

INTERPRETING THE OTHER:
AUTISM IN YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE

THESIS

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by

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INTRODUCTION

A work of literature provides the reader with an image of society, mirroring beliefs and behaviors. These images do not always convey a complete picture of society as it actually exists but rather as we hope it might be. The occurrence of disability is one of the subjects not truly or fully represented. Although disabled characters can be found throughout literature, their depiction is not always accurate or informative. The representation of disabled characters in young adult fiction often fails to instill a sense of their humanity. Their express purpose appears to be to instigate change in others rather than to accept them as people in their own right, unfortunately mirroring the view of today's society regarding disability. This trend has begun to change but the presentation has not progressed as far as one might imagine. Characters with visual or auditory impairment or those with physical handicaps appear to be accepted in fiction in the same manner as they are integrated into society. Unfortunately, those with mental impairments remain creatures of the unknown and the unknown is difficult for many of us to handle.

Autistic characters or those with autistic characteristics began appearing in literature in the thirteenth century with the legends of Brother Juniper in *The Little Flowers of St. Francis*, tales of a Franciscan monk who exhibited many autistic-like characteristics (Frith 22). Folklore includes stories of changeling children, those

children who replace infants stolen by fairies and exist in a world of their own. Lucy Lane Clifford describes a child who does not conform to the society of the time in “Wooden Tony” (1892), a story of a child who exhibits many of the characteristics that would today indicate a diagnosis of autism. Referred to as “the idlest boy in Switzerland”, Tony longs to be “far off” from the world into which he was born. Unable to prove his usefulness, he slowly withdraws from the sunshine, the song of the mountains, and humanity into his wooden world literally in the story. One of the earliest confirmed cases of autism appeared in the late 1700s when a child was discovered wandering outside the town of Aveyron, France. He lacked speech, social skills, and the ability to relate to others, all characteristics associated with autism. He was dubbed the Wild Boy of Aveyron. Stories of other wild or feral children have surfaced over the years giving credence to the notion that autism has existed for a much longer period of time than it has actually been acknowledged. A developmental disability and spectrum disorder that has increased dramatically in the last two decades, depictions of autism have begun to appear more often in books and movies. Maurice Sendak’s picture book, *Outside Over There* (1981), depicts the changeling child as “another made all of ice.” The book *Victor* (1998) provides an account of Dr. Itard’s work with the Wild Boy of Aveyron. *Rain Man* (1988) brought autism to the big screen as Charlie struggles with his older brother, Raymond’s, disability after the death of their parents. In the twenty-first century writers of science fiction, fantasy, and realistic fiction as well as young adult fiction are including characters diagnosed with autism or those exhibiting autistic characteristics in their work. The inclusion of

these characters by authors such as Diane Duane and Mark Haddon indicates an acknowledgement of this particular disability and an attempt to present a clearer picture of autism to adolescents.

Each of the works I have chosen to examine skillfully portrays a character with autism in a different light and using a different genre. Each author has experience in writing children's literature and obviously has some knowledge of the autism spectrum disorder and possibly the fact that this disability is becoming more and more common throughout society. Diane Duane's novel, *A Wizard Alone* (2002), sets the autistic character in a fantastic world where TVs and DVD players argue and wizards live among common people in an attempt to save the world from entropy. Mark Haddon's realistic interpretation involves a character who resides in a small town in England, attends a special school, is fascinated by murder mysteries and numbers, and mourns the death of his mother in *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (2003). Each presents insightful and informative representations of the autism spectrum disorder in an attempt to dispel the unknown, and remove those with autism from the realm of the other.

The literary techniques used by each author provide unique expressions of the autism spectrum disorder. Different genres provide a variety of methods in which to present these individuals. *A Wizard Alone* looks at the autistic mind of a wizard through the use of fantasy. *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* presents realistic interpretation of Asperger's syndrome, a high-functioning form of autism, through the actions and voice of the individual. The narrative techniques

used throughout these tales differ depending upon where the individual in question falls along the Autism spectrum. Darryl's classic autism in *A Wizard Alone* is perceived through the senses of Kit and Nita, two adolescent wizards. Christopher, afflicted with a higher-functioning form of autism, Asperger's syndrome, dictates his own story in *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*. The authentic portrayal of characters was apparently impeded in the past due to the inability of those on the outside to imagine the view through the lens of autism. Today, the increase in research and media attention has made information concerning this disorder more accessible, making it a more viable subject for exploration in fiction.

A Wizard Alone, the sixth book in Diane Duane's *Young Wizard* series, tackles autism through fantasy, imagining the inner workings of the autistic mind. The *Young Wizard* series pits the specialized skills of inherently good adolescent wizards against the evil undertakings of the Lone Power, a fallen wizard who attempts to undermine the structure of the universe. Each adolescent candidate must take the Wizard's Oath and then pass an ordeal before achieving true wizard status. Each book in the series deals with a different issue. *Deep Wizardry* (1985) addresses issues concerning the pollution of the oceans, *High Wizardry* (1990) issues of technology, *A Wizard Abroad* (1993) the magical tradition of Ireland, and *The Wizard's Dilemma* (2001) disease. *A Wizard Alone* finds Kit and Nita, two certified adolescent wizards, struggling to understand death and rejection. The introduction of Darryl, a classically autistic wizard, into the mix forces them to acknowledge his disability, face the similarities between themselves and Darryl, and realize his true worth. Darryl uses

his autism to bait and trap the Lone Power in a world contrived of sensory stimulation and visual absurdities that he has created within his mind. As Kit and Nita struggle to help him, they experience many of the same physical and emotional feelings that Darryl endures. It is only through the concerted efforts of the three young wizards that the Lone Power remains unsuccessful and Darryl escapes the aloneness of his autism.

Mark Haddon's interpretation of a fifteen-year-old autistic boy's journey to discover the truth about the deaths of his mother and a neighbor's dog, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, offers insight into the opposite end of the autism spectrum. Christopher Boone finds the dog, Wellington, impaled on a garden fork and takes it upon himself to learn the truth behind the dog's murder. He inadvertently unearths the truth about his parent's marriage and the lie his father told him about his mother in the process. Afflicted with Asperger's syndrome, Christopher manages to take some control of the impulses that flood his system as he flees his home in Swindon to find his mother in London. The overwhelming sensory input and obsessive tendencies that dictate his every move inhibit all but his most concerted efforts, but succeed he does. Christopher's first-person narrative offers a unique perspective of the inner workings of his mind.

This thesis examines the two books, *A Wizard Alone* and *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, from three perspectives. The first chapter examines the portrayal of the autistic character within these narratives as each one attempts to present a realistic interpretation of autistic behavior. Their degrees of effectiveness in

this endeavor vary. While *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* conveys authentic depictions of autistic behaviors and outcomes with Christopher's obsessive fixation on routine, *A Wizard Alone* illustrates the characteristics of a more self-involved case of autism but then suggests that autism can be easily overcome as Darryl awakens from his autistic stupor, a truly improbable occurrence.

The use of specific genres and themes reinforce and, occasionally, question the portrayals of the autistic characters. The second chapter looks at the way the genres employed by each author offer unique interpretations of the disorder. Addressing a young adult audience allows the author to examine many of the intricacies of the disorder that might be misunderstood by younger readers. Fantasy and realism offer totally different approaches and outcomes. The third chapter looks closely at the manner in which these narratives incorporate themes common to fiction involving the disabled. The utility of these characters with autism often remains shadowed by the immensity of the disorder. At first glance it is difficult for some to discern the usefulness of a person with autism. Scratch the surface and Christopher's ability to discover the murderer and his mother's whereabouts becomes apparent as does the wizard Darryl's ability to save the world. The age old question of the preference of death to autism or any disability brings forward the theme of death as dominant in these works. The death of Nita's mother in *A Wizard Alone* enables her to relate to Darryl's isolation and loneliness. Another important theme, mirrors, reflects the truths about ourselves that we wish to ignore. Seeing a bit of oneself in a character who is rocking and murmuring repetitively or who is socially inept is

disconcerting to say the least but it also helps us realize the similarities and diminish some of “the other” mystique.

As the parent of a child with autism and an advocate for the education of the uninformed, I encounter the marginalization of those inflicted with this disorder on a daily basis. Accessible information through popular culture, in books and in movies, has increased the overall awareness among the general public. The inclusion of the autistic character in popular young adult fiction serves to demystify the disorder. I have spent a great deal of time ensuring that the educators and students with which my seventeen-year-old son comes in contact have accurate information about his disability. As I watch him interact with his informed peers it is obvious that their knowledge of autism enhances their relationships. It is my belief that literature makes that awareness possible for a greater number of people.

Michel Foucault in *Madness and Civilization* (1965) notes that the Age of Reason brought about a constricted mindset as far as the mentally disabled are concerned. Throughout the Middle Ages in Europe the mentally disabled were accepted as a part of the whole but as that perspective began to change, acceptance of the different and unusual began to decline at an increasing rate: “Madness and madman [became] major figures, in their ambiguity: menace and mockery, the dizzying unreason of the world, and the feeble ridicule of men” (Foucault 13). With the governmental intervention into the treatment and education of the disabled in the United States beginning in the 1960s that lead to Public Law 94-142 or IDEA, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, in 1975 and the Americans with

Disabilities Act in 1990 the tide slowly began to turn, but the attempt to bring that thinking full circle and accept those people as a part of the norm continues to fall short. As the incidence of autism rises, so does the need for awareness and acceptance. Young adult literature plays an important role in setting the agenda for fostering the acceptance of autistic individuals in the future. The accurate portrayals of two disparate points on the autism spectrum by Duane and Haddon go a long way toward accomplishing that goal.

CHAPTER 1

“HOW DOES IT FEEL?” : TRUTH IN THE TELLING

Autism is a difficult disorder to describe or to understand. According to the Autism Society of America's definition autism is:

a complex developmental disability that typically appears during the first three years of life. The result of a neurological disorder that affects the functioning of the brain, autism impacts the normal development of the brain in the areas of social interaction and communication skills. Children and adults with autism typically have difficulties in verbal and non-verbal communication, social interactions, and leisure or play activities. (Autism society np)

As a spectrum disorder, the symptoms and characteristics of autism can present themselves in a wide variety of combinations, from mild to severe. People with autism may exhibit any combination of the behaviors in any degree of severity. Diagnosis is often difficult. There is no medical test to determine the presence of autism. Behavior analysis remains the only tool available to insure that those with the disorder receive the services necessary to function in our world. In some cases the autism becomes apparent within the first few months of life. In others, symptoms do not manifest until months or even years later. Late-onset autism is thought to be the result of the introduction of an external impetus that triggers the mechanism that begins the decline in communication skill resulting in a more classic form of the disorder.

