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# Representation of Asperger Syndrome in Contemporary Fiction

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# Abstract

The two popular and highly celebrated novels *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* (Mark Haddon 2003), and *Mockingbird* (Kathryn Erskine 2010) are both examples of contemporary adolescent literature that features protagonists with Asperger syndrome (hereafter called AS), through a first-person narration. In this thesis, I will address the issue of how point of view and narrative voice within the two novels relate to the theoretical models of disability studies. I argue that these narrative techniques criticize the medical model, and that they challenge the more dominant social model of understanding intellectual disability as it was founded during the 1970-80s. In order to show how examples of adolescent literature featuring AS relate with the broad and rather complex field of disability studies, I will use several of the essays presented in *Autism and Representation*, edited by Mark Osteen, and together with Vivienne Muller's essay *Constituting Christopher: Disability Theory in Mark Haddon's The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* (2006), the essays form the foundation for my analysis of the two novels. I will look at the way each novel relates to the two dominant models of conceptualizing disability. As the analysis will prove, the effect of narrative strategies in the novels serves to underline some of the current challenges within the field of disability studies.

An important part of the discussion on the two models of conceptualizing disability, is that both the medical and the social model fall short in providing a theoretical framework that recognizes the disabled individual's personal and realistic experience of living with AS, while also interrogating the process of conceptualization that renders the disabled individual as deviant, or other, from the normate. In the pursuit of finding more useful ways to theorize disability, I will use arguments stated by Robert Rozema in his article called *The Problem of Autism in Young Adult Fiction* (2014), together with the historically important argument of Rosemary Garland Thompson, stating that disability should be recognized as yet another form of identity-category, together with race, gender and sex. Through the literary analysis of the novels, I argue that the two novels describe disability as a socially constructed category, using

AS as the example that proves how the category is fundamentally unstable. The category of “disabled” is in fact disabled in itself.

This theory instructs a new way of thinking that changes the idea of which methods one should use when teaching these novels in a classroom, but moreover, it also informs a new way of *thinking* about disability in the educational system. Within public education, the inclusion of disabled individuals in classrooms is increasing, and the contact between neurotypical pupils and pupils with disabilities create a need for reflection on the topic of ability/disability. The two novels celebrate a heterogeneous society, but still, examples of marginalization are found within them; they introduce characters with severe developmental disabilities and a lower degree of cognitive or social function compared to that of the protagonists. Both novels discuss the value of these characters based on their social function. I strongly believe that a discussion of such kind of marginalization is important when teaching the novels, especially when considering Kennedy’s argument:

Students who are familiar with disability issues are more likely to reject negative stereotypes associated with disabilities and better empower themselves or others who may experience disability in some way. (Kennedy 62)

With this in mind, the thesis will discuss how disability ought to be addressed and examined within the classrooms of Norwegian schools, both secondary-lower and high school. *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* serves as the starting point for a re-conceptualization of Asperger Syndrome and other developmental disabilities. The didactic work considers how the core curriculum suggest education *about* people with other capacities than those of the majority, while also specifying that education should provide training in cooperation with people that have capacities that differs from those of the majority. The focus of the didactic work is to argue of why specific education dealing with disability is important, while also briefly outlining how one could use cooperative learning as a didactical method to include people with AS in ordinary education, and as a method to teach neurotypical pupils about AS.



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# Introduction

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We must endeavour to hear and appreciate the words, thoughts and emotions of those with the most limited capacity to express them.

Neurotypical parents, family members, clinicians and caregivers must constantly strive to speak *with* autistic people rather than *for* them; those on the spectrum must continue to speak with neurotypical scholars, advocates and family members. Let us address each other with respect, not as means to some other end, but as human agents” (Osteen, 301)

