

Represent Autistic Women in the Media

31/03/2016 17:20 | Updated 01 April 2017

170



Florence Leslie
Woman, Writer, Autistic

I am fourteen. The clock ticks in the waiting room of *The Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services*. *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* is open in my lap. But I am not autistic. I am... *sweetly odd*, when I'm not wielding honesty like a blunt and clumsy weapon. I have a nose ring. A boyfriend. I'm so uninterested in maths that I'm tallying creative ways to storm from class so I can read, with the adult library card I blagged, in the 'Quiet Room'. I am a girl.

Twelve weeks of covert psychological examination. I glance from the neutral glaze of the psychologist to the jigsaw puzzles shunted into the corner of the office. Twelve weeks. An envelope drops on the doormat that may as well be stuffed with blank paper. Prognosis: puberty. I fold the paper into origami, so skilled I can construct any shape. Unless I don't understand the instructions. If you cut your fingers on my swans tangled in wire I refold them into flowers. I fold and fold until the shapes split at the seams. I turn twenty years old, zonked on anti-depressants with cocoa-pops dribbled down my pyjamas, caught in a loop of academic extension requests and reality television.

My story is not unique. *Autistic Spectrum Disorder* is four times more common in men than women. All the data is derived from boys. Leading researcher Simon Baron-Cohen likened Autism to an '*Extreme Male Brain*', arguing men are innate at logical thinking and women are wired for empathy. The soundbite of this study upholds sexist stereotypes by refusing to explore gender roles as cultural constructions. Autistic traits are encouraged in boys as leadership skills, such as specialised fields of interest. Women are raised to be socially compliant. Many girls channel their creative energy into perfecting a mask. Talents regarded as obsessive rather than expert, they mimic their peers until autism becomes imperceptible. This snowballs into severe depression and anxiety as women on the spectrum never receive the right support. I have been referred to so many therapists I have lost count. Waved away as hormonal. Tested for diabetes. Prescribed iron tablets. Precautions save lives, but the profile of Autism needs to change to prevent women slipping through the diagnostic net.

To live openly as a woman on the spectrum is to retort *well, what does Autism look like to you?* But lately I've been biting my tongue. Media is a powerful influence. *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* is considered *the* "Autism novel", marketed with *Asperger's Syndrome* in the blurb. The protagonist is a young, male maths prodigy. BBC One's current drama *The A Word* opens with a little boy held aloft to the sun and declared a genius. During the first episode, the sentiment "remember that autistic women exist too :)" [was tossed around Twitter](#). You could argue that recycled representations reflect the widest experience, raising the most awareness and acceptance. But all the literature surrounding Autism, scientific and fictional, emphasises men. This is dangerous. It prevents parents and professionals catching the signs *Autistic Spectrum Disorder* in women, or else disregarding their experiences entirely. But autistic women exist. And our voices are out there on the internet, filtered through medical jargon and all the resources designed for young men. Roll back a few pages in Google. The prevalence of men's stories in the media reveal something darker about how the narrative of Autism is marketed and constructed to audiences when confronted with the role of women in society.

I'm learning to live without a mask, but obtaining a diagnosis is fraught with gendered expectations that systematically deny women support. I scour the internet to connect my experiences with other autistic women every day. By raising the profile of autistic women in the media, more of us will be reached and perceptions can change.

SUGGESTED FOR YOU

SUBSCRIBE TO & FOLLOW UK LIFESTYLE

[Learn more](#)

✉ Newsletter

[Subscribe Now](#)

396 K

108 K

22.7 K

Podcast



[Add us on Snapchat](#)

Follow Florence Leslie on Twitter: www.twitter.com/florence lovely

More: [All Women Everywhere](#) [Autism](#) [Autism Spectrum Disorder](#) [Feminism](#) [Women](#)

[Advertise](#) [RSS](#) [Careers](#) [FAQ](#)

[User Agreement](#) [Privacy](#) [Comment Policy](#) [About Us](#) [About Our Ads](#) [Contact Us](#) [Archive](#)

"The Huffington Post UK" is provided by AOL (UK) Limited. © 2017 AOL (UK) Limited its affiliates and licensors.
Part of HuffPost • HPMG News