

Giving a Voice to Autism

by Eli Gottlieb for The Wall Street Journal, January 4th, 2013.

© Eli Gottlieb 2013, All Rights Reserved.

The main argument in favor of realistic novels, aside from the pleasure in reading them, is that they instruct us. By recognizing ourselves in fictional characters sent slaloming through the moral and ethical gates of life, we find our own repertoire of choices widened at those crucial moments when we, too, have to figure out what to do when a parent dies, a spouse deserts us, or the pilot gets on the PA system and advises us all to pray.

But what if a story is told by a man whose disabilities make it difficult for him to express his thoughts? My first novel was recounted in the third person and described, with fair autobiographical fidelity, my growing up with an autistic brother. I'm currently writing a novel told entirely from that autistic brother's point of view, and I find myself continually shoved up against a paradox: How do you make interesting a world which is by definition pathologically self-enclosed? How does the tool kit of the novel, with its venerable elements of dialogue, landscape and plotting, persuasively present the first-person experience of someone who is overstimulated by the input of life and yet lacks the cognitive means to process and communicate it?

American fiction these days is a richly inclusive stew of identities, but it has surprisingly few examples of the "developmentally disabled" point of view. One of the rare exceptions, and an Ur-text of the genre, is William Faulkner's "The Sound and the Fury." In the sections of the book narrated by a 33-year-old mentally disabled man named Benjy, Faulkner produces his effects by shattering the normally smooth perceptual continuum into discrete chunks: "Through the fence, between the curling flower spaces, I could see them hitting. They were coming towards where the flag was and I went along the fence. Luster was hunting in the grass by the flower tree. They took the flag out and they were hitting."

The repetitive staccato sentences highlight Benjy's limited mental means, while the tone skates close to that literary cousin of the dysfunctional adult narrator: the child-voice. Books told from children's points of view often employ the same limited vocabulary, magical thinking and emotional foreshortening as those of the developmentally disabled.

In "The Curious Incident of the Dog at Night Time," author Mark Haddon borrows from both camps and ventriloquizes the voice of a 15-year-old autistic: "Siobhan has long blond hair and wears glasses which are made of green plastic. And Mr. Jeavons smells of soap and wears brown shoes that have approximately 60 tiny circular holes in each of them."

In my own case, I'd originally cast the new book in the third person, but I found that I needed the ground-hugging intimacy available only with first-person narration. This, however, required a crucial adjustment away from the "literary" prose which is my default mode. A third-person sentence like this: "Sometimes his handlers would escort him to church, where the soaring darkwood vault transfixed him, and the rich voice of the preacher as he spoke of hellfire and damnation moved the hair on the back of his neck," would end up transposed to this: "Sometimes she takes me to her mega-church where the Lord is so condensed that people faint and shout out loud at how much of the Lord there is. The preacher has a rich yelling voice and when the chorus sings it's like the bang of thunder that comes mixed with lightning."

Maybe physicists are right, after all, that the best thinking happens in childhood. My challenge in the new novel is to recover that buried perceptual-cognitive mix and haul it into the fictional light of day.

—Mr. Gottlieb's latest novel, "The Face Thief," will be out in paperback in February.