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As long as the tradition of creating and sharing stories has existed, we have created and shared stories that display the ability of the human being. Our stories include characters with strong minds and bodies, leaders of battles or objects of love. Still, there is another side to our stories – the story of how we through centuries have displayed, explored and understood human beings with disabilities. One example might be Charles Dickens famous character, little Tiny Tim with his crutch and his disability on display. Charlotte Brönte’s schizophrenic maniac, Bertha, in *Jane Eyre* serves as another good example, together with Mr Rochester who becomes blind towards the end of the novel. These iconic stories within literary history clearly show us that disability has always been a part of the universal narrative, a part of our society worth mentioning. Even if it is easy to think of disability as tragedy that strikes on random and inflicts pain on some misfortunate individuals, it is more challenging to consider how all human beings most likely will have a personal experience with disability at some point in their lives. When remembering how sorry we felt for Tiny Tim with the crutch, one might realize that an accident might occur, leaving you with a broken bone for a few weeks. In contrast with Tiny Tim’s disability, a broken bone will eventually heal. Even if the broken bone is a transient impairment, it certainly gives a personal experience with disability. Dementia, obesity, or even just being pregnant are other examples. When following this train of thought, one might conclude that disability belongs to our collective idea of what it means to be human, rather than to the idea of personal misfortune, or social exclusion

If disability counts as a natural part of life, then one might ask why there are so few examples of literary works that features characters with disabilities, or why literary scholarship treating



disability are so few and far between. Traditionally, both physical and cognitive/neurological disability have been defined as forms of diseases. In concluding that there is something *wrong* with the disabled body, emphasis was put on finding cause of the symptoms, so that cures could be found. Through this clinical model, scientists, psychiatrists and authors of literary works from the 1960, and until the present time have portrayed disability without including the voice, the reflections or experience of the disabled individual in the discourse. As Mark Osteen describes it: “Not only was the “voice of the disabled subject” usually missing from its scholarship, but often the disability itself existed only as a symptom ghost, in that the object of research was to abolish or at least render insignificant the disability being portrayed” (Osteen 1).

Although many of the disabled characters we find in children or adolescent literature are physically disabled, the number of novels published that features characters with other forms of disabilities, such as autism-spectrum disorder (ASD), intellectual or social disorders, are even more sparse in number. One should, however, notice that the number of novels dealing with Autism, AS and other ASD’s has increased drastically since the Public Law 94 – 142 (Education of All Handicapped Children Act). This law concluded that individuals with disabilities no longer should be treated differently within the system of education, and that they should have the same access to education as non-disabled children. As Juanita Lynn Harrill concludes in her study *"Portrayal of Handicapped/Disabled Individuals in Children's Literature: Before and After Public Law 94-142."*, the number of published novels is not the only way in which portrayals of disability in literature improved after the P. L 94-142. More importantly than number, the variety of disabilities displayed, and the accuracy and realism of portrayals improved dramatically.

In this thesis I ask how Asperger Syndrome (AS) is represented in two accessible, best-selling novels; namely in *Mockingbird* by Kathryn Erskine, and *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* by Mark Haddon. Both novels are examples of contemporary adolescent literature that are highly celebrated for their contribution in representing autism-spectrum

disorders, and more specifically Asperger Syndrome. Considering their popularity, the pitfall of simply concluding that these novels portray the truth of the Asperger's experience, would allow further marginalization of the already marginalized group of the intellectually or developmentally disabled. Being an author with AS, Gyasi Burks-Abbott argues in his chapter called *Mark Haddon's Popularity and Other Curious Incidents in My life as an Autistic* (Burks-Abbot 289), that Mark Haddon's character Christopher Boone seems to have become the new archetype of Asperger's. "He presents an archetype, a distillation.... There are dozens of ways of having Asperger's or of being Aspergen. I don't think there is anything false or misleading here, but it can't represent the whole spectrum"(289). Erskine's character Caitlin shares the same characteristics as Christopher; she is a savant with "special skills", and a high-functioning Aspergen. One cannot be content with finally having two, well-written novels about AS, or satisfied with the success of the novels being considered "exceptional by any standards." It is important to address the narrative construction of the novels, looking at narrative strategies, language, or inclusion of non-verbal elements in order to avoid further stereotyping and marginalization of people with AS. Such interrogation might enhance a fuller understanding of AS both within the school system and in the public environment in general.

