented. So it is difficult to accept when, given the chance to undergo an operation that would eliminate his autism, Lou agrees to be normalized. His decision invokes the disability-versus-difference controversy that rages in today's autism community: Should autistic people be taught to act like others, or should they embrace their differences as intrinsic elements of their identities?⁴ Lou maintains that he is not ashamed of his autistic self but decides to have the operation in order to enhance his personal, professional, and social development. It is disheartening, however, that Lou employs his autistic agency to choose

not to be autistic; once again, the autistic character exists only to be ultimately erased.

Whereas Lou wants to be someone else, Christopher Boone, the teenage narrator of Mark Haddon's best-selling novel *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (2003), is quite pleased with himself just as he is. And why not? He is pictorially imaginative, self-aware, and observant enough to be a fairly good detective. Haddon's novel juxtaposes chapters of linear narrative with digressions in which Christopher explains his inner world. Alternately static and dynamic, at once stringently focused and sprawling, the novel successfully depicts Christopher both in neurotypical terms and in his own, autistic terms. Indeed, the novel's greatest triumph is Haddon's rendering of Christopher's mental world via drawings, math problems, maps, lists, and, in one very effective scene, a chaotic barrage of signs that illustrates his disorientation in a noisy train station (170).

Yet Haddon does not really break the rules: Christopher's mathematical gifts mirror Rule #1, his eccentricities conform largely to Rule #2, and he serves partly as a yardstick for his parents' behavior and a catalyst for their emotional problems (Rule #3). But although Christopher discovers unknown abilities, defeats his fears, and passes his A-levels, *Curious Incident* is not a recovery story. Christopher remains autistic, and his development occurs through, not in spite of, his condition. Not only is he still present at novel's end, he is also stronger, more confident, and more assertive. At once disabled and gifted, unusual and typical, definitively himself yet capable of growth, Christopher is one of us. The novel portrays autism as just another way of being human. Moreover, in refusing to wipe out its autistic character, *Curious Incident* succeeds where virtually every other autism novel has failed.

Why are the rules so pervasive? James T. Fisher argues that autism cure stories resemble the Protestant tales of the redeemed self that are deeply embedded in Western consciousness, with religious conversion transposed into recovery from the disorder (Fisher 2008, 51–52). The heroic-parent story (as exemplified in Leimbach's novel) is, further, a variation on what medical sociologist Arthur Frank terms the "restitution narrative," whereby a patient is cured through someone else's expertise (1995, 79). In both genres, the agent of change is an external power, and the patient remains subordinated, passive, or invisible. As Stephen Shore suggests, these stories are versions of the "castle parable,"

in which neurotypicals rescue the autistic person trapped behind walls by slowly gaining his or her trust and then leading that person out of the castle (2003, ix-x). Such narratives reassure neurotypical people of our “normality,” letting us feel good about ourselves for caring, meanwhile reinforcing the ethos of individualism and conversion: “You only have to *want* to overcome a disability and, with hard work, you can do it!”

Purportedly nonfictional narratives of autism are equally subject to these formulas. Thus, one popular autism narrative depicts evil corporations and government institutions colluding with malicious or incompetent doctors to inject children with autism-causing vaccines. Luckily, the story goes, a few heroic parents, such as Jenny McCarthy (most often described as a “former *Playboy* model”), save their children by subjecting them to all manner of dubious treatments, as a prelude to wiping out the autism scourge forever (see McCarthy 2007).⁵ Once again, these stories are not really about autism but about people trying to eliminate it. Indeed, the ghost of Bruno Bettelheim lurks behind these narratives, which, like his notorious theory that autism is caused by uncaring mothers, focus not on autistic people but on their parents (1967). Heroism, after all, is but the flip side of demonization.

These tales may seem preferable to older stories of parent-blame, hopelessness, and stigma; but they, too, perpetuate misleading ideas about autism’s causes and “cures,” presenting it as an unmitigated curse from which parents must rescue their children, thereby adding to the guilt of family members whose autistic loved ones don’t recover and diverting attention and resources from other research and services. Because such stories dominate the marketplace, alternate narratives—both those of the majority who don’t recover and those of a growing minority of autistic people who object to the idea that they are sick and need to be cured—may go unheard.

Sibling memoirs provide an essential perspective. The best of them show how living with autism requires adjusting one’s expectations and one’s definitions of normality, and demonstrate how those adjustments enable one to accept oneself and one’s sibling as both similar to and different from others. (A recent fine and varied collection of sibling stories is Cumberland and Mills 2011.) Yet even these books struggle to avoid Rules #3 and #4.