Transposing this disorder from actual case studies to the fictional world of young adult literature proves to be a difficult task. The depiction of autism in fiction is difficult due to the inability of people with autism to communicate their feelings and explain their behaviors through spoken or written language. It would certainly be easier to describe the affected character by superficially recounting their bizarre behaviors and challenges without any insight into the inner workings of the disorder, but both Duane, a former psychiatric nurse, and Haddon, who once worked with autistic children, chose to present their autistic characters in ways that attempt an understanding of what it is like to be autistic. Each author presents a view of autism that takes into account the variety of characteristics and behaviors that define the spectrum disorder.

A Wizard Alone, the sixth book in Duane's *Young Wizard* fantasy series, revolves around a young autistic wizard's attempt to fend off the Lone Power, one of the Powers That Be who invented entropy and death. Darryl McAllister uses his autism to his advantage in fighting off the continued destruction of the world as we know it. Darryl, a victim of late onset autism who was not affected until the age of eight, goes on Ordeal, the test young wizards endure to secure their powers, and remains incommunicado for just under three months. Most Ordeals take several days. Series regular Kit Rodriguez and his dog Ponch are summoned by Senior Wizard Tom Swale to check on Darryl without interfering in his Ordeal. Junior Wizards Kit and his friend Nita Callahan begin to acquire and struggle with the autistic-like characteristics that confront Darryl on a daily basis as Kit assesses Darryl's situation

and Nita struggles with the recent death of her mother. Duane uses fantasy and third person point of view as Nita and Kit travel into the autistic wizard's mind. She also incorporates symbolic allusions as well as sensory and communication obstacles to convey a sense of his autism.

Basic information about autism within the text is necessary to provide the reader a degree of understanding as the story unfolds. Duane introduces autism to the reader when Kit discovers Darryl in a special education class and notices his face, "expressionless, flat...as still as a mask" and the slow steady banging of his head against the van window (Duane 44). Kit recognizes a possible reason for Darryl's unusual behavior. It seems that he does have some prior knowledge of the disorder. After becoming aware of Darryl's disability, Kit begins to realize the challenges that lie before him as he begins to investigate the available information. His mother, a nurse, proves to be an excellent resource, and Duane uses her to provide a definition of autism for Kit and for the reader. The use of a medical professional to convey this information establishes an authoritative voice, one that influences Kit's interactions with Darryl. In simple, concise language, Mrs. Rodriguez summarizes the kinds and possible causes of autism: "There are a lot of different kinds, and we're still feeling our way around to the causes...may be too little of one chemical or another in the brain...an enzyme that's missing...something wrong with the immune system...a virus, or pollution, or vitamin A deficiency...There're a hundred answers, maybe all of them right sometimes..." (Duane 51). This provides the reader with an

understanding of how puzzling this disorder can be. She continues her explanation by providing examples of problems with which people with autism contend:

Autistic people have trouble, sometimes, predicting what other human beings' minds are going to do... some autistic people have trouble conceiving of anything existing outside the working of their own minds. The concept of "the other" seems to take a long time forming. That's part of why so many of them can't make or keep eye contact with other people...a lot of them seem not to know what fear is...(Duane 53-4).

She also attempts to clarify some of the sensory issues that might also be involved in an over-stimulating world where "sounds ...were too intense, [there were] sights they couldn't bear to see" forcing them to retreat into themselves or injure themselves as a means of blotting out the pain and insuring a measure of control over their situation in hopes of survival (Duane 54). Mrs. Rodriguez's description of autism enables the reader to empathize with Darryl's plight and acknowledge Kit's and Nita's predicament as they assume autistic characteristics in their attempt to help him. Duane's explanation of the disorder continues as the behaviors of the characters are related to the reader.

The definition of autism sets the stage for Duane's use of symbolism in conveying the ever-present characteristics. Darryl's autism provides excellent cover for his actions throughout the Ordeal. His body is a constant presence in the reality he shares with Kit and Nita either in his special education class or with his parents. Other wizards physically enter into alternate universes to complete their assigned task, while Darryl's challenge takes place within his own mind. So little is understood about the inner workings of the mind of a person with classic autism that

much of Duane's vision is speculative but for anyone who has ever interacted with an autistic person, the symbolism she chooses holds up well.

Duane uses symbolism that provides vivid depictions or analogies of traits or conditions associated with autism. Depending on the severity of the disorder, it is often assumed that the mind of an autistic person only allows in what is acceptable to that person. Change is difficult to deal with, so in many cases autistic people accept only routine thought and situations without resistance. It is often assumed that people with autism turn inward in an attempt to escape the stimulation of the world around them. Their heightened senses are not able to control or differentiate the sensory input from the world around them. In severe cases it is thought that penetration of the protective shell with which they surround themselves is nearly impossible. During Kit's first visit into Darryl's mind, he encounters a barren landscape "right out of the depths of the Sahara ... Look how empty it is" (Duane 69). He wonders if Darryl is hiding from himself as well as the world as he begins to explore and finds no evidence of Darryl's presence. People with classic autism rarely convey their inner thought processes or feelings due to their limited ability to communicate. It often appears that they are "not there." It is interesting to note that before Kit enters Darryl's mind, Darryl's teacher is reading a book to him about the seven wonders of the ancient world. It seems that in some cases the outside world seeps through into the mind just as sand finds its way through closed windows and door frames. Darryl appears to use this knowledge to create a hostile environment within his mind in which to confront the Lone Power, forcing it to experience constant discomfort in a

place where Darryl feels more at ease. Darryl continues this tactic throughout his ordeal. Duane effectively utilizes the assumption that people with autism construct inner worlds in which they experience a sense of comfort and hold the threatening world around them at bay.

Nita unknowingly enters Darryl's mind through her dreams and Duane uses this tactic to introduce some of the more obvious symbolism. The reader's initial introduction to Darryl comes through Nita's dream of "the clown riding around and around in circles on a ridiculously small bicycle in ever decreasing circles" in a spotlight (32). Duane uses the voiceless repetition of the clown to mirror two of the stereotypical behaviors associated with autism, the often obsessive repetition of actions and the circling or fascination with spinning. The repetition comes from a need for sameness:

Rhythmical motions are good ways of imposing order and control on one's self and the environment and this order is something most people with autism seem to both desire and need. There is a common incidence of interest in spinning around and in watching spinning objects, the dizziness spinning evoke may be enjoyable, as may be the elimination of other information"("Behaviors").

The tear adorning the clown's face symbolizes the intense sadness one might feel at the inability to function in this world; the screaming is a response to the intense pain experienced as the senses are overwhelmed with stimulation from this world. This also mirrors Nita's emotional upheaval since the death of her mother. She relates to the sadness, the pain, and the need to remove herself from everyday life as she avoids contact with Kit, her best friend. Each time Nita encounters another symbol

associated with autism, such as the robot who attempts to communicate or the knight “completely covered from head to foot in plate armor,” the typical behaviors associated with autism become evident (Duane 88,125). The robot represents the disconnect in relationships and in communication although it tries repeatedly to convey information. It also exhibits many of the other physical characteristics of autism. Uta Frith in her book, *Autism, Explaining the Enigma*, asserts that “robots are untouched by human relationships...[t]he machine-like behavior...[exhibits] repetitiveness, stereotyped movements, lack of emotional expression and lack of spontaneous playfulness”(27). The robot’s awkward gait combined with his blank expression and his attempt to communicate while emitting groans, grinds, and screeches interspersed with words in the Speech, a language universal to most wizards, consistently symbolizes behaviors exhibited by those with autism (Duane 89). The difficulty positioning the body in space and the blank or nonexistent affect are common characteristics. Its indistinguishable verbalizations mimic the problems many with autism experience such as poor articulation, inappropriate associations, and screaming as the resulting reaction to their frustration. The knight remains silent with a shell of armor deflecting any input whatsoever (Duane 125). During later visits into Darryl’s mind through lucid dreaming, Nita confronts a wall: “It was a wall. Perfect, white, featureless, stretching away from her—seemingly into infinity—in great curves on either side...It was not a physical thing, she knew, but a representation of some power or force that had been out there to stop any intruder”(Duane 259).

The walls or barriers that Darryl constructs to maintain a distance between himself and the Lone Power appear in various guises as he continues to evade the offending forces and have the effect of representing the invisible walls surrounding affected individuals. Kit watches Darryl encase himself in ice as he protects himself from the mutant basilisks conjured by the Lone Power: “Between one breath and another, he had become encased in what looked like as solid block of ice...[s]uddenly the basilisks flapped away” (Duane 167). The ice continues to protect him as the Lone Power attacks him with a sword that shatters on impact, and Kit begins to suspect that anything done to Darryl with his defenses in place will not harm him. The constant barrage of attacks causes him to vary his defenses to insure the impenetrable state of his being. He constructs a maze within his mind to confuse the Lone Power and prevent him from discovering Kit’s presence. He fabricates a wasteland of mirrors that aid in his mission as “shapes slide and hide in the mirrors, images chasing images but never meeting, never touching, fleeing one another as soon as any got close enough to make contact”(Duane 263-4). Nita sees the mirrors as “vampiric, sucking up fragments of personality, snatches of conversation, the glances of eyes, leaving the originals devoid of word and glances”(Duane 290). It is the breaking of those barriers or the shattering of the mirrors as “[t]ons of razory glass exploded into millions of pieces and came raining down on the glassy floor” that finally enables Darryl to escape his autism (Duane 291).

Duane’s symbolic representations do not carry the entire weight of the autism portrayal. Although autism is not a contagious disorder, Duane chooses to have Kit

and Nita assume certain autistic characteristics. This allows them to realize what it is to be autistic while conveying that same information to the reader. As Kit becomes more involved in his assigned task, he slowly begins to experience many of the sensory issues that hold sway over Darryl. His senses become much more sensitive to the slightest stimulation. The input received through his eyes, ears and skin becomes a source of intense discomfort resulting in elevated inner turmoil or anxiety: “The voices somehow both spoke at normal volume and screamed in Kit’s ears, intrusive, grating, maddening. He couldn’t shut them out...” (Duane 162). Most people with autism experience some degree of over- or under-stimulation of their senses. They experience sounds at increased volumes or intense pitches and are often unable to distinguish the variables in different sounds. Their hearing has been compared to a radio that is not tuned into a specific station, the static interspersed with random words or sounds making comprehension impossible. It is not unusual to find autistic children covering with their hands over their ears as sounds overwhelm them. Voices take on a irritating characteristic as Kit notices his mother’s voice having “a strange grating quality to it” (Duane 238). Sound is often overpowering, limiting autistic people’s receptive abilities and interfering with their expressive language and, in essence, their ability to function. The need for silence is shown in the form of Darryl’s wizard’s manual. A wizard’s ability to function in a magical capacity is dependent upon his or her manual. Each manual contains necessary information pertaining specifically to that individual wizard as well as general information necessary to enable him or her to complete any given assignment.

