Autism Spectrum Disorder as Portrayed in Children’s Literature

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Abstract

Since 2009, The University of Southern Mississippi Gulf Coast Library has partnered with the University of Southern Mississippi Gulf Coast Autism Project (USM-GC). The USM-GC Autism Project established an Autism Demonstration School at the Long Beach [Mississippi] School District to show how to design and implement appropriate educational programs for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in an actual school environment. The Gulf Coast Library is home to a variety of ASD related resources. To support the needs of teachers and librarians who serve youth populations diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder, we are building a bibliography of children’s books that portray ASD in a realistic way. Books which have been nominated or chosen for special awards form the foundation of the list. The list includes a short description of each book and indicates the suggested age range of the reader. Also included is a list of awards with web links. A bibliography of resources for educators and librarians about Autism Spectrum Disorder is part of the work.

The Book Selection Process

An important goal of this project was to identify quality children’s literature where Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) were portrayed realistically and information about ASD was reliable and creditable. The books included here have been nominated for or awarded important national and international awards.

For more information about the awards, a list is provided here.

ALA/YALSA Best Fiction for Young Adults
http://www.ala.org/yalsa/bfya

Whitbread Literary Award [now called Costa Book Award]
http://www.costa.co.uk/costa-book-awards/welcome/

Dorothy Canfield Fisher’s Children’s Book Award
https://sites.google.com/a/cesuvt.org/dcf-award/

Dolly Gray Award
http://daddeec.org/Awards/DollyGrayAwards.aspx

John Newbery Medal
http://www.ala.org/alsc/awardsgrants/bookmedia/newberymedal/aboutnewbery/aboutnewbery

Once Upon A World Children’s Book Award
http://www.wiesenthal.com/site/pp.asp?c=lsKWbPJLnF&h=4441347

Schneider Family Book Award
http://www.ala.org/awardsgrants/schneider-family-book-award

School Library Journal Best Book of the Year
http://www.slj.com/category/reviews/best-of/

Young Voices Awards
http://www.youngvoicesawards.com/

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Images from publishers' and authors' websites.
Award Winning ASD Children’s Literature

**Award**: Schneider Family Book Award  
Jason Blake, an ASD 12-year-old, connects with PhoenixBird online after she becomes a fan of his posted stories, but is terrified that when they meet in person, she won’t be able to see past his autism to who he really is as a person and writer.  
Age range: 9-11

Ted, who is ASD, and his sister Kat must solve the sudden disappearance of their cousin Salim when the police keep hitting dead ends. Ted’s unique way of looking at the world gives him an edge in the race to solve the mystery of his cousin’s disappearance.  
Age range: 9-11

**Awards**: Whitbread Book of the Year, Whitbread Novel Award  
This novel is narrated in first person by a 15-year-old autistic detective who tries to solve a pet homicide of his neighbor’s large black poodle. The unemotional personality of character Francis Boone has had many fans think that Boone is on the Autism Spectrum—something author Mark Haddon has denied.  
Age range: 13-adult

**Awards**: ALA/YALSA Best Fiction for Young Adults  
14-year-old Nathaniel Clark, who has Asperger’s, hopes that by writing songs for his rock band, he can prove his genius and become a member of the Aulus Institute, a premier organization for the profoundly gifted.  
Age range: 12-adult

**Awards**: Dolly Gray Award; National Parenting Center Seal of Approval Winner  
Sam is a happy boy who loves to giggle. But Sam does not like loud noises; he has trouble making friends. After the diagnosis of Asperger’s, his parents learn to accept Sam as a child with differences.  
Age range: 5-7

**Awards**: Dolly Gray Award & 2014 Skipping Stones Honor  
Fourteen year old Johnny is not having the summer vacation he planned. Instead of trips to the lake and swimming and pizzas and video game marathons with his friends, he has to stay with his goofy aunt and 16 year old cousin with ASD. Remember, in the city. Seeing each other through dramas and adventures, the boys eventually learn to appreciate each other and have the best summer ever!  
Age range: 11-15

**Awards**: Newberry Honor Selection; School Library Journal Best Book of the Year  
Moose Flanagan and his family live on Alcatraz Island, where his dad is a prison guard. Moose takes care of his sister Natalie, who got rejected by a school just for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder. Moose asks one of the prison’s residents, Al Capone, to help his sister Natalie get into another school for students with Autism.  
Age range: 11-13

**Awards**: Schneider Family Book Award  
“Mockingbird” is narrated by Caitlin, a 5th-grader with Asperger’s. Caitlin struggles with Asperger’s and her own inability to empathize with others. And things are made worse when her older brother Devon is tragically killed in a school shooting. Caitlin and her family’s grief that they share helps Caitlin to empathize and to grow as a person.  
Age range: 8-12