Through reading *The Curious Incident* and *Mockingbird* as examples of how disability is a category of identity, the literary analyses informs a discussion of how one should think about, and treat individuals with disabilities in society. The final chapter of the thesis will be devoted to the exploration of how the Norwegian system of education deals with disability, focusing on how the core curriculum stresses that education should "Counteract prejudice and discrimination, and foster mutual respect and tolerance between groups with differing modes of life" (Core curriculum 14). Arguing of the pedagogical benefits of cooperative learning, I will discuss how *The Curious Incident* may be used as a starting-point for discussions about disability in cooperative learning groups.

This introduction briefly outlines what AS is, and presents the theoretical framework in which the novels will be analysed. Chapter 1 and 2 will consider the use of narrative strategies in *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* and *Mockingbird*, and how the novels relate to medical/social model of conceptualization, and how the two novels construct or deconstruct the concept of disability. Chapter 4 will be devoted to a didactical approach to how one can teach the two novels in Norwegian classrooms, and use them to inform a discussion on how we think and conceptualize disability.

## 1.1 What is Asperger Syndrome?

Autism is considered a developmental disorder caused by a specific abnormality in the brain (Frith 2). It occurs in one of every 1000 births, and the first report of it was given in 1943 by Dr. Leo Kanner, who noticed how eleven children seemed to have congenital lack of interest in others, with delays in communication-skills, and with motor behaviours that followed a repetitive and ritualistic pattern (O'Connell 8). Autism comes in various forms, and individuals with the diagnosis operate differently when in contact with other people and the society in general. Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD's), then, include all the different variations of Autism, including high-functioning individuals, low-functioning individuals and autism accompanied with mental retardation. In 1944, the physician Hans Asperger described how otherwise high-functioning individuals were found to be socially isolated, with underdeveloped motor-skills, and a lack of understanding when introduced to non-verbal language. This was to be the first report of Asperger Syndrome, considered a subcategory of Autism (Frith 1), a form of developmental disorder and a part of the Autism Spectrum.

Although research proves that all Autism Spectrum Disorders derives from a neurological abnormality, the individual suspected of having Asperger Syndrome is diagnosed through cognitive assessment, language testing, evaluation of IQ and motor skills, and an assessment

of communication skills. The developmental history of the individual is combined with the other tests in order to diagnose Asperger Syndrome. According to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders 4<sup>th</sup> ed.*, Asperger Syndrome stands out from other developmental disorders in that it includes these symptoms:

- Qualitative impairment in social interaction, as manifested by at least two of the following:
  - Marked impairment in the use of multiple nonverbal behaviours such as eye-to-eye gaze, facial expression, body postures, and gestures to regulate social interaction;
  - Failure to develop peer relationships appropriate to developmental level;
  - Lack of spontaneous seeking to share enjoyment, interest, or achievements with other people (e.g.: By lack of showing, bringing, or pointing out objects of interest to other people);
  - Lack of social or emotional reciprocity
- Restricted, repetitive, and stereotyped patterns of behaviour, interests, and activities. As manifested by at least one of the following:
  - Encompassing preoccupation with one or more stereotyped and restricted patterns of interests that is abnormal either in intensity or focus;
  - Apparently inflexible adherence to specific, non-functional routines or rituals;
  - Stereotyped and repetitive motor mannerisms (e.g.: hand or finger flapping or twisting, or complex whole-body movements)
- The disturbance causes clinically significant impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning.
- There is no clinically significant delay in language (ex. Single words, used by age of 2, communicative phrases used by age of 3)
- There is no clinically significant general delay in cognitive development or in the development of age-appropriate self-help skills, adaptive behaviour (Other than social interaction) and curiosity about the environment in childhood;
- Criteria are not met for another specific Pervasive Developmental Disorder, or Schizophrenia. (American Psychiatric Association 84)

Asperger Syndrome is a diagnosis where impairments of the brain affect the ToM (Theory of Mind). This signifies that the social codes and varieties of language are difficult to access for an individual with AS. In addition, the ability to understand or describe feelings is often impaired, and people with AS often find it difficult or impossible to understand their own feelings, or to feel empathy with others. Mills describes ToM as a mechanism of the brain that allows us to adapt to our environment:

We can see ToMM (theory of mind mechanism) as a critical mechanism, a specific evolutionary adaptation that enables individuals to go beyond the superficial interpretations of their environment to theorize and process interior cues for exterior actions. Through this mechanism we gain adaptive advantage, for we learn to anticipate behaviours, negotiate difficulties, and respond productively to change (Mills 123).