Darryl's wizard's manual comes to him through The Silence, an intuitive sense that relays information, as opposed to the spoken word or in written form (Duane 213). He says "the noise would get in the way. Once or twice the shouting got so loud that I thought I'd die of it" (Duane 213). This change in the method of access enables Darryl to perform tasks required of him in the same manner that adaptive equipment or modifications made to the different environments in reality enable those with autism to function to the best of their ability.

Duane captures the essence of many of the typical physical behaviors associated with autism. Visual stimulation often exacerbates the need to withdraw. Acknowledgment by another person can be overwhelming. There might be an inability to make eye contact, one of the classic characteristics of autism but one that is increasingly questioned. Many autistic people do, in fact, make eye contact with people with whom they are familiar. Strangers, teachers, doctors, or therapists may not receive the same recognition. Along that same vein, people with autism often do not acknowledge or comprehend the attention of others. Duane's relates this phenomenon as Kit attempts to approach Darryl, and Darryl's attention is focused on him for "a fraction of a second...He had felt for that second, what Darryl had felt: the unbearable pain of another person's regard..." (Duane 163-4). Other areas often affected are the tactile, vestibular, and proprioceptive systems which involve the input of sensory information through the skin, bodily movement, and spatial abilities (Hatch-Rasmussen np). Kit notices that "[h]is body didn't seem to be working right... his legs seemed to belong to someone else"(Duane 211). Tactilely, stimulation

through the skin's surface may be over- or under-sensitive. The overwhelming sensation that Kit's body encounters as he enters the jungle Darryl constructs in his mind presents a picture of sensory overload: "The heat here was terrible—stifling, muffling...[*e*]everything smells bad' ...even over the screaming...he thought he heard a breathing sound— He couldn't bear it any more"(207-211). Sensory input and the integration of that input proves challenging for most people with autism. Only with extensive therapy does this particular challenge become manageable. Darryl's participation in special education and the probable inclusion of many of these therapies in his curriculum reinforces his ability to control to some degree his behavior.

Duane sets the stage for problems with communication, a characteristic common to all forms of autism, in the first chapter. Kit's inability to communicate with the TV and DVD player, something he excels at normally due to his wizardly knack of conferring with machinery, sets up his difficulty in communicating with Darryl. Nita's problem in this area becomes apparent in her dreams as she attempts to interact with the clown, the robot, and the knight. She does manage a form of communication with each character at some point, but not in the usual manner. They each appear to understand Nita, but their expressive language appears hindered. The voice communicating for the clown comes not from his physical body "but from the darkness all around" and the tonal quality is absolutely flat (Duane 179). The robot expresses himself through constant interference, frustrated by his inability to make sense. Communication with the knight is not direct. An omnidirectional voice,

“coming out of nothing,” conveys his thoughts to her as he holds his vigil awaiting the battle with the Lone Power (125-6). Each instance provides an example of a communication difficulty experienced by a person with autism. Expressive and receptive languages as well as the ability to articulate to some degree prove to be problematic for most. Communication, the means with which most people connect, remains out of reach.

The combination of all of these issues makes the ability to tolerate life challenging to say the least. Duane includes many of the traits associated with autism, but the outcomes she creates are not always realistic. Darryl is basically noncommunicative, but he is able to communicate with Kit and, on a more basic level, with Ponch, within his own mind. He is able to manipulate his autism to his advantage in combating the Lone Power, while in “real life” the autism seems to be the manipulator, not the affected person. Kit and Nita’s assumption of the autistic characteristics exhibited by Darryl defies reality. It is not a contagious disorder. It is possible for people, actors for instance, to portray the visible characteristics of autism but, the traits which truly define someone as autistic can not be imitated. Those inner feelings, both emotional and sensory, can only be imagined by someone unaffected by the disorder. Autism is not a “curable” disorder. It may loosen its grip through a continuous regimen of therapies, but affected people do not walk away from it. It is a part of who they are, just as someone with a volatile temper may learn to control it but the propensity to that anger remains. The reality of the autism remains constant throughout *A Wizard Alone* but in the end it is only the fact that this story is a fantasy

that enables the young wizards to experience his pain and bring him back from the edge of the abyss. Only through Nita's knowledge of kernal manipulation does the change become a reality. The kernal, or core, as Duane represents it, resembles life's force as an alternate representation of DNA. In the fifth book in the Young Wizard's series, Duane defines a kernal as containing "a master copy of its physical laws ...this master copy...lists all properties of matter and energy...and the values for which these properties are set" (Duane *Wizard's Dilemma* 199-200). Nita prompts Darryl as he in turn manipulates "the tangle of light," enabling him to alter the structure of his physical makeup and setting the stage for a full recovery from the autism (Duane 307).

Duane's ability to convincingly portray many of the characteristics of autism also includes her incorporation in the text of Darryl's parents' anguished response to their son's disability. Nita picks up on snippets of conversation while making her way through Darryl's mind. The conflicting emotions of parents faced with an inconceivable foe tumble around her: "—tired of waiting...We have to keep doing what we're doing...maybe there's not going to *be* any more change...he's going to be this way forever...We have to have faith, honey...if we lose it, no one else's faith is going to help" (Duane 284-5). She presents the emotions succinctly and effectively without detracting from the action, providing a multi-leveled portrait of a very complex issue.

Duane's use of fantasy enables her to look at the disorder and examine possibilities that are quite impossible in the real world today. Visiting the inner

workings of the autistic mind is something to be imagined. As the medical and educational communities become more adept at developing therapies and strategies to deal with the restrictions imposed on those with autism due to their disorder, glimpses into their thoughts and feeling are becoming more prevalent. Mark Haddon's thought-provoking exploration of the inner workings of the mind of a person with Asperger's syndrome in his realistic novel, sends readers on a more fact-based journey than does Duane's work.

Haddon, an author and illustrator of children's books and television programs in Britain, who worked with autistic individuals early in his career, chooses to explore the world of autism through the eyes of a fifteen-year-old boy, Christopher John Francis Boone, who is afflicted with Asperger's syndrome. Telling Christopher's story from a first person point of view provides the reader with a glimpse into the possible inner workings of his mind. His behaviors and thought processes are conveyed through Christopher's own words as he recounts his experience in the pages of his book, a murder mystery in the vein of a Sherlock Holmes story. As he documents his personal experience, solving the mystery concerning the murder of the dog and discovering that his mother is actually alive, he draws on his strengths and obsessions to put the story on paper. Haddon incorporates many of the typical characteristics attributed to Christopher's disorder in structuring the narrative and conveying the story to the reader.

Asperger's syndrome differs from classic autism in that it does not affect the person's IQ or his or her speaking ability. Most people with Asperger's have normal

or above-normal intelligence. Their ability to express themselves is not constricted by their disability. They do, however, experience difficulty maintaining relationships because of their inability to pick up on social cues and their inability to acknowledge other's emotions. They interpret language literally and abstract thought is completely foreign. Many also experience sensory issues. Haddon portrays Christopher as typical person with Asperger's. He is bright, excelling in math and science. He has trouble understanding nuance, jokes, white lies, and innuendo and often exhibits little or inappropriate affect. His obsessive nature enables him to focus completely on the task at hand, in this case investigating the murder of the neighbor's dog, Wellington, a large poodle. The neighbor, Mrs. Shearer, initially accuses Christopher of killing the animal, and he takes it upon himself to solve the mystery. As his search for facts continues, he unwittingly uncovers evidence of other secrets which have a significant impact on his life.

Haddon introduces Christopher through the structure of the book, an appropriate method because structure holds Christopher's world in place. The chapters, numbered not chronologically but with prime numbers ranging from one to two hundred and thirty three, incorporate Christopher's love of prime numbers into the framework of his book. Chapter nineteen includes a complete description of the process used to determine whether a number is prime. He notes: "prime numbers are what is left when you have taken all the patterns away. I think [they] are like life" (Haddon 12). He goes on to devote chapters to the discussion of logical principles such as The Monty Hall Problem (Haddon 62-65), a detailed description of a mystery

that is not a mystery (100-102), an analytical description of God (164-5), and constellations (125-6). Illustrations often accompany the informative passages, allowing the information to appear in a more concrete context. Christopher's text is also accompanied by an appendix which addresses some of the math in greater detail.

Christopher attempts to fashion his book after the tales of Sherlock Holmes. His favorite novel, *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, serves as a model for his investigation. He identifies with the detached detective. Firth suggests in her assessment of Sherlock Holmes that the detective displays an oddness that "conveys clear powers of observation and deduction, unclouded by emotion" and is also "objective, incorruptible and...extremely literal"(24-5). The similarities between the famous detective and a person with Asperger's are clear. Christopher relates to the fictional detective because Holmes notices the obvious and "detach[es] his mind at will"(Haddon 73). He recognizes the similarities: "And this is like me, too, because if I get really interested in something, like practicing maths...I don't notice anything else...Father can be calling me...and I won't hear him" (Haddon 73). Although he enjoys the stories of Sherlock Holmes, Christopher finds Sir Arthur Conan Doyle objectionable, due to his belief in the supernatural. He goes on to explain his objections to Doyle's fascination with fantasy by stating Occam's razor: "No more things should be presumed to exist than are absolutely necessary" (Haddon 90). Only logic and concrete thought play a role in Christopher's method of deduction and in the structure of his narrative.

The sensory issues Haddon examines throughout Christopher's text are common to all forms of autism in varying degrees, not just Asperger's. The onslaught of external stimulation overwhelms him. His obsession with colors and order and the impact both have on his daily life begins to surface as he explains his method for determining good and bad days. The need to feel secure in his surroundings propels his compulsion to exert a form of control on the environment. Four red cars in a row on the way to school indicates a "Good Day," three red cars in a row "Quite A Good Day," five red cars a "Super Good Day," but four yellow cars make it a "Black Day" (Haddon 240). When Christopher thought his mother was in the hospital he made a card for her covered with red cars to indicate a "Super Super Good Day" (Haddon 17). Although his father later told him that his mother had died of a heart attack, Christopher's attempt to insure her recovery with his drawing was actually an attempt to keep things constant. Christopher is able to verbalize these imposed perimeters whereas those individuals who appear at other points along the autism spectrum can not.