A case in point is Karl Taro Greenfeld’s bracingly honest and well-written *Boy Alone* (2009), which tells of life with his severely autistic

older brother, Noah, who was already the subject of three memoirs by their father.⁶ The title refers as much to Karl as to Noah: partly because of his brother, Karl has lived much of his life as a self-exile, struggling with drug abuse and experiencing problems with intimacy. The book implies, indeed, that Karl and Noah are mirror images. But Noah is such a difficult brother that perhaps Karl can be forgiven for perpetrating an authorial trick: for some fifty pages, he portrays Noah as a “high-functioning” adult—a man capable of speaking clearly and even of starting a romance—before jolting us back to reality with a list of Noah’s medical interventions and a picture of Noah’s actual grim adulthood. One may feel betrayed that Karl couldn’t resist presenting a fictional cure story that parallels his own rehabilitation. Yet this alternate-world tale does capture the mixed feelings he holds for the brother about whom he writes: “He remains the center of my life. I hate him for that” (331).

The vast majority of parent memoirs adhere to the four rules, but mostly to Rules #3 and #4. There are far too many to discuss them all here. But that scarcely matters, for most of them are alike: recovery stories touting a specific therapy or therapies. In this vein are Catherine Maurice’s *Let Me Hear Your Voice* (1993), featuring ABA/Lovaas therapy; Annabel Stehli’s *The Sound of a Miracle* (1991), auditory training; Jenny McCarthy’s *Louder Than Words* (2007), diet and heavy-metal detoxification; and Russell Martin’s *Out of Silence* (1994), facilitated communication. *How I Saved My Child from Autism and Became a Better Person* could be their one-size-fits-all title. Such books also seem designed to absolve the parent by singling out a scapegoat. Well-intended though they are, they fuel the misconception of autism-spectrum disorders as a set of temporary problems that can be remedied by undaunted parents who discover a magic bullet. In these narratives, Rules #3 and #4 converge in an unhealthy marriage of myths.

Even some of the better recent accounts of life with an autistic child fall prey to the tyranny of the recovery story. For example, Dan E. Burns’s 2009 memoir *Saving Ben* movingly describes his pursuit of appropriate therapies for his severely autistic son Ben (meanwhile, Dan comes out as gay and copes with a mentally ill ex-wife; he pushes a lot of hot buttons!). Other parents of autistic children will surely empathize with his vividly portrayed frustration, anger, elation, and fear; yet even these parents may raise eyebrows at his readiness to try anything under the sun, no matter how implausible, and at his belief that only

he can save Ben. Though his love for Ben is palpable, the book presents recovery as the be-all and end-all of their relationship. It is less about Ben than about Dan and, even at the end, when we learn that the young adult Ben remains significantly disabled, his father is still trying to save him (154). Having shaped his material to fit Rule #4, he has nothing left to say when Ben remains in his “castle.”

Stasis or Chaos

Other nonfiction books reveal that the narrative problem of autism transcends questions of formula by exposing challenges peculiar to autism. First, because of the notorious autistic love of routine, family members may feel that they live in the movie *Groundhog Day* (1993), in which every day is like every other day. How do you craft a tale about events or people that never change? In other cases, autism strikes family members as a series of constant, inexplicable explosions of chaos that produce a life of perpetual interruption. How does one forge a cohesive narrative about continual disruption? As Irene Rose notes, the need for narrative cohesiveness conflicts with the narrative content (2008, 45). As soon as chaos or interruption is given narrative order, it ceases to be chaos or interruption. Autism thus seems uniquely resistant to narrative, and tensions between narrative order and disruption—whether figured as relentless repetition or as outbreaks of chaos—characterize virtually all nonfiction autism stories, particularly parent memoirs. As I discovered while writing my own memoir (Osteen 2010), autism seems uniquely resistant to narrative.

A handful of parent memoirs have dared to break Rule #4. Each author seeks a method—be it denial, indignation, or stoic acceptance—to deal with his or her initial grief, rage, and guilt. Each one also seeks a path between the feeling that autism is a terrible demon and the more elusive sense that it may also be a gift. Most important for my purposes here, they all grapple with the conflict between autism as it is lived and autism as it can be narrated, by seeking a strategy to depict stasis or disruption. Because I have discussed three such books in my introduction to *Autism and Representation* (Osteen 2008, 20–22), I’ll merely sketch my analysis here.

Robert Hughes’s *Running with Walker* (2003) candidly recounts his son Walker’s difficult behaviors and his own depression, anger, and feelings

of inadequacy. Though Hughes describes Walker as “low-functioning” (15), he successfully portrays the *joie de vivre* that renders Walker a fascinating character and lovable son and brother. The book nicely balances the highlights and lowlights of life with autism, but it remains a series of episodes, its rhythm as uneven as Walker’s characteristic pace.