The Oxford Dictionary of English lists the word “impaired” as “having a disability of a specific kind,” but the discussion of terminology and the relationship between “impairment” and “disability” is a far more complex site of discussion. The distinction made up between bodily impairments and the socially constructed concept of disability points to different, but equally important sides of the diagnosis. First, disability in the social model is understood as “socio-structural barriers that serve to disadvantage and exclude people with impairments” (Swain, French, Colin, Barnes. 22). “Impairment” refers mainly to the material body, or the body part or system that does not function: “Any abnormality of, partial or complete loss of, or loss of the function of, a body part, organ or system ” (Dorland’s Medical Dictionary of Health Consumers, 2007). Asperger Syndrome stands out from other disorders and disabilities in that the impairment might not be recognized visually. One might only recognize the disorder through the social disabilities that the impairment causes. It is the Theory of Mind that is affected by the impairment, namely the diagnosed individual’s ability to attribute mental states to others (Happe 197). In other words, impairments of the brain affect the individual’s ability to take part in the social community, and it is therefore both a physical and mental disability that often leaves the person with AS socially isolated from others.

The balance of realistic narration of impairments, and positive focus on personal experience have proven to be difficult to find, when looking at the literary history of AS. Often one is preferred before the other in literary representation, leaving the portrayal one-sided. In Kathryn Erskine’s *Mockingbird* impairments of having AS are given attention, through presenting tantrums, groaning, avoiding physical contact, avoiding eye contact, echolalia, sensitivity to sounds, sensitivity to tags on cloths, special interests, difficulty with understanding ToM, and difficulty in recognizing facial expressions and their meanings. In addition, the dramatic and at times violent effects of having a temper-tantrum are portrayed when Caitlin self-harms. Mark Haddon’s protagonist Christopher does the same thing, and many of the same impairments are portrayed. The two novels stand out from what one might call the “canon” of fiction that features disability, in that they both narrate impairments *from the inside*, from the perspective of the one experiencing them.



## 1.2 Theoretical Framework

This part is devoted to presenting the clinical model and the social model that have reigned as the two dominant frameworks in conceptualizing disability, and to highlight the current problem of how to effectively bridge the two frameworks in order to establish *positive* and *realistic* representations of AS in literature. The last section of the chapter is describes methods by which *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* and *Mockingbird* will be analysed, namely through looking at narrative strategies, such as the use and effect of first-person narration.

### The Reigning Models of Conceptualizing Disability

The two novels, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* and *Mockingbird*, address the historical context of disability studies. The major difference between them, however, is recognised by the way in which the diagnosis is presented, and where the disability that subsequently follows the diagnosis, is located.

When developing an understanding of the theories that define autism and other intellectual/developmental disorders, one might start by looking at the early descriptions of these disorders, seen through the scope of a medical or clinical model. Until recent years, research on disability was usually consigned to the clinical or practical fields, which employ a “deficit” or “medical” model that represents disability as an individual problem or impairment to be “cured” or at least mitigated (Linton, Simi 85). These disciplines pay little attention to the social and political context—constructed discourses of normality, for example – through which disabilities are moulded and measured (Osteen 1)