Color affects the way Christopher experiences many things. He has an aversion to anything yellow or brown. He will not eat bananas, custard, or gravy and does not like "double yellow lines, yellow fever" or "dirt" (Haddon 84). He attempts to eliminate these distractions from his environment as a means of control or a way to insure his own safety. Other areas of stimulation that causes a great deal of anxiety are vision and touch. Christopher notes: "I see everything" (Haddon 140). He quite literally means everything. There is no detail that escapes, him and the input of so

much stimuli often overwhelms him. When describing a field where cows are grazing, Christopher lists thirty-one different things that he notices in a matter of minutes including nineteen cows, fifteen that are black and white and four that are brown and white. He also noticed that the distant village includes “32 visible houses and a church with a square tower not a spire” (Haddon 141). The list continues in some detail regarding thirty-two other details he feels worthy of notice. Another characteristic is aversion to being touched. Christopher explains this when his father picks him up at the police station:

He held up his right hand and spread his fingers out in a fan. I hold up my left hand and spread my fingers out in a fan and we made our fingers and thumbs touch each other. We do this because sometimes Father wants to give me a hug, but I do not like hugging people...it means that he loves me. (Haddon 16)

Christopher’s description of his attempt to reach his mother’s home in London after he discovers that she is alive provides a vivid portrait of the tumultuous emotional and physical upheaval that he endures because of sensory stimulation. The assault on his senses begins when he leaves his home. Realizing that he is leaving familiar surroundings is counter-balanced by the fear he feels about his father upon discovering his father has lied about his mother’s death and has killed Wellington. Fear engulfs him and remains constant throughout his journey (Haddon 136). He finds himself in a shopping area where the input is overwhelming: “I didn’t like all the people being near me and all the noise...it was too much information in my head and it made it hard to think... (Haddon139). The overload of information makes coherent thought virtually impossible. He attempts to order the chaos surrounding

him by assigning a form of structure. He computes math problems in his head and makes up timetables to maintain a form of control eventually hiding to calm himself and groaning to block out the noise

Haddon presents Christopher's parents to the reader through Christopher's literal observations. Life with Christopher or any autistic person is not easy. Communication and understanding rank among the top problem areas. The inability to change things or make the situation markedly better proves frustrating. The reader meets Christopher's father, Ed Boone, at the police station when Christopher notes his arrival: "I knew he was there because I could hear him. He was shouting." (Haddon 16). One assumes that life with Christopher and his father was too difficult to bear. Interestingly, Haddon chooses to have Christopher's mother leave while the most common scenario finds the father leaving the home. Ed Boone leads a difficult life as the care of his son lies solely on his shoulders. Ed tells Christopher that his mother died and continues the charade until Christopher discovers a box of letters his mother has sent to him. Betrayed by his caretaker and terrified by his father's confession of killing the neighbor's dog, he goes in search of the mother who left him. The dynamics between the parents and Christopher echo the complex emotional situation living with an affected person lends itself to. The grief expressed by Ed at Christopher's refusal to acknowledge him after the betrayal provides a glimpse into the fragile nature of a relationship with someone who finds any type of relationship difficult (Haddon 218). Christopher's relationship with his mother remains strong despite her two-year absence. Christopher acknowledges the concrete evidence, the

hidden letters and his father's lies, while ignoring the reason for his mother's departure, the other man and her difficulty in coping with her complicated home situation. His perspective of his parents's behavior is controlled by his inability to truly understand the emotional dilemma of caring for a person such as himself.

Haddon's use of realism as a means of conveying the state of mind of a young man with Asperger's syndrome provides the young adult reader with insight to a world of the unknown. The behaviors that appear odd to the casual observer might be better understood by those who have experienced Asperger's syndrome through Christopher's eyes. His difficulty with communication, sensory issues, and deciphering the emotional behavior of others become clearer to the reader through his concrete analysis and descriptions.

Duane and Haddon present two very different approaches to autism. Through fantasy Duane relates the problems associated with classic autism, but then resolves this difficult situation fancifully as Darryl decides to leave the disorder behind and embrace a "normal" life. Haddon's realistic approach presents a reasonably accurate representation of life with Asperger's. Both authors acknowledge the friends and families of the person with autism. They present the trials and tribulations associated with having a person like Darryl or Christopher in one's life with authenticity and feeling. The descriptions of characteristics associated with the disorder are accurate and detailed examples provide additional insight. The portrayal of autism in these texts provides excellent examples of young adult literature reaching out to the other in an attempt to bring those perceived as different into the mainstream.

CHAPTER 2

“IMAGINE ALL THE PEOPLE...”: GENRE AND AUTISM

Duane and Haddon present their portrayals of autism to their audiences through a combination of genres. Integrating young adult literature with characteristics of fantasy and realism respectively, they present unique representations of the autistic disorder. The genre employed by an author provides a framework for her or him to manipulate a story in a manner that conveys the intended message. Duane accesses the imagination and science of the future in her interpretation of the autistic mind, while Haddon relies on focused mimetic observations of behaviors associated with the disorder and the first person point-of-view to present his concept. Each interpretation provides accurate, insightful information concerning autism, allowing the reader to imagine the character as more than someone they do not understand. Using fantasy and realism, they approach the portrayal of the autistic mind from different perspectives. Both authors convey the experiences and ideas maintaining the function of young adult literature but they do so in different ways, therefore appealing to different audiences.

A genre or classification of a literary work consists of specific characteristics attributed to specific types of literature. Focusing of the context, form or technique, the work is assigned a category within the spectrum of acknowledged types (Murfin

146). This provides a method of organization from which to consider these texts. These designations cover a broad range of types from realism to fantasy, prose to poetry and are, at times, subjective as many texts do not fit firmly into one single category. There is much debate among literary scholars concerning the appropriate definition of genre. Brian Attebery asserts in his book *Strategies of Fantasy* that “genre may be approached as ‘fuzzy sets,’ meaning that they are defined not by boundaries but by a center” (12) and it is the “writer’s perception of the category that creates the member of the set itself” (13). For this discussion, genre will refer to the focus of the authors’ intended audience as the young-adult genre and, within that classification, fantasy and realism will be referred to as sub-genres.

Young adult literature, a genre in and of itself and intended for readers between the ages of ten and seventeen, addresses issues of interest to that particular age group. According to Peter Hollindale in his article “The Adolescent Novel of Ideas,” writers of this relatively new genre, which came into existence in the 1960s and 70s, focus on “taboo-breaking realism in the depiction of teenage social experience and conflict and by documentary explicitness in the presentation of emotional and sexual development” (84). Books such as S.E. Hinton’s *The Outsiders* (1967) acknowledged teenagers as viable consumers of popular fiction, making texts geared to that population worthy of specific attention. Farah Mendleson in the article “Is There Any Such Thing as Children’s Science Fiction?: A Position Piece” notes that young adult fiction presents a situation in which a child or young adult finds his or her place in society (293). The connection between reality and fiction

provides a format from which an author conveys his or her message. Fiction not only imitates the world around us, but it also imitates other fiction in its structure and style. This holds true for much young adult literature although older teens have been known to appreciate such titles as Kerouac's *On the Road* and its stream-of-consciousness style.

Young adult literature has an affinity with children's literature as it generally includes an instructive element. Children's literature was once a teaching implement written for that express purpose. Most authors no longer strive for that specific effect but the theme or universal truth of the text usually imparts a message of some kind. Much of children's literature has a didactic quality, teaching as it entertains. For example, Mary Pope Osborne's popular *Magic Tree House* series takes young readers on adventures to innumerable times and places. Young adult literature, while not overtly didactic, exposes readers to the unfamiliar and broadens their horizons or "grows the mind a size larger" (Hollindale 86). *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* includes an appendix in which Christopher conveys information about a math problem that he mentions in the text but realizes might not be understood by all readers. Christopher wants the reader to understand his math problem, just as Duane and Haddon are attempting to relate knowledge about autism.

Marketing plays a major role in the publication of a text for a specific audience. Duane, notes in an online interview that she addresses human issues everyone faces at some time, most specifically the question of right and wrong. It is a topic that appears not only in her young adult novels but also in her adult fiction:

“The young have no monopoly on innocence, no matter what their elders think. Kids want to know (just as much as adults do, or more) how the hard choices look when they approach, and how to deal with them” (Interview np) While *A Wizard Alone* was written expressly for a young adult audience, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* was actually written as adult fiction. Haddon asserts in a piece written for the *London Observer* and excerpted in *The Writer* that writing for adolescents and adults is really no different: “Writing for children is bloody difficult; books for children are as complex as their adult counterparts, and they should be accorded the same respect” (“Writing for Kids” np). Tim Wynne-Jones considers this phenomenon in the article “Tigers, Poodles and Birds, Oh My!” a review of *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* where he quotes Bill Thomas, editor in chief of Doubleday’s adult trade division: “I certainly do not think the book is inappropriate for younger readers, but it is an extremely intricate literary novel and only the most precocious of them would be able to read it on the level of the author’s intent” (271). Wynne-Jones believes that young adults will enjoy the novel even though they may not pick up on all of its intricacies, supporting Hollindale’s assertion that “more intelligence [should be attributed to]...young readers than previous generations would have expected” (Hollindale 88). Although Christopher never intends to be funny, his awkward interpretation and behavior gives the novel a somewhat humorous slant and provides an appealing quality that both young adult and adult readers enjoy.

Within young adult literature the most popular sub-genres appear to be fantasy and realism. According to the Barnes and Noble website, fantasy, including science

fiction, commands an overwhelming majority of bestsellers while realistic fiction comes in second followed closely by nonfiction accounts. The first two books of Christopher Paolini's *Inheritance Trilogy*, a high fantasy that partners an orphaned youth with a young dragon on a quest to save the Empire, currently top the list with Ann Brashares's *Sisterhood Series*, a realistic look at four childhood friends and the trials and tribulations of growing up, following not far behind. Duane's *Young Wizard Series* and Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* have maintained places of distinction, each winning awards for their achievements.

The literary sub-genre used by each author provides unique expressions of the autism syndrome disorder. Different genres provide a variety of methods in which to present these individuals. *A Wizard Alone* looks at the autistic mind of a wizard through the use of magic or fantasy. *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* presents, in a realist view, a perception of autism through the actions and voice of the individual. Most fantasy is related through the third-person perspective, the omniscient authority giving the story credibility. It is rare to find fantasy narrated in the first-person; the third person perspective offers an all inclusive narrative as opposed to a first-person perspective which limits the retelling to the knowledge of one individual. Duane's use of an omniscient narrator enhances the effect fantastic events have on the reader. The narrator provides an inclusive understanding of events as they take place. As the four wizards meet in the mirrored forest within Darryl's mind, Nita searches for her friend, understanding the danger surrounding the Kit, Ponch, and Darryl (Duane 280-1), Kit and Ponch wander through the reflective maze

having lost any comprehension of their mission (Duane 263), the Lone Power, focusing solely on Darryl, passes the other three without comprehension (Duane 286), and Darryl acknowledges their presence (Duane 265). A first-person account would have limited the reader's understanding of all that is truly occurring.