Kate Rankin’s *Growing Up Severely Autistic: They Call Me Gabriel* (2000) displays a similar problem. Rankin’s understated style reflects the truth that her son Gabriel’s eccentricities require no rhetorical flourishes, for he may be the most seriously impaired child yet depicted in a parent memoir: at age seventeen he is not toilet-trained, doesn’t speak, engages in no typical play, possesses no social or academic skills, climbs compulsively, runs away, and destroys furniture. But though Rankin’s son is unforgettable, the book never gains narrative momentum, just as Gabriel never changes. He resists treatment both clinically and narratively.

Charlotte Moore portrays the challenges of living with *two* autistic sons in *George and Sam* (2004). Rather than extolling a specific therapy, she sensibly notes that the audio integration therapy that benefited George had no effect on Sam, and that dietary interventions that did nothing for George helped Sam immensely. Humorous and down-to-earth, Moore’s book isn’t a story but a set of essays on issues such as education, food, imagination, and diagnostics. Unfortunately, her attempt to reach a wide audience also leads to the troubling conclusion that autistic people’s most valuable quality is to “provide a yardstick for neurotypical moral behavior” (222). Even in Moore’s savvy and generally enlightened book, Rule #3 rears its head.

Two other recent parent memoirs deliberately eschew the desire to tell a book-length story, yet each one sacrifices something important in the process. In *The Only Boy in the World* (2006), Michael Blastland, rather than relating a tale of recovery, thoughtfully explores theory of mind, obsessions, sensory issues, and social interactions and raises intriguing, if unresolvable, questions about our definitions of the human.⁷ In often sparkling prose, Blastland details pivotal episodes in his life with his son, Joe—the boy’s suddenly blocking access to a water slide; his being hit by a car (miraculously avoiding injury); his striking a crying baby—and provides a brilliantly apt oxymoron for his feelings after such incidents: “seething pity” (166). Blastland explicitly addresses the problems with Rule #3 yet also adheres to it, asserting near the end of the book that “one of the greatest aids to self-understanding is the differences in

others who give us something to compare”: his own self-understanding, not Joe’s (194–95). *Blastland* also transforms the theory-of-mind deficit from a tendency into a monolithic Truth, declaring that Joe has no conception of others’ thoughts and intentions, and representing his son’s world as an alien domain of arbitrary actions performed by mysterious beings. But time and again (it’s not clear whether this is intentional), *Blastland* reveals the limitations of *his own* theory of mind. For example, after contending that Joe cannot recognize his own emotions, he recalls his son telling him that he was “pee,” that is, happy (122). Tenaciously adhering to his theory despite evidence to the contrary and sacrificing narrative connection for local coherence, *Blastland* proves that Joe is his father’s son. Indeed, he does not solve the narrative problems of autism so much as exemplify them.

In *Weather Reports from the Autism Front* (2008), James C. Wilson writes about his adult son, Sam, while insightfully considering key issues such as cure, self-injury, socializing, and medications. Though working primarily from a neurodiversity standpoint—for example, recognizing that self-injurious behaviors are a form of “embodied language” and acknowledging the validity of many autistic bloggers’ resistance to medication—Wilson also remains skeptical about certain emerging neurodiversity dogmas (73). It’s not hard to see why: Sam, an intelligent man with well-developed interests and even some friends, nonetheless bangs his head, occasionally hits others, and displays disabling rigidities. As his father writes, “Sometimes . . . the decision to medicate is not a matter of choice,” and “when your autistic child begins banging his head on the wall, neurodiversity theory doesn’t provide much comfort” (154, 23–24). Nor does Sam’s father try to solve the narrative problem of autism: rather than a cohesive story, the book is presented a series of “reports” whose repetitiveness sometimes mirrors Sam’s perseverations.

Despite their flaws, these memoirs prove that a once-invisible segment—the more severely impaired autistic people who do not “recover” and whose stories don’t make neurotypical readers feel warm and fuzzy—has emerged. Yet they also expose the problem: no cure, no story. Having abandoned the recovery narrative, they grope for a central thread, thereby embodying the difficulties of narrating autism.

One extraordinary sibling memoir, however, illustrates a possible solution. Paul Karasik and Judy Karasik’s *The Ride Together* (2003) juxtaposes Paul’s graphic vignettes with his sister Judy’s more conventional

account to create a moving portrait of life with their autistic brother David in the 1950s and 1960s. Paul's comic strips trenchantly illustrate the world according to David, who habitually reenacts entire memorized television shows, most notably *Superman*. Paul also beautifully demonstrates how he learned to respect David's echolalia and eruptions. At a Three Stooges film festival, Paul is initially mortified by David's shouts of "Moe, Larry, cheese!" Then the Stooges' world spills into the theater, causing a pie fight and general mayhem. Back in "reality," David walks out, but his departure provides an opportunity for Paul to flirt with a pretty theater worker. The vignette ends with the brothers gleefully shouting in unison, "Moe, Larry, Cheese!!" (125–31). Through such incidents, Paul learns to accept his brother as a kind of Lord of Misrule, a "hole blown through ordinary behavior," as Judy puts it (139). Rarely has the radiant chaos of life with autism been better captured.

