

# The Representation of Autism Spectrum Disorder in Fictional Media

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When one thinks of autistic characters in fictional media, a particular image comes to mind: a white, heterosexual man that is a genius when it comes to math or science and never forgets anything. He may also be socially inept and is often played for laughs, especially when it comes to the prospect of attempting to woo a lady. This applies to most characters explicitly or implicitly portrayed as autistic: Doctor Shaun Murphy from the show *The Good Doctor* is applicable to the first aspect, while Sheldon in *The Big Bang Theory* checks both boxes. An article published by The Science Survey specifically brings up the earliest depictions of autism in movies, stating that, “In the 1970s, most forms of entertainment had aloof, distant, and sometimes mentally incapable autistic characters” (Hwang, 2024). Returning to the idea that autistic characters are often played for laughs, the same article continues by saying, “Others even used autistic characters as comedic relief, making autism or autistic characteristics a punchline for the audience to laugh at” (Hwang, 2024). On the opposite end of comedy, meanwhile, are the depictions in which those with ASD are portrayed as “dangerous and uncontrollable[sic]” (Jones, 2023). Once again, an example of this can be seen in the television show *The Good Doctor* in which Shaun violently smashes vials of expired medication on the floor or yells at one of his superiors while having a meltdown.

In addition to common tropes, the vast majority of depictions of Autism Spectrum Disorder take the appearance of an individual with severe symptoms. A study performed with the intention of evaluating the accuracy of fictional portrayals of autism as well as their impact on viewer knowledge states, “Garner et al. (2015) reviewed 15 films from the period 1988 to 2010 and reported that 13 of the films scored in the severe symptoms of autism category on the CARS2-ST” (Jones, 2023). The CARS2-ST in question refers to the Childhood Autism Rating Scale, which can be used on individuals between three and twenty-two years of age, while other studies referenced in the article utilized other diagnostic tools such as the DSM-5, which is the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition*. In addition to the already high representation of severe symptoms of Autism Spectrum Disorder present, “Nordahl-Hansen, Tøndevold and Fletcher-Watson (2018) reviewed 22 films and four TV series and found that characters typically demonstrated a very high match to DSM-5 criteria, with seven of the characters scoring the maximum possible on the total symptom scale” (Jones, 2023). With seven characters out of 26 works of fictional media scoring the maximum possible score in regard to their symptoms—one character per work—27 percent of autism representation present in the media reviewed portrayed the characters as being severely autistic. Beyond these seven, it is also mentioned that characters in general tended to be very high matches to the diagnostic criteria set forth within the DSM-5. The article went on to state, “Savant-like skills were reported in 12 of the 26 characters” (Jones, 2023), confirming that a single autistic person was present in each movie or show as well as around 46 percent of them possessing savant syndrome, a phenomenon most likely to be found in individuals with autism or brain damage wherein they demonstrate exceptional aptitude in one area. While not every character with autism present in television is on the more severe end of the spectrum, the statistics show that the vast majority of portrayals more than meet the requirements.

In comparison to the autism community, which is made up of individuals from all walks of life as well as with all types of symptoms to varying degrees, diversity was nearly non-existent in fictional media until more recently. Even now, with several films and shows breaking stereotypes, the proportions established by studies such as those examined by Jones (2023) are still far from accurate when put up against the actual statistics. In the discussion section of

their article, the authors write, “Portrayals of autism in film tend to focus on individuals with high support needs (e.g. full-time care and support), thus disregarding the varying levels of support that may be required by different individuals on the spectrum.” The representation of those across the spectrum rather than in the most extreme ranges is severely limited, given that, according to The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “The percentage of 8-year-old children with profound autism among those with autism was 26.7 percent” (Autism Science Foundation, 2023). While this study was clearly not conducted on adults, while autism symptoms may lessen as one ages and learns to manage them, the disorder itself does not disappear. When compared to the 46 percent rate of savant-like skills present in the 26 characters previously mentioned in Jones’s report (2023), the rates found in fictional media do not coincide with the reality of the disorder. Furthermore, the number of autistic individuals actually estimated to have savant syndrome as opposed to those with profound autism is “only 0.5% to 10%” (Hwang, 2024), displaying the high levels to which the prevalence of the disorder is overblown. Beyond this, the portrayals themselves tend to show savants as possessing high-level skills and knowledge when it comes to subjects such as math or science, when in reality, it could quite literally be anything from the etymology of language to the ethical killing of cattle. Focused representation on only a specific subset of the disorder, and poor representation at that, can lead to issues of understanding among neurotypical individuals.

