

Market Analysis

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In my recent review of 27 picture books with autistic* characters from the last 10-15 years, I've found many are written from a NT (neurotypical) perspective and for a NT audience, either broad or specific (i.e. siblings of autistic children). This is true even for several of the 12 written by openly neurodivergent (ND) authors (see below). I've also found that the large majority of picture books with autistic characters have Autism/ND awareness/acceptance as their singular or primary focus, and that agency and character growth are given only to NT parents, siblings, teachers, and friends. The books reviewed here fit 3 broad categories detailed in the analysis below: (1) Befriending/including autistic children, (2) Sensory issues, and (3) Celebrating/explaining autistic identities.

This body of children's literature tends to be othering to autistic people by depicting us through and/or for NT eyes, silencing our agency, and severely limiting our representation to narratives *about* our neurotype. My picture books break this paradigm as stories written *by* an autistic person, *in* 1st-person autistic voice, *with* protagonist agency, *and about* high-interest topics — including friendship, pressure to conform, perfectionism, indecision, difficulty with change, etc. — while seamlessly including an autistic worldview. I believe, therefore, that my work differs from what the market currently holds, and in fact fills a serious need in both our marketplace and culture.

(*or non-specified but apparently autistic)

ANALYSIS:

(1) Befriending/including autistic children:

- A. BENJI, THE BAD DAY, AND ME (2018, Sally J. Pla. ill. Ken Min)
- B. REALLY, REALLY LIKE ME (2013, Gretchen Leary, ill. Dani Bowman)
- C. DO YOU WANT TO PLAY? MAKING FRIENDS WITH AN AUTISTIC KID (2020, Daniel Share-Strom, ill. Naghmeh Afshinjah)
- D. A FRIEND FOR HENRY (2019, Jenn Bailey, ill. Mika Song)
- E. WE'RE AMAZING 1,2,3! A STORY ABOUT FRIENDSHIP AND AUTISM (2017, Leslie Kimmelman)
- F. I LIKE DINOSAURS TOO! (2019, Mandy Farmer, ill. Emily Neff)
- G. LEAH'S VOICE (2012, Lori DeMonia, ill. Monique Turchan)
- H. MY BROTHER CHARLIE (2010, Holly Robinson Peete, Ryan Elizabeth Peete, ill. Shane W. Evans)

Of the 8 works in category (1), all appear to have primarily NT audiences in mind with the messages of including, befriending, understanding, and accepting autistic children. They point out common autistic traits while highlighting the similarities of autistic kids to NT readers. Some do this in relatively ableist, othering ways (especially G, H), while others stand out for their realistic, respectful representations of autistic experiences (A, C, D). Only 3 have an autistic protagonist (A, D, F); and in all except A/D, the NT-focused messaging places the autistic character as a static foil/learning opportunity for NT characters/audiences.

3 are written by openly autistic authors (A, B, C) and 5 by apparently-NT** parents of autistic kids (D, E, F, G, H). This appropriation of a disability by NT parents may be well-meaning but is often problematic. Also, most of these books use PFL (person-first language), whereas 2 of the autistic-written books (A, C) use the IFL (identity-first language) preferred by the majority of autistic people.

(**they may be undiagnosed autistic, or not disclosing.)

(2) Sensory issues

- I. TOO STICKY!: SENSORY ISSUES WITH AUTISM (2020, Jen Malia, ill. Joanne Lew-Vriethoff)
- J. JUAN HAS THE JITTERS (2020, Aneta Cruz, ill. Miki Yamamoto)
- K. DON'T HUG DOUG (HE DOESN'T LIKE IT) (2021, Carrie Finison, ill. Daniel Wiseman)
- L. RISSY NO KISSIES (2021, Kathy Howes, ill. Jess Engle)
- M. BENNY DOESN'T LIKE TO BE HUGGED (2017, Zetta Elliott, ill. Purple Wong)
- N. SENSORY LIKE YOU (2017, Rachel S. Schneider, ill. Kelly Dillon)
- O. WIGGLES STOMPS AND SQUEEZES CALM MY JITTERS DOWN (2021, Lindsey Rowe Parker, ill. Rebecca Burgess)

These 7 books focus on sensory aversions to textures, noise, hugs, etc., and provide explanation, validation, strategies, and accommodations. 3 (I, N, O) have openly-ND authors, and most appeal to ND as well as NT readers. Most have a primary focus on autism/sensory processing disorder (K and L more broadly to bodily-autonomy) as opposed to story or character development, and while they all have ND characters, only O is written from a 1st-person ND perspective.

(3) Celebrating/explaining autistic identities

- P. THE BRAIN FOREST (2022), THE RAINBOW BRAIN (2023) (Sandhya Menon, ill. Kushla Ross)
- Q. JUST RIGHT FOR YOU: A STORY ABOUT AUTISM (2021, Melanie Heyworth, ill. CeART (I am Cadence))
- R. AUTISTIC OLLIE (2018, Jacob Drum, ill. Kit Rees)
- S. ALL MY STRIPES: A STORY FOR CHILDREN WITH AUTISM (2015, Shaina Rudolph & Danielle Royer, ill. Jennifer Zivoin)
- T. TALKING IS NOT MY THING (2020, Rose Robbins)
- U. THE BOY WITH BIG, BIG FEELINGS (2019, Britney Winn Lee, ill. Jacob Souva)
- V. NOAH CHASES THE WIND (2015, Michelle Worthington, ill. Joseph Cowman)
- W. THROUGH THE EYES OF ME (2017), THROUGH THE EYES OF US (2019) (Jon Roberts, ill. Hannah Rounding)
- X. A DAY WITH NO WORDS (2023, Tiffany Hammond, ill. Kate Cosgrove)
- Y. WHY JOHNNY DOESN'T FLAP: NT IS OK! (2015, Clay & Gail Morton, ill. Alex Merry)

These 12 books can be broadly defined as having the theme “You are valid” as well as including sometimes-comprehensive explanations of autistic traits. Several are written to autistic/ND children (P, Q, S) while others seem more likely aimed at educating NT readers, but all could appeal to ND audiences — especially Y, a clever reversal of books in category (1). Most are written in first person (child: R, T, W, Y, X, parent: P, Q, S). 5 have openly-ND authors (P, Q, R, T, X). The recently-published X stands out for its authentic 1st-person autistic protagonist. All of these books have education about and validation of Autism as their primary focus.

I believe this body of literature A through Y leaves a wide-open door for Z — my stories. My work can help lead a much-needed paradigm shift for our culture and industry with its authentic, character-driven representation of autistic/ND experiences of topics that go beyond neurodiversity awareness alone.