Judy more quietly dramatizes her efforts to understand David. When an investigation reveals that David has been abused in a residential placement, Judy agonizingly reassesses her responsibilities. But after their ride together from his new facility, David asks about the upcoming holidays and gives her a kiss. Only later does she realize that while she thought she was reassuring David, he was actually reassuring *her*, telling her not to feel guilty about leaving him. That night she watches *Rain Man* as David sleeps beside her. The film that once moved her now leaves her cold: "I couldn't be with the movie . . . that I had used to make a neat package out of David, and be with David at the same time" (151). Like the Stooges, David breaks out of the box into which others place him. He refuses to disappear.

The Karasiks show that their brother is not just a disorder or a patient but a complex, creative human being who can't be fully captured by the label of "autism." They appreciate David not as a yardstick for their own growth but as a mix of abilities and disabilities like other humans. And like Wilson, though not explicitly, the Karasiks suggest that autism is not an individual disorder but a family condition that responds to and generates interpersonal dynamics not so different from those in ordinary families (Wilson 2008, 185). (This is also a major theme in the movie *The Sandwich Kid*, which I discuss later in the chapter.) Each story, indeed, illustrates how other family members "become autistic" and are forced to learn empathy—the ability to perceive the world as another sees it—in order to inhabit the worlds their autistic

loved ones create. Most importantly for my purposes here, the Karasiks' book's mixed media brilliantly portray both chaos and stasis while permitting the authors to produce and stick to a narrative line.

Local Coherence

Several essays in *Autism and Representation* offer novel ways of reframing autism's relation to narrative consciousness and imagination. Each one highlights the notion of "local coherence." Bruce Mills, for example, explicates Ralph Waldo Emerson's and Samuel Taylor Coleridge's analyses of the unifying ("esemplastic") power of the imagination and demonstrates how these ideas inform contemporary clinical accounts of autistic deficits in theory of mind and central coherence. But rather than viewing these traits as impairments, Mills proposes, we may find in the work of autistic creators Jessy Park and Temple Grandin an art of local coherence that displays an imagination "defined by close attention to mechanical or physical patterns not psychological or social rules" (2008, 126). Attention to local coherence, he concludes, enables us to expand our definition of creativity and to nurture a richer idea of human possibility.

Matthew K. Belmonte similarly argues that the theory of mind and executive dysfunctions often named as core impairments in autism may be more accurately viewed as disruptions of narrative organization—a penchant to perceive the world in parts rather than as a connected whole. Threatened by the chaos this perceptual style generates, autistic people must work harder to construct a theory of reality than do neurotypical persons. But humans have always employed narrative as a defense against chaos. Viewed in this light, Belmonte concludes, autistic people are prototypes for a universal human struggle to craft narrative meaning from the menacing surround: they are human, but more so (2008, 166–79).

What about autistic people themselves? How do they narrate their lives? Given Belmonte's conclusions, one would expect narrative to present an insurmountable problem for autistic authors. One might even assume that anybody who can write her or his life has, by definition, recovered. Autistic authors thus encounter a dilemma: how to represent their lives as both autistic *and* akin to those of other humans. Complicating this problem is the fact that, as G. Thomas Couser points out (and as

I myself experienced as I sought publication for my memoir), publishers generally consider disability to be “depressing” unless it is harnessed to a tale of triumph or cure (Couser 2000, 308).⁸ Not surprisingly, then, many autistics’ autobiographies follow Rules #1 and #4. Yet they also display a creativity that is genuinely autistic: locally, rather than globally, coherent.

The first two such books, Temple Grandin and Margaret Scariano’s *Emergence: Labeled Autistic* (1986) and Donna Williams’s *Nobody Nowhere* (1992), exemplify these patterns. Grandin’s story is framed by Bernard Rimland’s foreword, stating that she has “recovered,” earned a PhD in animal science, and now travels the world lecturing on autism (1986, 5, 7). She would appear to be a living embodiment of Rules #1 and #4. The book itself, however, is more ambiguous. For example, Grandin’s obsessive reiteration of images of doors and tunnels (rendered vividly in the recent biopic about her [*Temple Grandin* 2010]) indicates a mind wedded to repetition. And though Grandin recognizes that her autism has caused her great difficulties, she also suggests that her obsession with cattle chutes enabled her to construct a psychic or developmental tunnel through which to enter the neurotypical world. In other words, autism helped her generate the tropes and objects that permitted her “emergence” from it. In fact, Grandin’s narrative suggests that she didn’t emerge from autism so much as *merge with* it, crafting a self from within autism that let her keep one foot on each side of the threshold. Her autism cannot be separated from her creativity.

