

## Panel I: Fantastic Biases and Where to Find Them



### The Fantastic Autistic: Creating Narrative from the “Anti-Narrative” Poetics of Neurodivergence

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#### Introduction: Just Joking

“ARE you just joking, David?”

This is one of my autistic sister’s most common phrases which acts as a kind of verbal buffer to misunderstandings and miscommunication between our different neurotypes. She has learned that jokes are gentle disruptions to the order of things, which are usually intended to provoke positive feelings. Jokes, puns and silliness easily arise in our family unit and have persisted; thanks, perhaps, to the presence of Jenny’s autism at our core. Whenever Jenny misunderstands something, or an instruction threatens the established order, her question “are you just joking?” helps to paper over the crack. Even if the statement wasn’t a joke, her response has helped her to at least get a hand on the tiller.

As part of my PhD in Creative Writing, I am writing a fantastical novel about autism and ghosts. The main autistic character is based on Jenny. She is three years older than me, the eldest of three siblings, and she is autistic with learning difficulties. The impulse to write a novel about her has been with me for a long time. I have still never seen a cultural representation of autism which in any way accurately reflects Jenny. I’ve recognised certain traits that match up, but Jenny’s version of autism eludes (or, perhaps, is avoided by) creatives who engage with the condition in one form or another. This exclusion has never sat comfortably with me and this discomfort became the foundation for the novel.

However, there was a second impulse. I wanted to confront a tendency that I’d seen emerging in my creative practice over the last ten years. This is my continual engagement with the weird, the strange and the absurd, all of which regularly echo into my short stories, often as a core structural factor. I found I also wanted to use the novel to explore whether my deep affection and affiliation for the fantastic had arisen from the fantastical habits, behaviours and languages of Jenny. I wanted to explore if growing up alongside autism had meant I’d grown up alongside a sort of living version of “cognitive estrangement” (Suvin, 3). I don’t, however, necessarily mean cognitive estrangement in the exact way that Darko Suvin theorised it – as a categorizing framework for the science fiction genre. Rather, I

approach a sort of queered version of the theory; a neurodivergent estrangement, where the ideologically problematic concept of “cognition” (see; Mieville, 235) is replaced by the principles of what autistic activist Nick Walker has termed “the neurodiversity paradigm” (225). This latter, Walker explains, is the assertion that difference in brains and minds “is a natural, healthy, and valuable form of human diversity” (228). Furthermore, Walker argues, this fundamental element of neurodiversity establishes that “there is no ‘normal’ style of human brain or human mind, any more than there is one ‘normal’ race, ethnicity, gender, or culture” (228). Neurodivergent activists insist upon this healthy variance of human minds and argue that attempts to “normalize” are futile and violent actions.

For “cognitive estrangement,” the presence of neurodivergence fundamentally undermines the stability of the universality implied in the “cognitive” side of the taxonomic equation. And so, in my pursuit of the estrangement of autism in my own creative practice, I use the structure of Suvin’s theory but queer its content. Instead, I am looking for a form of “neurodivergent estrangement” which can better accommodate both the reality and magic of autistic people like Jenny.

### **The Anti-Narratives of Autism**

It soon became clear that the exclusion of Jenny’s particular version of autism was partly due to the fact that it does not easily fit into typical modes of structuring narratives. Mark Osteen has charted the various clichés and stereotypes that have haunted depictions of autism in both non-fiction memoirs and popular literature. He contends that the possible reason for persistent misrepresentation is because autism itself “seems uniquely resistant to narrative” (267). He finds that in many autism stories there is a conflict between “stasis and chaos,” brought about by autism being a disruptive condition which nevertheless thrives on orders, systems and routines (268). This, he argues, appears to be too much of a challenge to translate into normative modes of narrative. This thinking leads him to pose the question: “is it possible to narrate autism authentically [...]?” (280).