When it comes to the topic of diversity, autistic characters are severely lacking in terms of racial background, sexual orientation, and gender identity. Several sources, from the academic articles mentioned thus far to YouTube video analyses, have pointed out the discrepancy. One of the former, the academic article written by Sandra Jones (2023), states very plainly, “There is a need for greater diversity in representation of autism in fictional media. For example, not all autistic people are white heterosexual males.” This statement is corroborated by one of the latter, a video published by the creator Jessica Kellgren-Fozard. While she is not autistic herself, Kellgren-Fozard does possess a BA in Film History from the University of Brighton, is known for her videos on disability awareness, and was joined in the video in question by two autistic creators: MiffedLuke, whose content is centered around his life with both autism and dyspraxia, and Annie Elaine, who focuses on her “Observations and experiences with body image, gender, race, LGBT+, disability, chronic illness, and mental health” (Elaine). During the section of her video titled “Hollywood Autism,” Kellgren-Fozard says nearly the same thing as Jones (2023): “The pop cultural Hollywood representation of autism is probably one you’re pretty familiar with: He’s a white, cisgender, heterosexual male, usually a child but if he’s an adult, he might as well be a child” (Kellgren-Fozard, 2020). While it is unclear whether she means to refer to the prevalence of autistic individuals with high support needs or being a quote unquote “manchild,” neither representation is constructive. The former adds to the image of all autistic individuals having severe symptoms, while the latter forms a stereotype of immaturity.

This is not to say, however, that all representation of autistic individuals in fictional media is poor. In fact, as highlighted by an article published by the Organization for Autism Research, several more recent shows and Disney short films move away from these common tropes. This was accomplished by not only having autistic people of color, but also displaying often overlooked aspects of the disorder. One such short film, *Loop*, is centered around a non-verbal girl with autism as well as a “bubbly young boy” (Gambacurta, 2020) while they venture out on a canoe trip. A second short film, *Float*, portrays a father who discovers his son has the ability to do exactly that: float and defy gravity. The father tries to hide his son’s ability from others to maintain the illusion of normalcy, and raising the child comes with challenges. This is a representation of the writer and creator of the film, Bobby Alcid Rubio, and the experiences he faced with his autistic son, who was the inspiration for the film. Beyond fictional characters, ABC Australia’s *Love on the Spectrum* broadcasts a dating show in which each individual participating is diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder. This not only brings very realistic

depictions of autism into the limelight, but disproves the prevailing stereotype that autistic people are, “Unable to form interpersonal relationships” .

Moving even further away from Hollywood, a few Korean dramas, commonly referred to as K-dramas, portray characters with autism in a less stereotypical manner than other pieces of fictional media. While one such show, titled *Extraordinary Attorney Woo*, does include a character with savant syndrome, director Yoo In-shik was, “Careful to not glorify autism and put neurodivergence on a pedestal” (Hwang, 2024). The show took care to not only show the “superhuman” aspects of the workings of Woo’s mind but also portray the less-super side. Like many autistic people, Woo has difficulty maintaining eye contact and is sensitive to both touch and loud noises. The trait that tipped the scales toward objectively well-done representation, however, was the inclusion of echolalia, the repetition of words said or noises made by other people. This fairly common aspect of autism, especially found in children but still prevalent in adults, is something mentioned only a single time throughout the expanse of the numerous sources used thus far. A second K-drama by the name of *It’s Okay to Not Be Okay*, meanwhile, moves away from the savant trope. It is introduced in the article with this very point, stating, “With the media choosing to focus on the “genius” side of autism, they tend to under-represent those who do not have savant syndrome. If not, they are perpetuating the idea that many autistic people have incredible skills in their field of interest, which isn’t always the case” (Hwang 2024). The character of Moon Sang-tae does not have an incredible memory or skill with academics, but rather has an intense fear of butterflies, has a stutter, and avoids eye contact. Furthermore, the actor himself did a “copious amount of research” (Hwang 2024) in order to ensure that his portrayal of Sang-tae was as accurate as possible. These portrayals along with several others, however, are only becoming more common in recent years and have to stand up to the historic misrepresentation of the movies and shows that came before.