Like Grandin’s book, Donna Williams’s *Nobody Nowhere* contains a preface that praises Williams’s “transition from autism to near-normalcy” (Rimland 1992, ix). Yet her own voice and viewpoint—blunt, headlong, self-obsessed but unreflective—clearly bespeak an *autistic* consciousness that rarely generalizes or condenses, shows little interest in others, and possesses a weak grasp of narrative connection or global coherence. Whereas Grandin is obsessed with doors, Williams uses repeated images of mirrors and shadows, as young Donna repeatedly attaches herself to and imitates particular friends while hiding behind two imaginary alter egos—soft-hearted, sunny Carol and prickly, controlling Willie—each embodying shards of her “fractured” identity (1992, 56, 209, 95, 102). Donna emerges only when she incorporates her alternate selves. Yet throughout her episodic story, Williams sustains one theme: the desire to integrate her intensely private world with that of others. Like *Emergence*,

then, *Nobody Nowhere* tells two stories at once: a narrative of normalization and a counternarrative of creativity emerging from within autism.

In some respects, Grandin's and Williams's self-portraits resemble classic bildungsroman protagonists, who battle oppressive authorities and endure degrading love affairs yet borrow from positive role models to synthesize a coherent identity and discover a vocation, which is manifest by their authorship of the books we are reading.⁹ But shaping an identity is far more difficult for these autistic authors, because their perceptions arrive in bits and pieces. Thus, they resort to strategies of bricolage—echolalia, imitation, fixations, alter egos—to construct a self by assembling spare parts (Grandin's second autobiography thus also describes itself as a set of "reports" [1995]). As Belmonte suggests, these autistics, like David Karasik, anchor themselves in the chaotic sea of sensation by battering upon stray flotsam. Perhaps autistic creativity and identity are paradoxically synthesized through an arduous process of self-effacement (as is also indicated by the many interpolated texts in *Emergence*), yielding an emergence that is also submergence. The authors don't exactly disappear; instead, they exist on two planes simultaneously—both the autistic and the neurotypical. The books, therefore, send mixed signals to autistic readers: we are autistic and have written books, so you can too—but only if the story is framed as a recovery or emergence tale. The inner narrative of consolidation may be lost within the formulaic framework.

How does one render an autistic consciousness when the demands of narrative seem to violate its essence? Kamran Nazeer's *Send in the Idiots* (2006) embodies another possible answer: tell not one story but several, and in each one present the author as both reporter and subject. Nazeer tracks the lives of four former classmates (who, like him, were diagnosed with autism as children), inserting digressions about conversation, sociability, and autistic consciousness, to achieve an unorthodox but effective blend of narrative and interpretation, empathetic involvement and authorial distance. This hybrid strategy lets him resist the recovery narrative; moreover, through investigating and inhabiting the lives of other autistic adults, he discovers his own hybrid adult identity, one that is sometimes autistic, sometimes neurotypical. Rather than reifying autism, Nazeer proves that it can be many different things and that an autistic person may be just as contradictory as any other human.

The fact that these authors have written at all is crucial, not just because they can serve as models for other aspiring autistic authors but

also because the process of writing their lives has helped them to *compose* those lives—to transform their authorial selves into gateways through which neurotypical readers may pass to reconsider conventional notions of selfhood and agency and thus become their empathetic collaborators. The books serve both as doors into the room of autistic consciousness and as mirrors in which to see our neurotypical selves *as* them. As such, they typify the universal human struggle to create coherence from the blooming, buzzing confusion of unfiltered reality. They are human, but more so.

They Don't Count Toothpicks

To some degree, the narrative problems I have outlined lie in the nature of writing itself. Although twentieth- and twenty-first-century authors have pushed the limits of chronology and linear storytelling, writing seems inevitably harnessed to a linear mode of consumption: even when we jump around while reading (as new technologies encourage us to do), we ultimately must read one word after another. Such a medium may not fit autistic people, who tend to think, as the books by Haddon, Grandin, and Williams demonstrate, in focused bursts of concentration or, as the title of Grandin's second book states, "in pictures" rather than in words (1995). Hence, visual media such as comics and the cinema may be more suitable than writing for capturing autism accurately and authentically. Indeed, although narrative, for a century now, has been the primary mode in which movies are presented, that wasn't always the case. As Tom Gunning, among others, has demonstrated, very early movies were often more about spectacle than story; as part of what he calls a "cinema of attractions," they prided themselves chiefly on the "ability to *show* something," particularly the "magical possibilities of the cinema" (1990, 57, 58). They offered a "rhetoric of display for the viewer rather than fashioning a process of narration" (Gunning 2006, 35). Such a rhetoric of display might merely represent autistic people as freaks; but an innovative filmmaker might employ the "magical possibilities of cinema" to render autistic consciousness visually. One can imagine a filmmaker doing so through devices such as jump cuts, flashbacks, dissolves (that is, the superimposition of images), montage sequences, and freeze frames; by breaking the fourth wall, as Paul Karasik does in his graphic panels; or by way of sonic or visual manipulations

(amplification or color saturation and the like), double exposures (as in the Temple Grandin biopic), and so forth. Liberated from the need to tell a linear story, a cinema of autistic attractions might emancipate autism from the fetters of verbal narration.

