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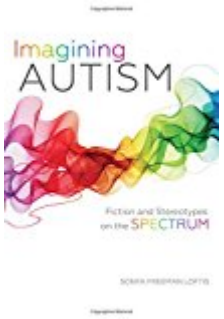
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Sonya Freeman Loftis. *Imagining Autism: Fiction and Stereotypes on the Spectrum.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015. 208 pp. $28.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-253-01800-7.



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Published on H-Disability (April, 2017)

Commissioned by Iain C. Hutchison (University of Glasgow)

This is an interesting book that takes as its focus fictional characters commonly considered to be on the autism spectrum. The author, Sonya Freeman Loftis, hopes her work will "encourage an increased understanding and acceptance of neurological difference, and help to bring mental disorders into the field of disability studies" (p. 3). While making no claim that the characters she has chosen to discuss are in any way exhaustive, she has tried to represent the full diversity of the autism spectrum. Freeman Loftis begins with a consideration of Sherlock Holmes, both as invented by Arthur Conan Doyle (1859-1930) and as later depicted on the screen. She uses her analysis of Holmes to introduce some of the book's main themes: how individuals with autism are depicted as mysterious, emotionless savants; their genius a feature of their atypical mind; and the often-proposed link between criminality and mental disorders. The author considers contemporary fictional "autistic" detectives from the television programs *Criminal Minds* and *Bones*. She points out that although these detectives might be considered positive depictions of the autistic condition, they serve to perpetuate negative stereotypes, as, like Holmes, they are cold and emotionless and share many features with the criminals they are pursuing.

In chapter 2, Freeman Loftis turns her attention to George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950) and two of his characters, Saint Joan and Henry Higgins. Here, she elaborates on her thesis--introduced in her analysis of Holmes--that what, on a surface reading, appears to be a positive representation of autism actually serves to reaffirm damaging perceptions. Holmes, Reid, Saint Joan, and Henry Higgins reinforce the erroneous belief that everyone on the spectrum is both a genius (be that mathematical, artistic, musical) and an emotionally cold thinking machine. While the medical model of disability sees autism as an impairment or deficit, these fictional representations portray the condition in terms of "fantastic excess," with their genius a form of "compensation cure" (p. 59). For the majority of individuals with autism without savant abilities, this representation fails to give a

meaningful portrayal of the difficulties and realities that they face.

In chapter 3, Freeman Loftis looks at characters in two influential novels, ***Of Mice and Men*** (1937) and ***Flowers for Algernon*** (1966). Her stated aim is to examine how fiction and reality influence each other with respect to autism. While Lennie in ***Of Mice and Men*** is not usually considered to be on the autism spectrum, Freeman Loftis points to his special interest, social naivety, trusting nature, intellectual disability, stimming, and hypersensitivity to touch. Charlie Gordon in ***Flowers for Algernon*** is shown first as severely learning disabled and then, following his "cure," as a highly intelligent and emotionless autistic savant. The author uses the chapter to highlight other major themes: how learning disability in literature has frequently been linked with sexual violence; the divisions between "low" and "high" functioning autism and what she terms the "cultural connection between autism and death" (p. 20). She considers how literary depictions of autism or learning disability in which the condition "destroys" families might influence societal response to real-life tragedies in which parents kill their autistic children.

In the following chapter, Freeman Loftis elaborates on the theme of the disruption to the family in her discussion of ***To Kill a Mockingbird*** (1962), ***The Glass Menagerie*** (1944), and ***The Sound and the Fury*** (1929), arguing that ***To Kill a Mockingbird*** portrays autism as "mysterious, dangerous and supernatural" (p. 87). Arthur Radley, the reclusive central character in ***To Kill a Mockingbird***, with his unusual body language, minimal speech, and intense sensory sensitivity, is often considered autistic. Freeman Loftis comments that Laura in Tennessee Williams's (1911-83) play ***The Glass Menagerie*** is presented "as a burden to her neurotypical family" whose physical disability can be named and spoken of (albeit unwillingly by the mother), but her autism is subject to taboo (p. 95). The condition is the "invisible disability that has no name and cannot be articulated" (p. 97). Laura's failure to overcome her autism is portrayed as a weakness that ultimately destroys her family.

In chapter 5, Freeman Loftis turns her attention to child narrators with her analysis of ***Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*** (2005) and ***The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*** (2003). While there is no diagnosis of Oskar as autistic in ***Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close***, he is portrayed in the film adaptation as having stereotypical features of the condition. The author is disparaging: "the film's presentation of Asperger's as a matter of cowardice and weakness is a false and damaging one … [its] ultimate message seems to be that AS can be overcome through courage, that Oskar's adventures in the film have 'cured' his sensory issues, and that his father's love has enable him to overcome his disability" (p. 116). Christopher, in ***The Curious Incident***, identifies with Sherlock Holmes, a seemingly a powerful and positive role model for him. However, as Freeman Loftis points out, this presentation is a parody of the autistic detective tradition. The boy detectives are shown to lack the vital understanding of human relationships and emotions.

In chapter 6, Freeman Loftis discusses ***The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*** (2005). Although Lisbeth is not given a definitive diagnosis in the books, she is considered by many readers to have Asperger's syndrome and is described as being emotionless, supernatural, an alien, and a puzzle. As with other characters discussed by Freeman Loftis, Lisbeth's savant abilities contribute to societal perception that everyone on the spectrum has extraordinary skills that are a compensation for their disability. Freeman Loftis describes how the book's author, Stieg Larsson (1954-2004), uses his character to draw attention to problems in the Swedish mental health care system. She highlights the contradiction at the heart of the trilogy: while ostensibly a critical depiction of mental health care, the books reinforce stereotypes and stigmas

around mental disorders by ultimately redefining their central autistic heroine: “In the end, the novels are only able to redeem Lisbeth and offer her triumph by denying, erasing, and silencing the narrative about mental disorders and social injustice that they initially espouse” (p. 131).

Given current fascination with autism, this book is a timely work. As literature reflects and shapes cultural attitudes, characters deemed to have autism can reflect or alter public perception of the condition. The books selected enable Freeman Loftis to show how stereotypes and prejudices around autism have subtly altered over time. For example, the fear of excessive, violent sexuality in the cognitively impaired has faded while cold, sexless, emotionless savants solving crimes through pure reason now take center stage. Other themes discussed include the depiction of autism as a tragedy, at least if unaccompanied by savant skills; the filter of unusual minds through the neurotypical (Holmes described by Watson, Lisbeth by how other characters relate to her); and autism as the destroyer of family relationships. Freeman Loftis touches upon how some of these characters have been discussed by individuals within the autistic community (this reader would have liked to have learned more on this). It is to be hoped that this engrossing book will encourage discussion and further work about fictional characters portrayed as autistic, even if not labeled as such. It is a book that will be of value to everyone interested in neurodiversity and the dangers of stereotyping. It should also appeal to anyone who wants a different perspective on a favorite character. It is highly recommended reading.

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