One of the best examples of how Autism and ASD’s were discussed scientifically during the 1960- and 70, is Bruno Bettelheim’s book called *The Empty Fortress: Infantile Autism and the Birth of Self*, a book that received public attention and celebration, as a work “forever affecting the world’s view of autism” (DeMaria 65). Bruno Bettelheim argued that that the

bonding-process between mother and the child was the main cause for ASD or other developmental disorders, and that he had found a way to “heal” or “cure” children with these kinds of disorders. Drawing his inspiration from the way prisoners in WWII’s concentration camps seemed to shut down emotionally due to the extreme conditions (DeMaria 68), he argued that emotionally deprived mothers caused Autism Spectrum Disorders in their own children. Even if Bettelheim’s scientific discoveries were thoroughly discredited, the term “Mother-blaming” did not die together with the reputation of *The Empty Fortress*, but it survived through novels that portrayed this vision of ASD. One example is Virginia Mae Axline’s non-fiction novel *Dibs*, a conversion narrative or success-narrative based on the same assumptions as those of Bettelheim’s work. Especially in America the conversion narrative was closely linked with the representation of disabilities, as Fisher describes it; Autism conversion. This type of narrative describes how an individual with AS can change, or heal through receiving the professional help of a therapist (Fisher 61).

The other model of framing disability, namely the social model, theorizes how the society in which one lives (Wilson 10), as a more fundamental factor in constructing disability than the medical factors. Because of this, the social model is far less interested in finding the cause of the disability, or a way to cure the disabled. In Britain during the 1970’s, the *Union of physically impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS)* developed the first set of arguments that later would be recognized as the Social Model. “Disability is something imposed on top of our impairments by the way we are unnecessarily isolated and excluded from full participation in society. Disabled people are therefore an oppressed group in society” (*UPIAS 1975*). Through reclaiming disability from the medical professionals who defined all kinds of disabilities as forms of disease or illness, the social model aimed to reconstruct the meaning of “disability” in light of the social exclusions encountered in their own lived experience (Thomas, Swain, French, Colin. 23). Within the social model, there is an interest in redefining disability as “another form of normal”, and that the disabled should be accepted and included in social life by public law.

Both *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* and *Mockingbird* describe the physical reality of living with AS, but still they claim that AS is a form of disability where the problem is situated within society, not within the person with AS. Both authors make a point out of discussing what is normal and what is abnormal, concluding that special is good (Erskine 176) and that even normal people have disabilities (Haddon 56). When Caitlin experiences a Tantrum Rage Meltdown or TRM, it comes because of not being understood and accepted by her peers, not necessarily, because she has AS. Even if the diagnosis of having AS comes with the possibility of having temper-tantrums, the responsibility of them happening has to be shared between Caitlin and her surroundings. In this, both novels conceptualize disability according to the social model.

Mark Osteen in his introduction to *Autism and Representation* explains how disability studies and the social model has contributed with a necessary alternative to the clinical model by introducing the idea that the problem is not situated in the disabled subject at all, but in society. Still, he argues that the study of disability is a study that has to transcend borders between disciplines in order to “enhance our understanding of disabilities somatic and psychic aspects” (Osteen 1). With this remark, Osteen points to the current challenge within the field of disability studies, where the clinical and the social model share so little common ground, that impairments are not given enough credit as functional limitation due to medical or neurological diagnosis. “But disability studies has concentrated so heavily on the sociocultural construction that it has largely ignored the physical realities on which its discipline is founded” (Osteen 2).

Both the medical and the social model attempt to solve the *problem* of disability, locating that very problem within the disabled subject or within society. Because they both deal with disability as a problem, the personal experience of impairment falls into the gap between the two reigning models of conceptualization – marking how they fail to theorize disability both positively and realistically. Vivienne Muller argues that both models theorize disability as a “Site of difference” (Muller 1), the clinical model referring to the disabled as essentially

deviant from the norm, and the social model arguing for social recognition for individuals with disabilities. The social model is comprehended and treated differently by different critics, for example Vivienne Muller who recognizes the social model as far more interested in political campaign than theorizing disability, while Mark Osteen recognizes disability studies as the study where one finds disability conceptualized through the framework of socio-constructivism:

Disability studies sets aside the “natural” and medical model of disability as accidental disease, trauma deficit, or defected, using and extending the insights of feminism, postmodern, and postcolonial theory and social and rhetorical studies of science to analyse disability as a socio-political construct. (Wilson 10)