Unfortunately, most mainstream fiction films “about” autism have used rhetorics of display mostly to invite audiences to regard autistic persons as freakish “attractions.” Few have even tried to represent autistic consciousness through imaginative cinematic techniques, and most have ended up resorting to the rules I have outlined. Indeed, as Anthony Baker (2008) and Stuart Murray (2008) have shown, fiction films purportedly about autism seldom are: they rarely grant autistic people agency or full humanity. The hazards for nonfiction films are slightly different. One peril is exemplified by Keri Bowers’s *The Sandwich Kid* (2007), which uses interviews to train the spotlight on the siblings of people with intellectual disabilities. The siblings’ candid responses furnish invaluable perspectives on life as a “sandwich kid” (one caught in the middle), but the interview format eventually becomes repetitive. Untethered from a narrative anchor, the film drifts, prompting Bowers to insert herself and lecture us about what we’re supposed to be learning. She ultimately blocks our view of her autistic subjects.

A few of cinema’s spectacular visual devices are employed imaginatively, however, in *George* (2000), a documentary directed by Henry Corra and Grahame Weinbren, with help from the title character, Corra’s twelve-year-old autistic son (the film was shot mostly in 1995). Eschewing narrative in favor of associative connections, *George* splices together interviews with friends and family and George’s experiments with his new camcorder. In one sequence, cellist Tom Cora (he spells his name differently than his brother), George’s uncle, compares George’s thinking to musical improvisation, and the film is indeed structured as a kind of free-form jazz composition. Henry Corra also allows his son to assist in making the film. We witness George determining which questions to ask interviewees, and we watch him at the editing console, giggling in delight as he creates jump cuts so that interviewees repeat gestures and phrases—for example, a classmate’s self-description as a “psycho idiot”—again and again. The filmmakers also employ freeze frames and still photographs to portray George’s peculiar temporal sense. Perhaps most important, in presenting George’s obsessions with airplanes, geography, and meteorology nonlinearly, the film combines repetition with

disruption in a fashion that captures the boy's view of the world. In some respects, the film is about its own creation—both by Henry (as in an early scene in which Henry learns that HBO no longer wants to broadcast the film because George “isn't autistic enough”) and by George. But it is most of all about the making of George himself as at once a subject (through interviewees' statements about him and through the camera's eye) and an auteur. In creating and viewing the film, Henry, George, and viewers *compose* George's identity. Like Grandin's and Williams's autobiographies, then, *George* reflects an authentically autistic local coherence through strategies of bricolage and self-reflexivity. If George's self-presentation remains mediated by neurotypical adults, the film nevertheless shows that visual and multisensory media hold great promise as means of transforming the narrative problem of autism into an advantage. However, we still await the emergence of a mature autistic filmmaker talented enough to fully control the reins of representation and narrate autism from the inside.

Until that time, a couple of recent nonfiction autism films by neurotypical filmmakers exemplify other successful ways to negotiate the narrative problems of autism. Although neither of these films is particularly innovative in its visual style, and though both gesture toward narrative formulas, they ultimately subvert them, sacrificing the global coherence of a single narrative thread for the local coherence of illuminating individual moments. Lizzie Gottlieb's documentary *Today's Man* (2006) introduces us to her twenty-something Asperger brother Nicky, as he seeks independence from his parents and tries to keep a job. Articulate, possessed of a phenomenal memory (though the film breaks Rule #1 by not emphasizing Nicky's savantlike skills), and understanding his condition quite well, Nicky is also socially inept and rigid, insisting on watching his favorite television shows (he loves *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* and the afternoon soaps) every day without fail. At his first job, he tells his supervisor that the many African Americans in his workplace make him believe he is in Harlem instead of on Wall Street. Clueless about racial sensitivities, Nicky does not grasp why this remark might offend; he loses the job when he departs midday to watch his beloved TV programs. Before long, he obtains another position as a receptionist at a theater company. The job suits his genial personality and meticulous organizational abilities, and he briefly thrives. But soon Nicky, unaware of social proprieties most people would instinctively

grasp, receives a reprimand for opening a coworker's mail. And when customers call to cancel tickets for a show that is receiving poor reviews, Nicky blithely concurs with them that the show is awful. He is fired the next day. *Today's Man* reminds us that the line between "high-functioning" and "low-functioning" is blurry: though smart and charming, Nicky seems destined to reside in his parents' apartment for the foreseeable future. He eventually finds companionship in an Asperger support group, but there's no recovery in the offing and there are no spectacular scenes; instead, we witness a struggling young adult who happens to be autistic.