This became quite the challenge—and quite the worry—for someone who very much wanted to narrate autism authentically. However, more recent writing by neurodivergent scholars have started to challenge this notion of the un-narratability of autism. Melanie Yergeau’s book *Authoring Autism* is one such example. Yergeau covers much of the same ground as Osteen but looks at autism from the position of rhetoric. She finds in medical, cultural and social rhetoric a sort of conspiracy of language that “figures autism as anything but rhetorical” (5). She contends that the seemingly arhetorical expressions of autism are in fact full of non-normative meanings which are persistently and insidiously misunderstood by non-autistic observers. She extends this further and, in a move which questions the very

basis of her own field, asks why should every expression have some sort of meaning:

I also want to put forth that, at times rhetoric is meaningless. Meaninglessness is not the pejorative so many of us would presume. I feel most autistic when I'm not making sense of anything [...] (87)

Why can't expression be actively, and rebelliously, arhetorical? Such resistance to sense-making forms the basis of her core theoretical concept of the "neuroqueer." Recognising an intertwined history of the attempted "straightening" of autistic minds with the same attempts to "straighten" the queer, Yergeau fuses the two to figure autistic people as the "ultimate asocial beings' who defy social order by failing "to acknowledge social order's very existence" (27). This subversive idea, as Justine Egner has shown, presents a new and radical way "to deconstruct identity categorisation and challenge hierarchies" (142).

Yergeau concludes her book by suggesting that autism inhabits a living "in-betweenity," a middle ground experienced as "a negotiation between rhetorical and arhetorical worlds" (205). For me, this phrase, and its "neuroqueer" underpinning, signalled the affinity between autism and the fantastic that I'd been trying to reach for. At the core of cognitive estrangement, especially when adapted towards neurodivergence and the neuroqueer, is the same negotiation between the real and the unreal, between the familiar and the uncanny, between the wonder and chaos encountered when we answer the call of Cthulu.

### Neuroqueer Estrangement in Action

Osteen and Yergeau yearn for narratives and rhetoric which encounter autism on its own terms and recognise its potential. It's my contention that the fantastic has, within its unique powers, the capacity and capability to do this. This, therefore, became the challenge for my fantastical novel: aim for an authenticity of autism, both in terms of content and form, where the representation of autism is accurate, and the poetics engages in some manner with autistic "neuroqueer" expression. Before I started the first draft, I wrote out a list of principles to follow to help me avoid the clichés that Osteen outlines and enable me to lean towards the neuroqueer paradigm of Yergeau. The principle which emerged as the most important and useful was the second one: "Include more than one significant autistic character."

One of the key problems with representations of autism is that there only tends to be one significant autistic character within a text. This leads to a distillation of autism into this one character which then flattens out the complexities and depth of the spectrum. The result has been a mass of cookie-cutter autistic characters such as Raymond Babbit from *Rain Man* (1988), Christopher Boone from *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, Sheldon

Cooper from *The Big Bang Theory* (2007-2019), Rory McKenna from *The Predator* (2018), Sam Gardner from *Atypical* (2017-present), Dr Alfred Jones from *Salmon Fishing in the Yemen* (2011), and Adam Raki from *Adam* (2009). All the characters listed here are white, male and middle-class. Most are young, adorable, serious, detached, and non-threatening. They are good at maths and science, but bad at love, relationships and other emotional connections. While there are some emerging representations of autism which diverge from these clichés, a legitimate set of questions have arisen: where are all the stories of black autism? Female autism? Autism with other disabilities? Working class autism? Historical autism, future autism, intersectional autism—and so on.

I didn't want to disrupt the authenticity of my sister's character by changing her race or class background, but in order to encounter and apprehend this issue properly I needed a strategy that would allow me to incorporate a multitude of autistic voices and experiences. This is where Yergeau's "negotiation between rhetorical and arhetorical worlds," reorganised as a "neuroqueer estrangement," really started to help. To demonstrate this, I will now explain the core fantastical concept at the heart of the current draft of the novel.

### Welcome to The Wing

*Welcome to The Wing. A place of life after death. A limbo of memories and sensations; a vast solitude where you relive your fears and nostalgias until someone comes along and moves you on. But this is not the afterlife for everyone. The Wing only takes the autistic.* (Blurb from current draft of the unpublished novel, 2019)

In the world of the novel, when a person dies their afterlife destination depends on whether they are autistic or non-autistic. Autistic ghosts go to "The Wing," while non-autistic ghosts go to a very different place: "Realm." Whereas The Wing is an elaborate landscape of memories, structures, and sensations, Realm is a vast, barren desert of nothingness. Each individual arrives at their own separate manifestation of either The Wing or Realm and they wander around until someone intervenes to move them on to the next phase of existence.

