

# Representations of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in Children's Literature

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## Abstract

We were tasked to apply critical multicultural analysis techniques to discern how a culture is represented in picturebooks and the social messages those books send to readers. "Critical multicultural analysis of children's literature acknowledges that all literature is a historical and cultural product and reveals how the power relations of class, race, and gender work together in text and image, and by extension, in society." (Bothelo & Rudman).

I chose to explore how Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is symbolized for those individuals who are on the spectrum- reading books and seeing themselves represented. Additionally, I analyzed the books presented the spectrum in an accurate nature for those learning about Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and its unique characteristics.

## Background Research

- "When Leo Kanner, an Austrian-American psychiatrist and physician, first described autism in 1943, he wrote about children with 'extreme autistic aloneness,' 'delayed echolalia' and an 'anxiously obsessive desire for the maintenance of sameness'." (Zeldovich).
- "What causes Autism? Parental age, prenatal exposure, family history, genetic mutations and disorders, and chemical/metabolic imbalances." (Holland).
- "Some autistic people may not speak at all. In fact, about 25 to 30 percent of children with ASD are minimally verbal (which means they speak fewer than 30 or so words) or don't speak at all." (Holland).
- "Children with autism are individuals and have their own personality with varying degrees of interests and capabilities. Two children can have autism but their symptoms may look very different from each other. If you look at autism with its three main areas, communication, social interaction, and repetitive behavior, each has its own spectrum of behaviors. For instance, along the communication spectrum an individual could be nonverbal at one end of the spectrum or he could be verbal with fluent but unusual communication skills at the other end of the spectrum. An individual could be aloof or interactive but odd in those social interactions." (Weaver).
- "In order to ethically represent autism in children's literature, it is important to consult children with autism and adults who have experiences with these children, give the character with autism a voice that allows readers to empathize and connect with them, make the character with autism the center of the novel or the narrator, and give the character goals, hopes, and dreams that do not require them to 'overcome' their autism in order to be successful." (Yalof).
- "Although there is a great deal of children's literature about autism that exists today, I have noticed a lack of diversity in the literature. The majority of children's autism literature features a male as the character with autism; only two out of the eight books in my study feature a female as the character with autism." (Yalof).
- "Girls may have fewer restricted interests and repetitive behaviors than boys do and may have more socially acceptable types of interests. They are also more likely than boys to mask their autism features by copying their neurotypical peers." (Zeliadt).
- "The most comprehensive analysis of autism's sex ratio, published in 2017, drew on data from 54 prevalence studies worldwide. That analysis estimated about 4.2 boys with autism for every girl." (Zeliadt).
- "Symptoms vary widely, so that one ASD adolescent may demonstrate easily recognizable autistic traits, such as severely impaired verbal skills and repetitive twirling or hand-flapping, while an ASD classmate may be almost indistinguishable from his neurotypical peers... The autism community has a favorite saying that reflects the diversity of the autism spectrum: 'If you know one child with autism, you know one child with autism.' In its portrayal of autistic adolescents, however, young adult fiction has thus far known only one child with autism: the high-functioning, hyper-verbal savant with Asperger syndrome." (Rozema).
- "In other words, if we want developmentally disabled readers to find themselves in adolescent fiction, we would give them more than one role to play. They can be heroes, villains, winners, losers, angels, demons, and everything in between. In allowing ASD teenagers to lead rich lives on the page, adolescent literature would recognize the diversity of the ASD community in ways that current crop of autistic fiction has not yet achieved." (Rozema).

## Conclusions

"Critical multicultural analysis of children's literature equips the reader with strategies to unmask dominant ideologies, integrate what they know about themselves with what they learn about others, and translate their reading and thinking into social action." (Bothelo & Rudman).

Throughout the study, one deduction stood out the most-there is a large divide in the number of picturebooks representing female-identified characters with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) versus their male-identifying counterparts. Additionally, picturebooks presented with the main character being on the autism spectrum were more realistic and positive, creating a better understanding of the individual struggles with this disability. Most of the books analyzed with the main character having ASD only mentioned ASD on the book cover or in the book jacket, not the actual text.