Autism: The Musical (2007) traces the attempt by Elaine Hall, the mother of a nonverbal autistic boy, to stage a musical in which the roles will be played by autistic children. Each child—Lexi, a talented singer with severe echolalia; Henry, obsessed with dinosaurs; Adam, who experiences violent tantrums; Wyatt, terrified of bullies and unable to make friends—is briefly spotlighted, and each child's parents recount the toll that autism has taken on their lives and marriages. At first the film seems merely to mobilize yet another tired formula—the hoary "let's put on a show" device—with the promise of a trumped-up, triumphant conclusion (the title of Hall's enterprise, *The Miracle Project*, underlines that expectation). But the musical is less a setup for a climactic conclusion than a vehicle to dramatize the small gains each child makes along the way. We never see the full show, nor do the children magically overcome their disorders: at the premiere, some forget their lines, and others can't remember where to stand, sing off-key, or stim. Also, as the film proceeds, we grasp how tedious Henry's dinosaur lectures become, share Lexi's frustration over her inability to form original sentences, and witness how parents such as Rosanne, Adam's angry mother, reframe their children's traits. Yet we embrace the children because of their differences and come to appreciate and celebrate the less showy victories each one achieves. Most of all, we understand that they are, in many respects, just ordinary kids.

Both films invoke narrative conventions—a young man overcomes adversity to find a job; a group of children put aside their problems to stage a hit show—only to overturn them. Sacrificing catharsis or cure, these documentaries truthfully render the trials and small triumphs of living with autism. But are they satisfying? That is, do they provide a sense of narrative completion? Or does the presumption that stories must have clo-

sure merely reflect narrow neurotypical thinking? Actually, the strength of both films lies less in their main stories than in the mininarratives—Nicky’s parents’ struggle to help him gain independence, the autistic kids’ budding friendships—that epitomize local coherence. Rather than following only the longest thread, these films also pluck out smaller strands, explore them, and find them meaningful in themselves.

There is even hope for more authentic fictional films about autistic families. Such hope is sparked by movies such as the 2008 Australian picture *The Black Balloon*, which concerns teenage Thomas Mollison (Rhys Wakefield) and his autistic older brother, Charlie (Luke Ford). To some degree, this film conforms to Rule #3. For example, Thomas often mirrors his brother: both fall in love with Thomas’s classmate, Jackie (Gemma Ward), and several scenes imply that Charlie symbolically embodies Thomas’s awkwardness and feelings of alienation. Charlie also serves as a catalyst when, escaping from the house and dashing down the street in his underwear, he darts into a nearby house to urinate—leaving his cap in the house and thus triggering Thomas’s romance with Jackie, who resides there. Charlie also provides the couple with an occasion for intimacy as the three kids find shelter together during a thunderstorm. As Charlie catches rain in his cap, Jackie and Thomas share their grief—Jackie’s about her mother, Thomas’s about Charlie, who, he believes, perceives the world as if through “black fuzz.”

But the film (directed by Elissa Down, herself the sister of an autistic man) breaks the other three rules. Indeed, although Charlie remains quite severely impaired to the end, the film offers plenty of indications that he knows exactly what is going on, deliberately teases Thomas, and pushes him to acknowledge his own “disabilities.” Charlie’s agency surfaces, along with the film’s forceful violations of Rule #2, in a handful of hard-hitting scenes that also portray the challenges of living with autism. In one of them, Thomas locks Charlie in his own bedroom so he can spend time with Jackie, upon which Charlie defecates all over the floor. Is he just “being autistic,” or is he taking revenge on his brother for mistreating him? The film’s most powerful scene, shot partly with a handheld camera to depict the siblings’ chaotic emotions, raises similar questions. At Thomas’s sixteenth-birthday dinner, Charlie begins masturbating at the table, embarrassing Jackie and infuriating Thomas, and leading to a brawl in which Charlie bites a chunk out of his brother’s arm and Thomas smashes Charlie’s head. Part of Thomas’s rage clearly