It is more common to find realistic fiction that is written in first person. Journal and memoirs provide a limited view of the world-at-large as the narrator's experiences and knowledge dictate his or her perspective. Christopher's first-person narrative reinforces the autistic singularity. His reaction to the letters from his mother that he finds in a box hidden in his father's closet restricts his father's response to the discovery. The "wall" that exists between Christopher and the rest of the world becomes completely impenetrable. Try as he might Christopher father cannot break through: "I could tell that he was in the room, but his voice sounded tiny and far away, like people's voices sometimes do when I am groaning and don't want them to be near me" (Haddon 113). Each text presents autism in a unique and different manner. Some readers will be drawn to the fantasy, others to the realism. The authors' insightful narratives provide a glimpse of a world that is difficult to imagine without direction.

Darryl's unique talents provide the impetus for Duane's story, and it only through the use of fantasy his world becomes accessible to the reader. Brian Attebery examines variances between fantasy as a mode, a formula, and a genre in *Strategies of Fantasy*. The mode of fantasy indicates the manner in which the story is told (Attebery 2), the fantastic formula adheres to a specific set of criteria in its structure

(9-10), and fantasy as a genre appears to be a combination in some fashion of the mode and formula (10). Fantasy, whether genre or mode, depends upon the willing suspension of disbelief not only on the reader's part but also, initially, on the part of the author. The creation of alternate realities or a Secondary World as defined by J.R.R. Tolkien in "On Fairy-Stories" determines the truth about that particular world. Duane created the world where Nita and Kit live as wizards in *So You Want to Be a Wizard* (1983) and expanded that world through each novel in the series. The fact that wizards truly exist in their world is known to very few people, but exist they do in a world much like our own but with a slightly different set of rules. Duane's creation of the world in Darryl's mind from the sands of the desert (Duane 69), through the vast darkness (Duane 210), to the mirrored forest (Duane 263) involves an entirely different set of rules.

Rebecca J. Lukens, in her book *A Critical Handbook of Children's Literature*, suggests that the genre of fantasy is made up of several sub-genres. These include "fantastic stories, stories realistic in most details but still requiring us to willingly suspend disbelief" (20), "high fantasy...characterized by its focus on the conflict between good and evil"(21), and science fiction which "stresses scientific laws and technological inventions"(22). Noting Lukens's definition, *A Wizard Alone* falls into her sub-genre of high fantasy just as all of the *Young Wizard Series* do, by pitting the good and righteous young wizards against the evil perpetrated by the Lone Power (21). Darryl's attempt to keep the Lone Power trapped within his mind to ensure the safety of the universe creates a personal struggle. His commitment to his quest

reinforces the true nature of the fantasy. Fantasy allows Duane to take liberties with the manner in which she addresses Darryl's autism, including the creation of another world inside of a human mind. The consistency of this Secondary World and Darryl's belief in his experiences within that world reinforces the high fantasy classification. The landscape of Darryl's mind mirrors physical aspects of reality but any other connection is nonexistent. Any relation to reality is through the reproduction of sights and sounds. The supposed void of autism appears as Kit and Ponch traipse through the desert sands Darryl replicates in his mind from a book he previously viewed with his teacher in his special-ed classroom about the seven wonders of the ancient world (Duane 68). Darryl uses the scene as a trap for the Lone Power but Kit and, most probably the reader, interprets it as a symbol for the autism. A relationship with the realistic world is maintained as Kit, Nita, and Darryl go to school and interact with those around them: Kit's parents, Mr. Millman, the school psychologist, and Darryl's parents. That reality also includes Darryl's disability. From Duane's comments on The Harcourt website, her use of autism as Darryl's disability seems arbitrary:

Autism is another story. As I conceive of it, wizardry is an equal-opportunity employer. Everybody, no matter how differently "abled" must to my mind have some unique quality or ability without which the universe wouldn't be the same. And what that quality might be isn't ours to judge. (Interview np)

Darryl's impact on the story would have been entirely different had he been blind or afflicted with cerebral palsy. Duane's decision to use an autistic wizard serves to inform her audience of the basic characteristics of autism, and then show

those characteristics in a positive manner by using them to solve a problem. Darryl's innate goodness combined with the powers bestowed upon him by the Powers That Be enable him to combat the evil of the Lone Power, adhering to the first tenet of high fantasy.

Duane's story also follows what Attebery calls the essential elements of fantasy when referred to as a genre. First and foremost is the impossibility of the content (14). The journeys into Darryl's mind by Kit, Nita, and the Lone Power certainly qualify as impossible feats. Secondly, the story conforms to the classic structure described by Vladimir Propp: "the round-trip journey to the marvelous, . . . testing of the hero, crossing of a threshold, supernatural assistance, confrontation, flight, and establishment of a new order at home" or the hero's journey (Attebery 15). Darryl withdraws into his mind and creates a world that Kit, Nita, and the Lone Power experience as well. Each character is tested as they venture into the world of Darryl's autism. The combined forces of the magic of the three young wizards thwart the Lone Power as he attempts to destroy Darryl. The four wizards return to their previous existence, but with the exception of the Lone Power, they each recover a part of themselves that had been lost. Nita begins to come to terms with her mother's death and move on (Duane 313). Kit returns to his family and friends (Duane 320). Finally, there is what Tolkien calls joy and Attebery calls "wonder" or making the impossible possible (Attebery 16). It is indeed wondrous that Darryl is able to leave his autism behind and return to a normal

existence: “Darryl McAllister looked at him, looked at him straight on... ‘Can I go home now?’” (Duane 308).

Often authors include elements of other genre within a given work to emphasize connections with reality outside the text. It is only through the introduction of what might be considered science fiction that Darryl’s recovery seems possible. The manipulation of Darryl’s kernel by first Nita (Duane 282) and then Darryl himself alludes to possible genetic manipulation of DNA in the future (Duane 306). Genetic studies have led to the consideration that gene therapy might one day be possible in the resolution to the puzzle of autism. Another generic crossover is that Duane’s Secondary World exists within the framework of a recognizable reality, one to which the reader easily relates. As well as the reference to genetic manipulation, Nita, Kit, and Darryl live in New York and attend neighborhood schools. They have parents, siblings, and friends with whom they interact with on a daily basis. Even Darryl’s autism is something that exists in our world with increasing regularity. Duane incorporates the various aspects of fantasy and science fiction to create an intriguing representation of the experience of autism.

The genre of realism is mimetic or the imitation of reality in literature (Murfin 170). Just as fantasy is related through traditional means or the fantastic formula, realistic fiction is based on the constraints of past storytellers (Attebery 9). Lukens’s definition of realism provides a structure

for the telling: “they are fictional narratives with characters who are involved in some kind of action that holds out interest [and] set in some possible place and time” (15). In children’s or young adult fiction, realism involves the personal exploration of issues that plague society as a whole. Even realistic fiction contains an element of fantasy as situations are concocted within the author’s imagination although based on actual occurrences. Realism forces Haddon to adhere to the constraints of actual life experiences or the possible, if not the probable (Lukens 14). Christopher’s first-person accounting of the details of his adventure establishes the true nature of his disability and the difficulties he encounters. Haddon’s accurate reproduction of Christopher’s speech patterns and behavior provide the basis for placement of the novel within this particular sub-genre. Haddon convincingly generates the analytical, obsessive behavior of his protagonist. Tim Wynne- Jones notes that “[Christopher] is at once real and fresh, entirely believable and, at the same time, not like anyone we know” (271). Haddon’s interpretation of an autistic response to the situations that Christopher finds himself in communicates the advantages and disadvantages of the disorder in a very realistic manner.

Just as Darryl commits to a specific quest, Christopher finds himself embarking on a hero’s journey of his own. Christopher’s investigation of Wellington’s death and his impromptu trip to London seem to be reasonable actions for someone faced with a number of unanswered questions.

Christopher's interactions with his teachers, his parents, and the strangers that he encounters on his journey are true representations of the communication issues and misunderstandings that occur between those with Asperger's and the rest of the world. Christopher's teacher, Siobhan, appears to understand him better than anyone else. Trained in the techniques of working with people with communication difficulties, she interacts with him on a level that is both appropriate and conducive to understanding on both of their parts. Christopher has difficulty understanding the subtleties of facial expression, and Siobhan patiently explains the different meanings of a raised eye brow: "It can mean 'I want to do sex with you' and it can also mean 'I think that what you just said was very stupid'" (Haddon 15). She acknowledges the things that bother him and has realistic expectations of his abilities and behaviors. She supports his writing offering ideas and helping him with the more technical aspects of his project: "she said people wouldn't want to read the answers to a maths question in a book...she said I could put the answer in an *Appendix*...[a]nd that is what I have done" (Haddon 4, 214). She also suggests useful strategies and provides support as he learns to deal with the world and his abilities. Christopher shows little empathy for other students in his classroom; Siobhan reminds him not to verbalize his opinions to their parents (Haddon 6).

Christopher's parents communicate with him but on a limited basis. They have developed a means of communication that acknowledges many of his behaviors such as the way his parents express affection for him with the touching of hands

rather than hugging (Haddon 16). Haddon replicates the difficult nature of communication with an autistic person as Christopher's father and then his mother attempt to make him understand their actions. Christopher tunes out his father's explanation after learning of the deception: "I didn't scream...I didn't fight...I didn't hit him" (Haddon 115). He experiences intense feelings of fear as he anticipates that his father might actually harm him (Haddon 122). After arriving at his mother's home in London, Christopher refuses to allow her to hold his hand (Haddon 194). It is only natural that she should want to comfort the child she has not seen in two years, but Christopher's aversion to touch prohibits it. Unfortunately, frustration with Christopher's disability and their own self-involvement make true communication between Christopher and his parents elusive.

Christopher's participation in the community appears limited, a situation not uncommon for those with autism. His interactions with the strangers on the street and at the train station are strained, and there is no suggestion of understanding. His encounter with the man with the diamond patterns on his socks leaves Christopher feeling threatened and the man wondering why he got involved in the first place (Haddon 182-4). His interactions with others on his journey to London are humorous. He makes his way to the train station after receiving directions from a preoccupied woman walking along the street with her two children. She tells him to "Follow that bus" and he runs after it, all the while attempting to keep Toby, his pet rat, from falling out of his pocket (Haddon 138). After being discovered on the train by a policeman whose intention is to return him to his father, Christopher runs and

screams and, finally, eludes him by hiding on a shelf behind some luggage (Haddon 259, 163). Haddon's descriptions of Christopher's exploits provide the reader with an interesting insight into the workings of his mind. Christopher's journey is indeed possible for many of those affected by Asperger's syndrome but not necessarily probable. It is Christopher's specific obsession that drives him on his quest.