There are also very few books that present non-verbal autistic individuals to readers which further contributes to stereotypes surrounding the disability that all autistic individuals present with the same characteristics and neglecting to acknowledge that autism is a spectrum disorder. Picturebooks that are written with friends or siblings of someone with ASD focus more on the challenges the sibling or friend faces in accepting the person with ASD rather than the obstacles met by the sibling/friend with ASD.

Parents, caregivers, librarians, and school personnel should ensure they have appropriate representations of the Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) so that all readers can understand the different levels and perhaps those individuals on the spectrum can see themselves in those picturebooks.

## Research Questions

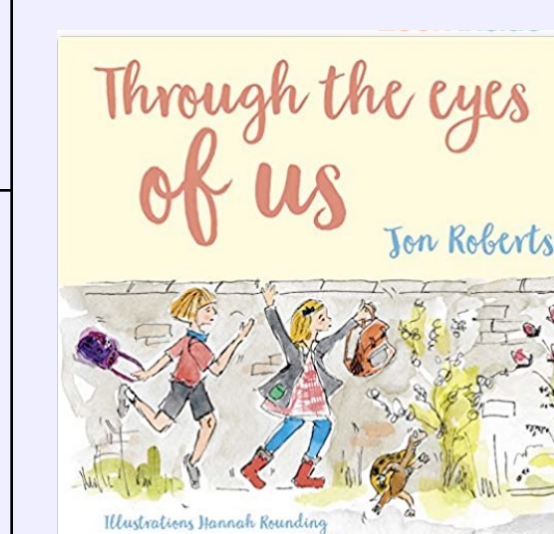
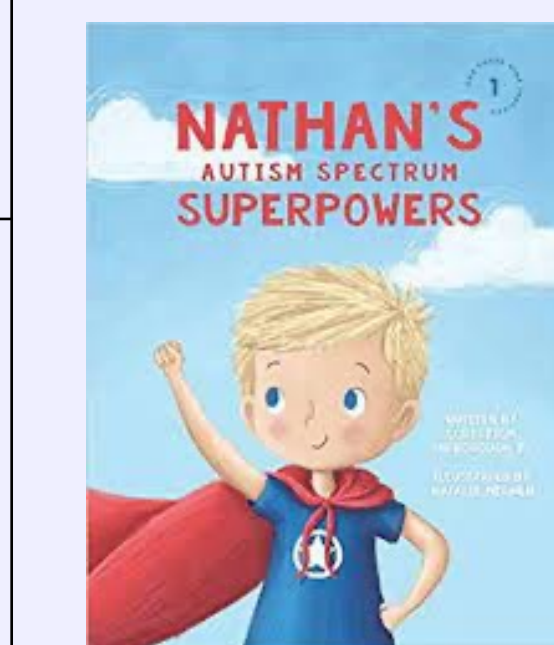
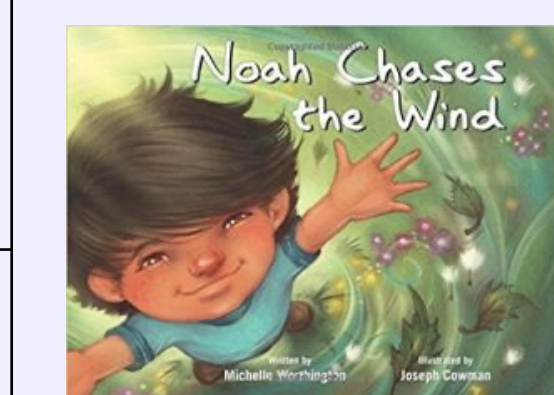
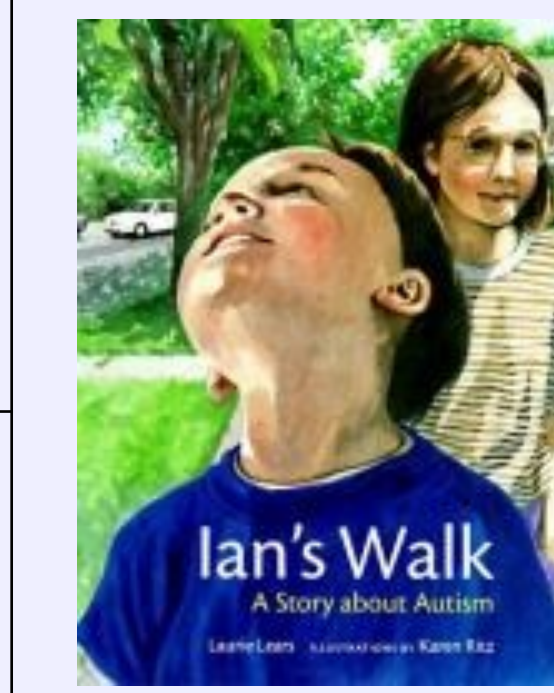
1. Is there a difference in representation of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in picturebooks when the main character is on the spectrum vs. a supporting character?
2. Do all picturebooks present children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in the same light? Same circumstances and patterns of behaviors?
3. Are there equal representations of male and female characters on the autism spectrum in children's picturebooks?