Unfortunately, while progress is being made toward more accurate portrayals, the stereotypes present in fictional media can lead to real-world stigmas that affect the autistic community. If someone’s only exposure to autism is through a movie or show that paints the disorder in a less-than-ideal light, their perceptions of Autism Spectrum Disorder may be skewed as a result. A concern regarding this was brought up by Jones (2023), as they ended their section on the impact of autism representation in fictional media by writing, “This is especially an issue for younger consumers as exposure to problematic portrayals of autism may impact their early perceptions of autistic persons, which provides the foundation to the formation of negative attitudes that may persist throughout their life span.” Such negative attitudes can lead to real consequences towards autistic individuals, as stigma often results in discrimination or bullying behaviors. Due to this, many diagnosed with autism deign to not disclose their disorder to employers, friends, or even family. A study documenting the disclosure of one’s diagnosis through social media reads, “Disclosure can result in increased understanding, acceptance, support or strengthened relationships, but it may also expose the autistic person to being dismissed, judged or misunderstood” (Edwards et al. 2023). As such, autistic people may decide that the risks of disclosure outweigh any potential benefits they may gain from potential existing support systems. In order to prevent others from seeing their authentic selves, they may engage in a behavior known as masking; however, while this may alleviate potential discrimination, it can also lead to an increased risk for difficulties with their mental health. Furthermore, in the event of non-disclosure, autistic individuals may not receive the support they need in order to succeed in higher education or employment.

The title of this article alone captures just how misunderstood Autism Spectrum Disorder is among neurotypicals, declaring, “Most people have no idea what autism is” (Edwards et al. 2023). The data gathered within the article was acquired over the expanse of three years, utilizing social media posts via Reddit and Twitter to gain what researcher data could not. Four specific trends emerged from what was collected, a total count of 3121 posts: “People do not

understand autism (with experiences related to employment, dating, healthcare and mental health), autistic people just want privacy and respect, autistic people can lead us forward and non-autistic people need to assume more responsibility” (Edwards et al. 2023). An example of the first theme is the denial of one’s diagnosis by others with the belief that they are faking their disorder for attention. Other users recounted tales of being offered “cures” for a disorder that cannot be taken away, such as crystals or detoxing, further contributing to the obvious lack of understanding. A subsection of the analysis of the first theme dives specifically into the portrayal of autism in both the media as well as movies and shows. One user noted, in reference to the movie *Music* by Sia, that such portrayals made them feel, “Infantilized and stereotyped” (Edwards et al. 2023). They went on to say, “This is why I STILL have issues embracing my autism and disclosing to others” (Edwards et al. 2023). Not only does poor representation in fictional media affect the knowledge level of neurotypicals in regard to autism, it also negatively affects those diagnosed with the disorder.

While the portrayal of Autism Spectrum Disorder in media has improved in recent years, there are still significant gaps between proper and stereotyped representation. The over-reliance on such stereotypes and tropes not only is not representative of the autism community but also continues to skew public perception of the disorder. The portrayals fail to capture the diversity and varied experiences of those who actually have autism, as goes the saying that frequents autistic spaces on social media, “If you’ve met one person with autism, you’ve met one person with autism.” Each and every person is unique, and this is no different for autistic individuals. Further research, however, could take a deeper look into how genuinely authentic portrayals could impact the understanding and empathy of viewers through the involvement of autistic writers and actors. Additionally, the long-term effects of such stereotyped representations on the general population could be researched, as well as how a shift toward broader portrayals might affect this.

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