All fiction is the work of someone's imagination. Duane and Haddon draw upon their knowledge of the autistic spectrum disorder as a means of creating unusual characters. Using the sub-genres of fantasy and realism, they provide the young adult audience with accurate portrayals of many of the characteristics of autism. Duane's depiction of Darryl's autism is authentic enough, although the outcome is unrealistic by today's standards. Haddon's Christopher exhibits the Asperger's personality to great effect. Through the structures of the genres chosen by the authors in presenting their representations of the autistic characters, their protagonists' reasons for existing become apparent. While the genre incorporated by an author draws the audience through its classification, the statements that the texts make about the subject of the work, or the themes, convey the true significance of the work.

CHAPTER 3

“TO EVERYTHING THERE IS A...PURPOSE”: THEMES AND AUTISM

Young adult literature addresses situations encountered by adolescents as they move toward adulthood. Peter Hollindale mores in his article “The Adolescent Novel of Ideas” that the most common assumptions pertaining to literature for those making their way through the uncertainty of adolescence are that:

...it addresses a multitude of themes from the everyday-realistic to the abstract, theoretical, and conjectural, or uses a range of modes from parochial and naturalism to cosmic fantasy, or enlists narrative procedure from simple linear story to complex multi-voiced, multitemporal, intertextual, strategies...(84)

The themes common to literature for adolescents focus on issues encountered as new andmore complex situations present themselves. Questions of life, death, social injustice, and emotional conflicts, among an array of others, surface in texts marketed to the preadult reader, to use Hollindale’s preferred term. A once marginalized sector of the reading population, the adolescent reader now has growing access to texts that address, among other things, ignored populations such as those with autism.

According to Christopher Rosa, a member of the Muscular Dystrophy

Association's Board of Directors, "There are two ways you can marginalize people with disabilities...One way is to exclude and stigmatize them. The other is to set them apart by putting them on a pedestal and establishing them as paragons of virtue, tenacity and courage. Both of these approaches end up distancing people with disabilities from others" (Medvescek 18). Literature that includes disabled characters often tends to reinforce the marginalization of those individuals by viewing them stereotypically. Maeleah Carlisle notes ten such stereotypes in her article "Portrayal of People with Disabilities in Children's Literature: 1940s to 1980s." These include being viewed as "pitiable and pathetic...objects of violence...sinister or evil...atmospher[ic]... Super Crip...laughable...his/her own worst-and only-enemy...a burden...nonsexual [and] incapable of fully participating in everyday life"(np). Disabilities are foreign to most of the populace, and so a literary introduction to any number of disabilities may leave the reader either romanticizing or demonizing a disabled character. As the occurrence of these characters increases in the literary realm, the question of stereotypes becomes increasingly important.

Literature has the potential to reinforce or undermine stereotypes. Ideally, presenting autistic characters as more complex individuals should begin to alleviate the preexisting stereotypes. However, much of the literature written including disabled characters revolves around them, not through them. A good example is *What's Eating Gilbert Grape?*, the 1993 film based on Peter Hedges's novel of the same name. The mentally handicapped Arnie is an important character, but his older brother Gilbert is the real focus. Gilbert is not only Arnie's primary caregiver but the

sole support for their dysfunctional family. Arnie plays a primary role in Gilbert's eventual acceptance of his life, but Gilbert is the one who develops and changes while Arnie remains one dimensional. As a rule, much young adult literature also maintains this attitude when considering the disabled. In contrast, Duane's Darryl and Haddon's Christopher develop multidimensionally as their stories unfold. Their reactions to their situations and the actions that each take to resolve the issues with which they are dealing show them as people.

Important to such round characterization in literature are the themes running like threads through a tapestry signifying the essence of a text. The author's ability to convey the central idea of his or her tale effectively and cohesively insures the effectiveness of the story. Most texts are not written with a didactic intent but the truth that emerges as a story unfolds remains with the reader. Often subjects addressed in texts written specifically for a preadult audience present different perspectives about a situation with which they might feel a connection. The ability to experience different situations through the words on a page goes a long way to expanding the horizons of the teenaged reader.

The themes prevalent in *A Wizard Alone* and *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* state and reinforce the focus of the texts as the situations and actions of the characters question long held stereotypes. Duane uses Darryl's autism as a seemingly insurmountable obstacle within the world of wizards, mimicking accepted concepts about those with autism in society today. In Haddon's text, Christopher's autism hinders his every action, including the construction of his

journal/novel. Each conflict is resolved as the affected characters overcome their autism to some degree. The predominant thematic focus within both texts is a person's useful place in society or their utility. While each character's usefulness remains the central theme counteracting the stereotype of uselessness, secondary themes bolster and reinforce the main idea. Mortality and reflection emerge as important influences on each characters's actions, as both respond in a method appropriate to their situation.

Contributions to society in everyday life insure a person's recognition and acceptance. It is often assumed that those who are not able to contribute in obvious ways serve no beneficial purpose and are, therefore, a burden to others. Those with autism invariably fall into this group. Many people with autism are so self-involved that their participation in our world is unimaginable; others reach out for contact but their idiosyncratic behavior deters those who lack understanding of the disorder. In reality each person with autism has his or her own areas of interest and sometimes exhibit extraordinary aptitude in these areas. Their exceptional skills are often difficult to determine and sometimes harder to direct but when discovered and developed appropriately can provide avenues to insure a purposeful existence. Margaret Higonnet in her article "Civility, Child Citizens, and Uncivil Antics" suggests that "equality [appears] to be immediately paired with that of social utility" (126). A balance is maintained when each individual acquires a skill that makes them a productive member of society. It is commonly thought that those with autism, particularly those experiencing the more severe forms of the disorder, offer no benefit

to society. Traditionally, in literature, characters with disabilities are marginalized, functioning as flat characters who instigate change in others, experiencing no significant change themselves, but Claudia Mills asserts that finding examples in which the disabled characters have equal value with the non-disabled is becoming more common in children's literature (538). Duane and Haddon each convey the usefulness of their autistic characters in ways that bring about positive impressions of the impaired individuals, negating the stereotype of uselessness, as they emerge as principal players within the text of each book.

The common perception of the helplessness of those with disabilities is questioned as Duane initially establishes Darryl's usefulness by introducing him as a wizard and then presenting the issue of his autism. This method of presentation places the focus on Darryl and his potential as a wizard and not on his disability. The opportunity to take the Wizard's Oath, the first step in becoming a full-fledged wizard, is only offered to those deemed qualified to shoulder the responsibility that accompanies that honor. Taking the Wizard's Oath enables an entity to be in a position to help insure the survival of the Universe. The introductory chapters of the *Wizard's Manual* as outlined in the first book in Duane's series, *So You Want to Be a Wizard* (1996), indicate that "[a] wizard's business is to conserve energy—to keep it from being wasted"(15). Darryl's purpose beyond that is not immediately apparent but emerges as the story develops and he influences the other characters. Just as Nita and Kit were tapped to help fulfill the objectives of the Powers That Be, Darryl is approached to serve a specific purpose. Because of his autism rather than in spite of

it, Darryl appears better equipped to accomplish the task or ordeal set before him. As the Senior Wizard Tom notes: “If he’s been offered wizardry, that means that there’s some problem to which *he* is the solution” (*Wizard Alone* 46). Each potential wizard’s ordeal involves using his or her specific abilities in fending off the destructive activities of the Lone Power. Kit and Nita’s ordeal in *So You Want to Be a Wizard* was completed by combining their talents: Kit’s ability to communicate with machinery and Nita’s communication with nature, to overcome a particularly devastating attack directed by the Lone Power. Nita’s sister, Dairine, was called to duty during an attack which involved computer information systems, her specialty. In an effort to stop the Lone Power from inflicting harm on the universe, Darryl uses his autism to confound and trap him, as Nita tells him: “he’s been keeping you stuck in here with him on purpose! He’s been getting better and better at it all the time, and you never even suspected, because you thought you were in control. But this is his master work...you’re still sealed in here until he lets you go” (Duane 293).

While denying the stereotype of uselessness, Duane’s characterization of Darryl instead falls into the beatification syndrome where special skills are attributed to those who exist outside the normal range. As the ultimate goal of the young wizards is to insure the continued existence of the universe, Darryl plays an important part. However, just being a wizard is not enough for Darryl in Duane’s text; she enhances Darryl’s worth by endowing him with the attributes of an *abdal* or Pillar within the world of wizards: “The sobriquet ‘Pillars’ refers to the immense supportive strength inherent in these creatures wherever they appear” (Duane 201).

According to the classifications section on the Orders of Being in the Wizard's Manual, an abdal's or Pillar's "status comes from direct endowment by the One; their power is derived strictly from the incorrupt nature of their personality...[they] channel the One's power without obstruction into the strengthening of the world" (Duane 201-2). Darryl's autistic characteristics put him in the position to assume the powers bestowed upon him and allow him to deal with the Lone Power. His inclination to focus obsessively on the task at hand, not allowing anything to deter him, allows him to construct an inner world in which to trap the Lone Power. Because Darryl's purity and innocence enables him to accomplish the ultimate task, Duane's beatification of the autistic character within the context of the story is essential (202), but Duane's use of beatification does little to negate the stereotype of uselessness as it asserts the need to make up for his disability in his superior status.

Just as Darryl learns to manipulate his ability to contain the Lone Power, Mark Haddon's Christopher Boone in *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night Time* discovers the answers to secrets that have a major impact on his life. Haddon shows that Christopher's inherent talents are useful. Christopher depends on his autistic characteristics, his obsessions and his intense focus, to determine who murdered his neighbor's dog, to discover the whereabouts of his mother after learning that she is alive and, ultimately, to create a literary text. He emerges as the only productive character in the story. His determination moves the plot forward; his focus decides the process of discovery although the discovery is often unpleasant for him. He touches all of the other lives with which he comes in contact and makes an

impression. He sorts through the emotional maze of his parent's divorce and the after effects. The killing of the dog, Wellington, a direct result of the problems between Christopher's parents, sets the stage for Christopher's quest, to discover the dog's killer. Haddon acknowledges the stereotype of uselessness through Christopher's behavior but then counters that assertion with the same behaviors. Christopher's obsessive intention to find Toby, his pet rat, when he escapes in the train station almost costs Christopher his life (Haddon 182). The same obsessive intent allows him to make the trip to London to find his mother.