There is nevertheless a general consensus among critics that disability studies at the present time fails to theorize the physical impairments of disability, while at the same time interrogating the concept of “disabled” itself. Corker and Shakespeare formulate the problem more elegantly:

Both the medical and the social model seek to explain disability universally and end up creating totalizing meta-historical narratives that exclude important dimensions of disabled people’s lives and of their knowledge (Corker, Shakespeare. 15)

A scholarly discussion on works of fiction that features developmental disabilities (DDs) such as AS, has to take into consideration the issue described by Corker and Shakespeare. Portrayals of people with disabilities should be both realistic in terms of recognizing impairments, but also positive – valuing people with their personal experience, instead of valuing intelligence or social function. Robert Rozema in his article *The Problem of Autism in Young Adult Fiction*, uses both Haddon and Erskine’s novel to address portrayals of DDs in young adult fiction. He suggests using these guidelines by Leininger, Dyches and Prater to create new character descriptions of people with disabilities, but he also suggests using them in criticism of already existing literature:

Portrayals of individuals with disabilities must be both *realistic* and *positive*. To be considered realistic, a book must depict the characteristics of the disabilities accurately, in keeping with current professional practices and literature. Books with positive portrayals must characterize an individual with disabilities in some or all of the following ways: (a) realistic emphasis on strengths rather than weaknesses (b) high expectations (c) making positive contributions beyond promoting growth in other characters (d) becoming self-determined (e) being given full citizenship in the home and community (f) expanding reciprocal relationships. (Rozema 26)

In order to position Rozema's claim of how portrayals of AS should be realistic and positive, to that of analysis of *Mockingbird* and *The Curious Incident*, I find that the endings of the two novels proposes how a person with AS can learn and develop the skills of communicating in social situations, and learn the feeling empathy. In this way, the novels suggest that development of social skills is possible, even if the medical and neurological diagnosis marks how development of ToM will be a lifelong struggle. In addition, both protagonists undergo changes as the narrative progresses, but *Mockingbird* might be understood as more of a conversion-narrative or success-story than *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*. I find the two endings significant to this point, because they summarize the accomplishments and developments of the protagonists:

And I know I can do this because I went to London on my own, and because I solved the mystery of Who Killed Wellington? And I found my mother and I was brave and I wrote a book and that means I can do anything" (Haddon 268)

I put the sketchbook on my lap and open my new box of colours. Now I'm ready to use them because I figured out how I'm going to draw the whole complete picture. I smile and begin (Erskine 232)

The actions Christopher mentions – going to London, solving the mystery, finding his mother and writing a book – were all actions and accomplishments initiated by himself. The representation of Christopher seems realistic and positive in this view, because it marks high expectations for Christopher; it promotes personal growth, beyond promoting growth in other characters. Most importantly, the ending suggests that Christopher is self-determined. The ending of *Mockingbird* underlines how Caitlin finally has understood how to draw the whole picture, symbolizing that she has figured out both how to blend colours together, and she understands and uses the concept of empathy. Although the ending suggests development and personal growth, this growth promotes growth in other characters such as Jayson, Michal and even the whole community. I argue that the novel has realistic narration of her weaknesses, but it does not possess realistic emphasis on her strengths. I also find it problematic that the representation of AS is not self-determined. The fact that she starts using colours, or drawing faces, comes because of the correction she receives from Mrs. Brook. Neurotypical characters in the novel initiated all of Caitlin's accomplishments, making her less self-determined than Christopher.



## Conceptualization of Disability

When analyzing the novels in question, it is central to look at the ways in which the neurotypical environment described in the novels is conceptualizing disability. However, it is also important to look at how the disabled characters themselves conceptualize disability.

Rosemary Garland Thompson suggests that one should theorize disability as a category of identity, the same way as gender, sex and race have been theorized. She places her argument on derridean conceptualization, inventing the term “the normate” to explain how disability, race, sex and gender has been conceptualized within systems of binary opposites.