## Methods

Ten picturebooks were chosen from the shelves at my library which were listed as having a character on the autism spectrum through our search database. The books were read and analyzed based on whether or not the main character was the person on the autism spectrum, if that character identified as male or female, and how their behaviors of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) were described. Based on this analysis it was then determined whether or not this book would be recommended.

## Analysis

Title & Author	Main Character on the ASD?	Identifying Gender of ASD character?	Behaviors Described?	Recommend?
 <i>A Friend for Henry</i> By: Jenn Bailey	Yes	Boy	Follows the rules literally, struggles to make friends, unable to accept change.	Yes - but the book doesn't say that Henry has ASD aside from the jacket description
 <i>All My Stripes: A Story for Children with Autism</i> By: Shaina Rudolph	Yes	Boy	Sensitivity to sounds and textures.	Maybe - with much explanation
 <i>Talking is Not my Thing</i> By: Rose Robbins	Yes	Girl	Overwhelmed by sound, attempts to use words, but they don't come out right, likes routines.	Yes - it shows a side of ASD not commonly found in books, although it doesn't say ASD in the text, only the back cover
 <i>My Brother Charlie</i> By: Holly Robinson Peete	No	Boy	Difficulty making friends. Inability to show emotion, hyper-focused. Gets into unsafe situations frequently.	Maybe - focuses a lot on making the sibling understand ASD
 <i>Ethan's Life: My life with Autism</i> By: Ethan Rice	Yes	Boy	Sensory issues, hyper-focused.	Yes - the author is on the ASD and presents the struggles well
 <i>Ian's Walk</i> By: Laurie Lears	No	Boy	Sensory issues. Difficulty expressing emotions	Maybe - does present some stereotypes of ASD and focuses more on sibling understanding
<i>My Brother Otto</i> By: Meg Raby	No	Boy	Stimming, acting out when upset, impulsive, biting, hyper-focused, and obsessive, nonverbal	Maybe - it's never said in the text that Otto has ASD and does not present working with someone on the ASD in a good light
<i>Noah Chases the Wind</i> By: Michelle Worthington	Yes	Boy	Hyper-sensations, hyper-focused, and extremely inquisitive.	Yes - although it never states ASD directly
<i>Nathan's Autism Spectrum Superpowers</i> By: Lori Leigh Yarborough	Yes	Boy	Supersonic hearing, fixation on problems, physically draining to do certain activities	Yes - has helpful hints to friends and caregivers throughout
<i>Through the Eyes of Us</i> By: Jon Roberts	Yes	Girl	One processes slowly, one overeats, both appreciate routines.	Yes - the two main characters have ASD with different behaviors



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