**Awards**: Newbery Honor  
12-year-old Catherine just wants a normal life. She’s very patient with her brother who has Autism Spectrum Disorder—and tries to help him avoid his own embarrassing behaviors. But one summer Catherine meets Jason and Kristi—the friend she’s always wanted. But it’s Catherine’s own shocking behavior that changes everything and compels her to ask, what is normal?  
Age range: 9-12

**Award**: Children’s Book Council of Australia  
Although Spence never identifies the baby as ASD her description of the behavior, tendencies, and habits clearly fit the spectrum. How the family copes and adjusts, even moving to the city for special schooling, is an emotionally charged and powerful story. Not an easy story, but honest and thoughtful in its telling. The impact of ASD affects the entire family.  
Age range: 10 and up

**Awards**: Schneider Family Book Award; Once Upon a World Award  
Marcelo Sandoval, a high-functioning 17-year-old boy with Autism Spectrum Disorder, goes to work for his father in the mailroom of a corporate law firm. Marcelo faces new challenges, including romance and injustice.  
Age range: Young adult

**Award**: Young Voices Foundation Bronze Award  
Mia is different from other children in several ways. She has Asperger’s. She also has a unique bond with her mother. Mia hand-picked her mother while still an unborn spirit in Heaven. Yet Mia still must deal with the challenges of being bullied in school.  
Age range: Young adult
**Award Winning ASD Children’s Literature**

*Awards:* Canadian Children's Book Centre Our Choice Starred Selection
Taylor Simon is very much like other girls, but is also very different. As an 18 year old with Asperger’s syndrome, Taylor yearns for the comfort of the familiar. But this summer she and her mother go to Prince Albert National Park as the mother pursues her latest romantic adventure. Now Taylor must navigate getting a job, learn about herself, and understand that her mother has her own flaws. These are big lessons for Taylor as she moves forward with her life.

*Age range: 12 and up*

*Award: Michael L. Printz Award*
This is the final book of the *Wild Orchid* trilogy which tells the story of Taylor Simon, a Canadian teen with Asperger’s syndrome. Unique in that the main character is female and has Asperger’s, the story is more a young woman’s coming of age than her diagnosis. Taylor is an extraordinary character and her story embraces her relationships, her friendships and her own special insights.

*Age range: Young adult*

*Award: Dolly Gray Award*
Having a younger brother who is ASD isn’t easy. Sammy rides a special bus to a special school. He can’t join in the play—he knocks down the building blocks and lies by himself under the trees looking at leaves. In spite of these barriers, the older brother tries to see things Sammy’s way and a special bond is formed between them.

*Age range: 4 and up*

*Award: Dolly Gray Award*
This story focuses on sibling relationships where younger brother Ian is ASD. Narrator Julie wants to take a walk to the park with her big sister Tara, but Ian wants to go, too. A very simple plot tells a complex family story with a wide range of feelings—resentment, anger, loyalty, and love.

*Age range: 6-9*

*Award: Schneider Family Book 2015.*
Rose, an emotionally and mentally challenged fifth-grader, lives with her damaged father. She is obsessed with homonyms and her own set of rules. When her father finds a lost dog, Rose names it Rain—a lucky name because it has two homonyms—reign and rein. In Rain, she finds companionship and acceptance. Then careless father allows Rain to get out during a bad storm. Wilf Rose find the strength to venture into the dark and wet to find her beloved Rain? Is someone else searching for Rain, too?

*Age range: 9-13*

*Awards:* Dolly Gray Award
The second book in the trilogy *Wild Orchid*, the story continues for Taylor Simon, a Canadian 18 year old living with Asperger’s. Taylor’s world is becoming more complex as she steps outside her comfort zone. She has a pet hamster, is taking a class at the local university, and is riding her bike or taking a bus. As Taylor struggles for independence, she finds herself feeling out of control. She wants to be seen as an individual, not a person with a disability.

*Age range: 12 and up*

*Award: Dolly Gray Award*
Max, a young boy with ASD, is abducted from school. The only witness to the abduction is Max’s imaginary friend, Buds. Unable to tell anyone, Max sets out on a mission to save Max.

*Age range: Young adult*

*Award: Rennes Prize nominee (France)*
A 12-year-old girl, Lucy, befriends a 4-year-old boy, Matthew, who is ASD. Matthew’s mother encourages the friendship between Lucy and Matthew, hoping Matthew will learn social skills.

*Age range: 9-14*

*Award: Society for School Librarians International*
A story told in the form of letters written between two Canadian teens living across the country from each other, Sween and Jessica, create their own world and connection in spite of the distance. Jessica’s brother is ASD and her father has abandoned the family. Sween is a pool-playing rebel and drop-out estranged from his family. On paper they have a support system. Will the relationship change when they meet?

*Age range: Young adult*

*Award: National Council for Social Studies*
A picture book written and illustrated by Peter Reynolds, “I am here” is what a shy, sensitive, possibly ASD little boy says as he sits apart from the other children who are laughing and enjoying themselves at the school playground. The story is a springboard for discussions about empathy and acceptance. It also conveys a strong anti-bullying message.

*Age range: 3-7*