Christopher's text begins as he discovers the dead dog "lying on the grass in the middle of the lawn in front of Mrs. Shears's house"(Haddon 1). It is immediately obvious that the narrator has a different perspective of the situation than the casual observer. His attention to specific detail becomes apparent in the first sentence: "It was 7 minutes after midnight" (Haddon 1). This attention to detail continues throughout the recounting of his journey and, at times, becomes a considerable hindrance. The need to see specific colored cars on his way to school determines the quality of the day: "4 red cars in a row made it a **Good Day**, and 5 red cars in a row make it a **Quite Good Day**, and...4 yellow cars in a row make it a **Black Day**, which is a day when I don't speak to anyone" (Haddon 24). Christopher prefers to anticipate the logical order of the activities in which he participates and those that occur around him. He says that it makes him feel safe (Haddon 25). Disorder and unpredictability inhibit his ability to function, thereby affecting his usefulness. Christopher also has difficulty comprehending abstract thought. A teacher at his

school attempts to comfort him after learning of his mother's death by telling him that she has gone to heaven. Christopher scoffs at her belief in something that does not exist, but he understands the concrete aspects of death for which he provides a very analytical explanation: "your brain stops working and your body rots...and bur[y it] in the earth...and all [the] molecules were broken down into other molecules and they went into the earth and were eaten by worms and went in the plants" (Haddon 32-3). Logic is reality, supposition remains highly suspect.

Christopher's focused, analytical, concrete way of thinking enables him to succeed as he pursues his quest. The behaviors that make his utility questionable actually make him more qualified to pursue the answers to his questions. After initiating the search for Wellington's killer, Christopher draws a map of his neighborhood and, having set upon a manner of questioning that he draws from the stories of Sherlock Holmes he favors, he canvases possible witnesses. He methodically works his way up and down the street asking pertinent questions and, ultimately, decides on a "**Prime Suspect**" (Haddon 42). Christopher uses these same attributes as he makes his way to London and locates his mother's house. Logically plotting his every move, his obsessive focus and determination help him overcome the challenges that he faces from the overwhelming sensory stimulation he encounters on his train trip. The onslaught of audio and visual input coupled with physical awkwardness could have easily hindered his progress but at times the obsessive characteristics of the disorder prove to be beneficial. Haddon's straightforward approach to Christopher's abilities throughout the text counters any notion of

helplessness. Haddon and Duane each present their autistic characters's positive contributions to society and in doing so negate the stereotype of uselessness. Darryll saves the universe from entropy; trapping the Lone Power within the world of autism. Christopher solves the mysteries that surround him; he discovers who killed Wellington and he finds his mother (Haddon 221). In doing so, Darryll and Christopher save themselves.

The issue of mortality often stems from discussions of utility. It seems that death permeates most fiction involving autistic characters. Although not usually the primary focus, the death of someone close to the autistic character often starts the action or conflict of these stories. This is true not only in young adult fiction but also of popular adult fiction and movies. *Rain Man* (1988), one of the better known cinematic explorations of autism, features the complications that arise after the death of a care-taking parent. *Being There* (1979), with Peter Sellers as Chauncey Gardner, and the children's fantasy film, *The Boy Who Could Fly* (1986) both deal with an autistic character losing a parent or caregiver, as does Bill Branon's book *Timesong* (1998). Dean R. Koontz, William Bernhardt, and Carol O'Connell, writers of popular adult suspense fiction, employ the savant skills of their autistic characters to solve situations involving murder and mayhem. Still others combine the element of the death of the care-giver with the inherent skills exhibited by the autistic person as in the film *Mercury Rising* (1998), based on the book *Simple Simon* (1996). The use of autistic characters suggests the possibility of greater acceptance of the disorder or, more probably, the greater incidence of those individuals in the general population.

The inclusion of aspects of death, however, casts suspicion over the intent of the material.

The prominent juxtaposition of autism and death in so many representations prompts the consideration of the role of death in situations where an individual does not measure up to society's standards. This juxtaposition occurs in literature, as well as in comments made by those unfamiliar with disabled individuals. The recent movie, *The United States of Leland* (2004), examines the aftermath of the murder of an autistic child, Ray, at the hands of a teenager who feels sorry for the child's inability to relate to others. Boycotted by parents and friends of people with autism due to the portrayal of the uselessness of the autistic child's life, the film directs the sympathies of the viewer toward the killer and the lesson he learns rather than to the tragedy of Ray's death. The death is used as the impetus for Leland's evolution from killer to mentor as he inspires those around him. Commenting on the film, Cal Montgomery, a disabled writer who conveys her message through the use of a communication board, asserts that in adhering to common stereotypes, the director, Matthew Ryan Hogue, takes the easy way out. His focus on the perpetrator of the crime without any consideration for the worth of the victim relieves him of the responsibility of honesty in Ray's representation. Ray appears as a void, a stereotype that which even his mother buys into when she states "He was barely there" (Montgomery np). Is death truly the answer to the perceived societal notion of the uselessness of autistic individuals? Interestingly, Haddon never broaches the subject

and Duane apparently rejects this notion as Darryl's continued existence remains crucial to the plot. Death is, however, a presence throughout each text.

The threat of death seems incomprehensible to those with autism. Just as Christopher envisions only the physical aftereffects of death, Darryll sees it only as a means to defeat the Lone Power. As Duane reveals Darryll's intention in trapping the Lone Power, the adversity that he faces becomes obvious. The Lone Power is intent on destroying him not because Darryll is useless but because he poses a real threat to the entropy promoted by his foe: "What were you thinking? That I'd be merciful...that I'd let you off easy because of your 'problem'? You should know better" (Duane 168). Darryll sees no option other than to stay imprisoned with the Lone Power until encouraged by Kit and Nita to: "Come on out and give It a run for Its money!" (303). His demise is not necessary nor is his disability. Duane appears, however, to be sending a mixed message when she allows Darryll to walk away from his disability or his universe as easily as one would awaken from a light sleep. And, in a sense, Duane kills the autistic character:

Darryll McAllister looked at him, looked at him straight on.
The teacher went over to the boy, "Hey there, Darryll." he said,
"What's up?"
"I don't think," Darryll said, in a voice that cracked and
creaked with not having been used for words for a long time, "I don't
think I need to be here anymore."
The teacher's mouth dropped open.
"Can I go home now?" Darryll said, and smiled. (308)

It is interesting to note that earlier in the text Darryll sees a distinct disconnect between himself and the autism, and he notes that the autism is not a part of necessary part of himself (Duane 304-6). However, Darryll's autism

proves a useful attribute in his quest to contain the Lone Power; Darryl faces death himself because he is useful, not useless, negating the stereotype.

Haddon does not place Christopher in danger of losing his life, but the death or supposed deaths of other characters motivate his actions. The death of the dog provides the initial impetus for Christopher's journey: "I decided that I was going to find out who killed Wellington even though Father had told me to stay out of other people's business" (Haddon 28). The discovery of his father's lie concerning his mother's death as well as his father's admission of killing Wellington leads to the death of their relationship: "I had to get out of the house...I couldn't trust him, even though he had said 'Trust me,' because he had told a lie about a big thing" (Haddon 122). Unlike Darryl, who emerges from his autism as a normal child, Christopher retains his autistic behaviors after his journey but realizes his ability to overcome those behaviors when necessary.

Mortality takes on an additional role as the characters in these two novels deal with the deaths of others close to them. The death of Nita's mother in an earlier book, *The Wizard's Dilemma*, and the death of the dog and the fabricated death of Christopher's mother allows the authors a fair amount of leeway in the use of death in their texts. The effect of death on the characters in Duane's work causes the mimicking of autistic behaviors and in Haddon's inspires the ability to curtail some of those inclinations. Duane uses death as the impetus behind Nita's behavior as she deals with her feelings of loss. She finds it difficult to function and withdraws from those around her: "We've both been holding the world at arms length...trying to get it

to leave us alone...And making ourselves more alone as we do it" (Duane 197). The numbness she feels seems to increase with time just as Darryl's must have as he loses his connection with the world around him: "She felt as if there was some kind of thick skin between her and the world, muffling...She perceived that separation as something unnatural...and still didn't care if the remoteness never got better—the times she was content to just sit and stare out at the world" (Duane 95). Nita's experiences bring attention to the parallel between her behavior and Darryl's. Just as she performs normally on a physical level, Darryl's physical body occupies space in a special education classroom, but as Ponch, Kit's dog, points out "*Some of him* [is right in front of us]. *Not all*" (Duane 45). They have both withdrawn into themselves, maintaining a very tenuous connection with those around them.

Death appears to have the opposite affect on Christopher, causing him to emerge rather than withdraw. The deaths he encounters motivate him to control some of his behaviors in an attempt to resolve the questions in his mind. Wellington's death as well as the fear that his father might kill him sets him on the course, and his discovery that his mother is alive propels him further on his journey (Haddon 122). The behaviors that hinder his everyday functioning initially limit his options in discovering the truth. He realizes that to solve the problem he must take matters into his own hands and in doing so he begins to understand that he has more control over his situation than he had ever imagined: "And I thought, 'I can do this,' because I was doing really well and I was in London and I would find my mother" (Haddon 172). Each introduction of death initiates change of some kind in the affected characters.

Nita and Christopher each begin to come to grips with their situations and move on. As a result, death in these texts proves to be a catalyst for useful existence, not one doomed to uselessness.

In her discussion of stereotypes, Carlisle asserts that “literature often reflects the current society’s values and attitudes” (np). The connection a reader feels with the text revolves around their ability to relate to the characters in some manner. Readers see themselves in the behaviors, feelings, or situations that the characters experience. Duane and Haddon each use mirrors and reflection as a motif that connects to the theme of usefulness, reinforcing it as an examination of the fracture between “abled” and disabled individuals. As the personalities of Darryl and Christopher are revealed, similarities between “us and them” become recognizable and the stereotypical behavior is questioned.

Duane uses mirrors to express a number of elements common to autism and the effect it has on those around them. Metaphorically, these mirrors represent the avoidance of direct confrontation with the world. Symbolically, she uses them as she describes the world Darryl has created within his mind to confuse and trap the Lone Power. The mirrors, just as those in a fun house, project deceptive reflections of space: “shapes slide and hide in the mirrors, images chasing images but never meeting, never touching, fleeing one another as soon as any got close enough to make contact” (Duane 263-4). Avenues of escape and shadows providing cover ebb and flow into each other, never indicating where they begin or end. The forest of mirrors that Darryl constructs in his mind reflects the elusiveness of autism: “the glittering

wasteland...images chasing images but never meeting, never touching, fleeing one another as soon as any got close enough to make contact”(Duane 264). The difficulty in making connections is obvious when the characters stumble past each other as they search for Darryl. Nita appears to be the only one who is aware of the others when she enters the forest to find Kit (Duane 285). It is interesting to note that she is much more aware within Darryl’s mind than she has been in real situations after her mother’s death. She laments the fact that she “had not been paying attention to what was going on around me,” before opening her mind to listen “in that great dark space inside Darryl” (Duane 280-1). Then Kit and Ponch stumble about not entirely certain of their purpose (Duane 263). The Power is focused on Daryll to the exclusion of all others. He intermittently catches his own reflection in one of the half mirrors when his overwhelming ego surfaces and overtakes his obsession with Daryll: “It looked at Itself in a mirror as It passed, and smiled faintly” (Duane 288). Daryll’s trap serves its purpose; once inside the world of autism, there seems to be no escape according to the tenets of reality. The Lone Power as well as Kit, Ponch, and Nita are imprisoned just as Daryll purports to be, although his imprisonment appears to be self-inflicted as he is able to walk away from it in the end. Nita’s response to her mother’s death and Kit’s submersion in Daryll’s world cause them to imitate or reproduce some of the stereotypical behaviors common to autism. Mirroring these behaviors creates an undeniable bond between the three wizards. Only by breaking the mirrors, can they be released. The confines of Darryl’s autism shatter along with the mirrors allowing each character to move on once again proving his usefulness:

“[Nita] had been locked up in her grief as surely as Darryl had been locked up in the otherworlds of his own making. It had taken a major blow to jar her loose, and Darryl had gone through something similar” (Duane 313).