The first consequence to be drawn from this is that the signified concept is never present in itself, in an adequate presence that would refer only to itself. Every concept is necessarily and essentially inscribed in a chain or a system, within which it refers to another and to other concepts, by the systematic play of differences. Such play, then – *différance* – is no longer simply a concept, but the possibility of conceptuality, of the conceptual process in general (Derrida 285)

Derrida claims that within language there are no essences, only differences. What one can see when looking at concepts is that within what might be conceived as binary oppositions, such as able/disable, or Man/woman, there are no essences, only differences. To take Thompson’s concept, the Normate, (which is the able, white, heterosexual man) it only exists in language and our collective understanding as concept because of its difference from other signified.

This also suggests that there is nothing essentially normal, or essentially abnormal.

## Theory of Narrative Strategies

In recovering and reevaluating the experience of the disabled individual, a good place to start is to look at the way in which AS has been represented in contemporary literature, and what narrative strategies the authors of such literature choose to make use of. Since a large percentage of the people with Asperger Syndrome find it difficult to read and write fiction, many literary works dealing with AS are written by neurotypical authors, on *behalf* of people with AS or other disabilities. Most authors writing about AS have a second-hand knowledge

of the Asperger experience, as for example Mark Haddon, who worked with children with AS before writing his novel. The tradition of writing about the personal experience of AS through a second-hand knowledge of it, makes the question of realistic narrative representation of the disability even more important.

In her chapter called “*Recovering Reality: Narrative Representations of AS in Contemporary Fiction*”, Julie O’Connell investigates contemporary novels that feature characters with AS.

Her argument is that point of view plays an important role in the accuracy of the representation, and she critically points to how the distance of a third-person narration of AS might use a more educational style than first-person narration:

Palmer’s third person point of view lends itself to awkward teaching that other authors like Haddon and Moon entirely avoid by following the fundamental rule of showing, not telling (O’Connell 133)

Erskine’s novel *Mockingbird* falls into the trap of taking on a didactical approach in the representation of AS, for example by naming chapters after concepts, for example the chapter called “Friends”, in which she describes how Caitlin relates to friendship, or the chapter called “Empathy”, describing how Caitlin struggles with ToM. Haddon’s representation of AS also includes examples of moments where Christopher acts or thinks in a less plausible manner according to his diagnosis, but the novel as a whole places him in the centre of his own understanding, where Christopher himself controls the action and the language he employs.

The narration is limited because of the impairment of ToM, and the experience of not having ToM is shared with the readers through restricting the narration. The use of narrative strategy in this case points back to how the personal experience of disability is valued. To explain this further, the term described by Tom Trabasso as “The Power of Knowledge” becomes a crucial part of understanding the limited or restricted narration in both novels:

The knowledge I refer to is the knowledge of human intentions, plans, actions, and outcomes, and it is essential to making human experience meaningful. It becomes available to us early in life, and it continues to develop throughout our lives. A writer or speaker assumes what the reader or the listener knows or is capable of knowing. The producer has to have a model of the receiver’s knowledge state and uses this in speaking or writing, to choose expressions and topics and their organization (Trabasso 189)

The use of knowledge is important to notice because the receiver is introduced to a speaker with less knowledge of human intentions, plans, actions and outcomes than the receiver himself, which forces the receiver to engage in the speaker's- Christopher and Caitlin's - environment on *their* premises, through *their* knowledge and through *their* disabilities or abilities.

Another approach in looking at narrative representations of AS in contemporary literature is to notice the effects of visual elements within the narrative. Kristina Chaparenko pursues this idea in her essay *Challenging Christopher's "Disability" to communicate properly in Mark Haddon's Novel The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* According to Chaparenko, graphic elements in novels are often understood as the "expression of the failure of language" (Chaparenko, 2). This assumption is proven by the way critics are dealing with Mark Haddon's novel, discussing graphic and typographic elements within the narrative as a sign of Christopher having an impaired communication, rather than his "ability" to communicate. Wolfgang Hallet also treats non-verbal elements such as one might find in *The Curious Incident* in his essay called *The Multimodal Novel. The Integration of Modes and Media in Novelistic Narration*, arguing that non-verbal elements in Haddon's novel are used in a specific way, and cannot be seen separately from the narrative text.