The protagonist of the book is Leo. He is a living, non-autistic man whose job is to enter The Wing and rescue the autistic ghosts that have become stuck there. But, as is the nature of such things, all is not quite what it seems. Further conflicts arise when, back in the land of the living, Leo must suddenly become the main carer for his autistic sister, Teresa (the character based on my sister, Jenny). Eventually, Teresa and The Wing end up coming into contact and various fantastical adventures ensue.

The conception of The Wing came from the marriage of the estranging element of autism as a state-of-being with the principle I'd laid down for myself regarding the inclusion

of multiple autistic characters. The Wing, and Leo's job role, give me a legitimate method of negotiating this necessity for inclusivity. Leo goes on regular missions into many different manifestations of The Wing and encounters autistic ghosts from across the spectrum *and* along the manifold of intersectionality. Some of these encounters are brief while others are developed into the "significant" characters my guiding principle requires. Because death is the great equaliser, and because the afterlife has such a rich fantastical heritage, The Wing opens up an opportunity to get at some of the complexities of autism in a broad, social sense which is often missed by other representations where the focus is too narrow. In this way, the book develops from the local, familial story between Leo and Teresa into a broader reflection on neurodiversity and the neurotype divide between autism and non-autism. This division, which is apparent in the difference between The Wing and Realm, is a deliberate provocation resolved, in the end, by cross-neurotype collaboration.

It is the nature of ghosts and spirits to be invasive, interruptive, and disorderly in much the same way that autism can be invasive, interruptive and disorderly. But instead of this being something negative that needs suppression and control, the fantastic allows a subversive space for it to be considered in a neuroqueer fashion; autistic "disturbance" as chaotic but productive, interruptive but fundamental.

### UnConclusion

Following the neuroqueer approach of Julia Miele Rodas in her theorization of autism poetics, I offer an "unconclusion" in place of a traditional conclusion (Rodas, 2018 179). Rather than summarise the paper, I'm going to offer up a simple exercise for the reader. I will describe an action that my sister Jenny regularly performs, which I have incorporated into the current draft of the novel. It is an autistic gesture of sorts which is simple to teach but can feel a little weird to perform. It's something I've observed Jenny doing, but it's only when I tried it for myself that I began to understand the reasons for it.

Jenny gets a lot of sensory pleasure from certain sounds. She likes the hums and beeps of microwaves, the ignition and vrooms of car engines, the rhythms of music, and the tenor and flexibility of voices, especially her own. Through a simple habit, Jenny has discovered a way to enhance the listening experience of her own voice and I invite you, dear reader, to experience it for yourselves.

Place the bottom edge of your palms together so that your wrists meet and you create an open lotus flower shape with your hands. Now bring that edge up to your mouth so that your fingers reach back towards your ears. It will be like you are using your hands to create a surgeon's mouth-mask, or the facehugger from the *Alien* franchise. Don't press your hands against your mouth but hold them close. Now hum, or speak a phrase, into your hands and

listen to how it modulates the sound of your voice. Speaking works best; read out the last few lines of this paragraph.

Hopefully you got the sense of that. The sound intensifies as it hits your palms, travels along the insides of your fingers and reaches your ears. Jenny does this regularly for words, phrases and hums and she clearly gets a lot of pleasure and satisfaction from doing it. It's a strange thing to do, but it's also remarkably simple and effective. Here, in this natural and personal autistic movement, there is the glimpse of a fantastical negotiation "between rhetorical and arhetorical worlds." It is fantastical because it cuts against established social "norms" of how to behave and would be interpreted, from a non-autistic domain, as "weird" and aberrant: a worthless, arhetorical oddity. And yet, for Jenny, it is rich with rhetorical potential and, when we try it for ourselves, we can access a sense of it, even if we never make it a part of our own behaviours. That, in both meanings of the word, is the "fantastic" autistic I'm looking for.

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