Haddon’s use of reflection is more noticeable by the lack thereof; there are no reflections of any sort. Even when Christopher is taken to the bathroom to bathe or clean himself up, he does not glance in the mirror. Nor is there any indication that he acknowledges any reflections as he walks past shop windows. Reflection does, however, occur in reactions to Christopher through the words and actions of those he encounters throughout his quest, although he is not aware of such reflection. His behavior often elicits negative feedback from those around him as the ability to see anything of themselves in him eludes them. Others may be uncomfortable seeing any of their own traits displayed in someone considered to be deficient. Neighbors shy away from his investigation. Mrs. Shears, Wellington’s owner, threatens to call the police if he does not leave her yard (Haddon 32). People who attempt conversation with him during his journey to London back away as though facing something other than a fifteen-year-old boy. A woman attempting to help Christopher after he is almost run over by a train walks away after he seemingly threatens her with his Swiss Army knife (Haddon 184). His odd behaviors intimidate and alarm those he encounters.

In addition, Christopher’s book is actually a reflection or image of the truth as he sees it: “I don’t like proper novels, because they are lies about things which didn’t happen and they make me shaky and scared....This is why everything I have written

here is true” (Haddon 20). He notes “I see everything”(Haddon140), although he blocks out what he does not want to see or any excess stimulation that bombards him as he maneuvers the streets of Swindon and, later, London. His photographic memory is evident as he describes cows in a field. Everything Christopher encounters is related in minute detail. A mirror image of each person he meets, each situation he encounters, finds its way onto the pages of his book. The reader views Christopher’s experiences through the lens of the Asperger mind, every detail stressed but lacking any true emotional connection: “Mother was cremated. This means that she was put into a coffin and burned and ground up and turned into ash and smoke...sometimes I look up into the sky and I think that there are molecules of Mother up there”(Haddon 34). Christopher describes himself and how his mind works as he paints a vivid picture in the reader’s mind. He also creates a concrete image of himself for himself, a reflection that is not always obvious in a mirror.

The mirrors and reflection used by Duane and Haddon further erode the stereotype of uselessness. Darryl’s use of the mirrors provides a useful prison in which to trap the Lone Power, using the egotistical nature of the Lone Power to control his actions. Christopher’s success depends upon the reactions of the people he encounters on his journey. His bizarre behaviors such as “counting and groaning” (Haddon 161), hiding on the train (Haddon 163), sitting with his eyes closed on a bench in the train station (Haddon 176), and screaming at anyone who touches him (Haddon 183) cause strangers to avoid contact with him. Their unwillingness to interact with him in a more committed manner as he makes his way to London makes

his success possible. Their interference would have inhibited his actions and his success uncertain. Each character uses their autistic tendencies to the ultimate advantage.

The predominant themes in these two texts offer differing perspectives of some more common stereotypes attributed to those with disabilities. At times it appears that these stereotypes are so strongly held that even concerted efforts to allay their hold on society are ineffective. Duane and Haddon each offer different perspectives on the accuracy of several stereotypes, most particularly that of uselessness although “pitiable and pathetic,” “a burden,” or “laughable” might also be included. Carlisle notes that the stereotype of being one’s “own worst enemy” appears to be the most predominant throughout children’s literature into the 1980s (np). Duane and Haddon’s texts counter that ideology as Christopher conveys the impression of being his own liability at times but in the end he proves actually to be his own best champion. Darryl, to a lesser degree, also contradicts that perception with his abdal status and his ability to cure his autism. Each theme discussed bolsters connections between abled and disabled people and reinforces the idea that the gap is, indeed, closing. Duane and Haddon’s approaches enable the young adult reader to connect with the characters. Darryl and Christopher as young adults fend off the stereotype of uselessness while alleviating some of the mystique of autism.

The autistic characters, Darryl and Christopher, come to life through each author’s choice of genre and theme. The success of this endeavor depends upon the author’s ability to portray the situation with authenticity and ingenuity. Genre

classification leads those with particular interests to specific texts. Literature as a whole transforms reality through its themes. The genre of young adult literature allows the author to examine a subject, such as autism, on a basic level and convey that information to an audience of readers discovering new facets of life at every turn. Duane and Haddon prove that even a disorder as misunderstood as autism can be a source for interesting, intelligent fiction.

CONCLUSION

Young adult literature continues to embrace and expound upon issues that do, indeed, “grow the mind a size larger.” Diane Duane’s and Mark Haddon’s portrayals of their autistic characters provide insightful accounts of what it might be like to be autistic. Each text is a worthy addition to the canon of young adult literature. They provide palatable information in an entertaining and intriguing fashion for those interested in finding out more about how the autistic mind works. Scientific and medical documents provide factual information but fiction introduces that personal touch, a connection with the characters that instills a sense of empathy or compassion for those who are different. I invite the curious to take advantage of these works as a means of gaining a greater understanding and acceptance of the other.

The genre of young adult literature offers a wide range of approaches to subjects that are just being considered by young readers. Different sub-genres, such as fantasy and realism, appeal to various audiences as Darryl and Christopher experience worlds where sights, sounds, and personal relationships create stressful situations. Each character embodies the issues specific to his form of autism authentically and coherently. These texts attempt to dispel any notion of uselessness in regard to the autistic characters. Darryl’s worth is measured in his ability to thwart the Lone Power although it is also evident that his worth extends to being a child to

his loving parents. Christopher's usefulness becomes evident as he overcomes many of his behaviors to discover the truth. The usefulness of a person's life can not always be measured by what is visible to the eye. Everyone has value whether it is their ability to provide a service to others or to be cared for and loved. This theme of utility, connected with those of mortality and reflection, allows readers to connect with the autistic characters on familiar ground, as these are issues that everyone faces.

While they make strong statements about many of the issues concerning people with autism, there are noticeable weaknesses in the two novels. Relationships between the autistic characters and those around them: teachers, parents, and their peers in their special education settings, are addressed in varying degrees. It is unfortunate that relationships with normal peers do not exist within these pages. Darryl's relationship with Nita and Kit is just beginning and Christopher does not appear to interact with anyone under the age of about twenty. Siblings, the family members who in reality deal with an autistic brother or sister on a continuous basis and often in a caretaking role, do not figure into these story lines either. Regardless of the gaps, the hope is that the texts will forge connections between the normal adolescent and the literary one with autism, connections which, however tenuous, might lead to a greater understanding and, then, acceptance by the reader.

I am always searching for innovative ways to pass along information about autism spectrum disorders. I was heartened to discover these works among the books that I read to my son. Anything that increases the understanding of such a misunderstood disability is a welcome addition to the list of books that I recommend

to students, teachers, and parents of children with autism. The volume of literature with disabled characters appears to be increasing, and as it does, so should the attention to accuracy in these presentations. The books and movies mentioned previously provide fairly accurate portrayals of autistic characters that exist on the fringes of society. I considered using Brannon's *Timesong* and Gerstein's *Victor* as I examined the portrayal of autism in young adult literature. *Timesong*, the story of a young autistic boy who develops a relationship with a coyote after the death of his father, focuses on religious inspiration rather than the accurate portrayal of the autistic character. *Victor*, a fictional interpretation of the life of the Wild Boy of Aveyron, examines his situation without alluding to the fact that he might have been autistic. The characters of Raymond in *Rain Man* and Artie in *What's Eating Gilbert Grape* exhibit the most basic characteristics of individuals once relegated to lives within the confines of an institution in order "to [be] eliminate[d] from the social order as a figure which did not find its place within it" (Foucault 115). Much has changed and those individuals now live among us. The made-for-TV movies, *Family Pictures* (1993), based on Sue Miller's novel about a family dealing with an autistic child, and *David's Mother* (1994), the story of the mother of an autistic teenager attempting to reclaim her own identity, focus on the consequences of having an autistic family member rather than on the autistic character. Duane and Haddon counter these representations by offering readers compellingly accurate portrayals of autistic people.

While the actual depiction of what it is like to be autistic may never appear in fiction due to the constraints of the disorder, these books, written by authors who have experienced the disorder from a distance, provide a basis for others attempting to unravel the mysteries of autism for the casual observer. Richard Peck in his book about teaching and writing for young adults, *Invitations to the World*, asserts that: “a novel is a question, not an answer” (69). Duane and Haddon broach the question of autism, leaving the door open for others to consider questions about autism.

Although their attempts are informative and entertaining, there is much to be done to grasp truly the world of autism. As the literature communicates specific sociological information about autism, it also has a universal, literary dimension. It is possible to imagine the subject of autism in young adult fiction as a metaphor for society today. Anxiety runs rampant and the need to distance oneself from the constant barrage of input can be overwhelming. Do young adult novels with autistic characters not only focus on the individual but also look to the bigger picture? Is there a connection between the occurrence of the autism syndrome disorder, the appearance of autistic characters in young adult literature and the state of society? These are the questions contemporary books with autistic characters raise.

I believe that Hollindale’s theory of “the novel of adolescent ideas” applies to most young adult literature and that the adolescent derives some significant information from texts such as these but a study of the actual impact works such as these have on the young adult reader might prove useful. Does this literature actually influence the adolescents who immerse themselves in the pages or is it just a form of

entertainment and the message goes the way of the latest sitcom plot? Do the representations of the sensory and communication issues that plague Darryl and Christopher come across in a meaningful, understanding manner while eliciting empathy in the reader? Do the readers see something of themselves or others they know in the character descriptions? Further investigation of the effect of books such as these would benefit writers as well as teachers of literature and, ultimately, the young adult reader.

The amount of material available including autistic characters may be limited but learning through literature, although not always intentional, introduces new concepts and reinforces life's lessons. In the words of Dr. Jean-Marc Itard in Mordecai Gerstein's fictional account of the life of Victor, the wild boy of Aveyron, "*we learn to be what we are*" (69). That is true not just of Victor but of us all.

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