stems from his (unconscious) recognition that his brother is acting out his own (that is, Thomas's) sexual desire for Jackie. Charlie's bold gesture brings the brothers' festering rivalry to a head. By forcing the action, Charlie is, in his peculiar way, behaving as a typical big brother. The film counterpoints these depictions of chaos with a series of scenes employing aural and visual repetition that reveal Charlie's way of being in the world. At the film's opening, for example, we find Charlie sitting on the lawn, pounding a wooden spoon and vocalizing; the film repeats this sequence several times, implying that Charlie acts out this ritual daily. In these ways, *The Black Balloon* successfully copes with the narrative problem of autism by incorporating both stasis and chaos into a story that is not about recovery but about acceptance—Charlie's acceptance of Thomas's love, and Thomas's acceptance of his brother's disability and of his own identity, which he demonstrates near the end of the film by sitting on the lawn, vocalizing, and drumming along with his brother. That image of living in the moment, of sharing the world with autistic people on their own terms, offers a powerful picture of how one might truly negotiate with, and narrate, autism.

Is it possible to narrate autism authentically—to do justice to difference while retaining sufficient narrative coherence for audiences to sustain interest—without resorting to formulas? How may authors and filmmakers avoid sensationalism, resist the tyranny of the cure story, and grant their autistic characters full human agency? Perhaps by treating chaos and stasis not as hazards to be avoided but as opportunities to be exploited, as both *George* and *The Black Balloon* do so well. And, most of all, not by seeking global coherence but by celebrating those small, radiant moments of insight and purity that remind us of our shared humanity.

NOTES

1. The best-known studies of savant syndrome and autism are by Darold Treffert; they include his book *Extraordinary People: Understanding Savant Syndrome* (1989) and, more recently, *Islands of Genius: The Bountiful Mind of the Autistic, Acquired, and Sudden Savant* (2010). In a recent article, Treffert estimates the prevalence of savantism in autistic people to be approximately 10 percent (2009, 1352). Two other sources, however, offer widely differing estimates. In *Bright Splinters of the Mind: A Personal Story of Research with Autistic Savants* (2001), Beate Hermelin and Michael Rutter estimate the prevalence of savantism as 1 or 2 in 200 autistic persons (17). In contrast, a recent study by Patricia Howlin and colleagues determined that 28.5 percent of their 137 subjects met the "criteria for either a savant skill or an exceptional cognitive skill" (2009, 1359). However, the authors admit that "definitions of

what constitutes a skill that is truly exceptional in terms of population norms are also variable and highly unusual characteristics may not necessarily be equivalent to special skills" (1364). Douwe Draaisme writes, "The stereotype of autistic persons being savants is without doubt one of the most striking discrepancies between the expert's view and the general view of autism" (2009, 1478). Draaisme also surveys recent films with autistic characters in this article.

2. Anthony Baker (232–33) lists these first two rules as part of the "autistic formula" he finds in Hollywood cinema; he does not discuss literary manifestations. Stuart Murray, in *Representing Autism: Culture, Narrative, Fascination* (2008), astutely analyzes autism in mainstream film along somewhat similar lines (125–34).

3. I've borrowed the terms *yardstick* and *catalyst* from Patricia M. Puccinelli's book *Yardsticks* (1995, 11, 28, 45).

4. For example, among the "philosophies and goals" listed on the Web site of Autism Network International ("Introducing ANI," n.d.) is the following: "Autistic people have characteristically autistic styles of relating to others, which should be respected and appreciated rather than modified to make them 'fit in.'" By contrast, nonprofit organizations such as Autism Speaks focus most of their efforts on cure or remediation.

5. For a more recent outline of McCarthy's views, see "Who's Afraid of the Truth about Autism?" (2010). The name of her sponsored nonprofit organization, Generation Rescue, succinctly sums up her stance. There is also a Web site purporting to count the number of children who have died or become ill because they were not vaccinated, allegedly as a consequence of McCarthy's antivaccine campaign. See "Anti-vaccine Body Count" (Bartholomaeus n.d.). The most prominent nonprofit promoting the autism–vaccine connection is the National Autism Association.

6. The first and best-known of their father's memoirs is Josh Greenfeld's *A Child Called Noah: A Family Journey*, first published in 1970.

7. "Theory of mind" refers to the hypothesis that autistic persons are unable to grasp the fact that others may hold thoughts that they themselves do not, and hence that they have difficulty in attributing intentions to others. This deficit, it is believed, contributes to the poor social skills that many autistics or Asperger individuals exhibit. The first significant analysis of this condition was Simon Baron-Cohen's *Mindblindness: An Essay on Autism and Theory of Mind* (1997). Quite a few autistic persons question this theory, aptly pointing out that most *neurotypicals* possess a weak theory of mind when it comes to understanding the intentions of autistic people.

8. An editor at a prominent publishing house once declared to me that her company would consider no disability memoirs unless they contained "uplift," which I took to mean "cure."

9. These plot elements are described by Jerome Buckley in *Season of Youth: The Bildungsroman from Dickens to Golding* (1974, 17).

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