All these symbolizations, semiotic modes, generic forms and medial representations cannot possibly be regarded as merely additional elements an otherwise verbal narrative text. A stereotypical formula like "It looked like this" in Haddon's novel indicates that elements, non-verbal representations of the narrator's perceptions, and non-narrative modes must be read as integral parts of the narrative discourse. The traditional verbal narrative then serves to contextualize these other modes and media and to assign them their meanings, places and functions within the narrative world (Hallet 139)

The strategy of a consonant first-person-narrator, and the narrative strategy of including various graphic and typographic are both examples of narrative strategies that work to activate the reader's engagement with the text. The main problem within the field of disability, especially when dealing with developmental disorders such as AS, is to present personal experience in a way that does not leave the subject "deviant" from the norm, or

contribute to further stereotyping and marginalization of the disabled. Narrative strategies that engage the readers, and allows for readers to evaluate, problematize and participate in the thoughts, experiences and choices of the protagonists, might contribute to a wider understanding and acceptance of people who instead of being called “abnormal” should be labelled “another kind of normal.”

## Chapter 2: Representation of AS in “The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time

After it was published in 2003 *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* became an international best seller, winning the Whitbread Novel of the Year Award in 2003, and being long listed for the Man Booker Prize. In 2014, the novel has been translated into 44 languages, and, in addition it entered Broadway as a play in 2012. The novel might be considered the most popular work of fiction that deals with ASD’s, in that through language and style it seems to reach the masses, from older children to adults. Because of the simple language and complex content, the novel has become a part of the curriculum in many schools. The imprint the novel has left on its readers is well presented through the author Gyasi Burks-Abbots own experience, living with AS:

Back in the early nineties when I was first diagnosed with autism, the only way I could counter the blank stares I would get when I disclosed my condition was to mention the 1988 movie *Rain Man*, which left a deep imprint on the popular psyche. I once told a Harvard student I was autistic, and he was about to tell me that he has a friend with the same condition until he realized he was thinking about Dustin Hoffman. Less personal *Rain Man*-Inspired reactions to my autism came from the people who wanted to know about my particular savant skills. Today when I tell lay people that I am autistic, the first question they ask is, “have you read *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*?” as if that were the best example of a book written about autism. (Burks-Abbott 294)

Taking into consideration the popularity that the novel has gained over the last decade, and its status as some form of a magical portal into the complicated world autism, this chapter is

devoted to the investigation of how and *why* the novel stands out from other novels that feature disability. First, I will look at the way this novel challenges the conception of disability, through looking at Haddon's narrative strategies and how they affect the reader-response. I will also look at how the novel on one side deconstructs disability as it is conceptualized through the clinical model, and with the other constructs disability as a category of identity.

## 2.1 Representing the Diagnosis

One of the ways in which *The Curious Incident* refuses to meet the terms introduced by the clinical conceptualization of disability, is by refusing to describe the symptoms of Christopher's disability. Mark Haddon's protagonist never mentions his own diagnosis, and the neurotypical characters of the novel do not reveal the diagnosis either. The authorial strategy of leaving out such vital information about the protagonist has resulted in a discussion of whether Christopher Boone is diagnosed with Asperger's, Autism or simply behavioural problems. Even the AANE (Asperger's Association of New England) had to discuss the portrayal of Christopher's symptoms, first diagnosing him with Asperger's, but later changing the diagnosis to a high functioning autistic (Osteen 295). Some have even asked for evidence that supports a view of Christopher as disabled at all, arguing that he might be a normal kid with some behavioural problems.

That Christopher is in a special education class is the strongest evidence that he has a disability, but, as we well see, a disability studies perspective suggests that this evidence is more a reflection of how society perceives Christopher than ontological reality. Christopher's "disability" is not easily categorized; even those who are supposed to be experts about his condition, such as Siobhan, cannot figure out quite how to treat him. By never explicitly diagnosing Christopher, author Mark Haddon suggests a disability studies perspective from the outset: the "medical model" of disability is not central to Christopher's own experience of the world (Ray 2)



What comes becomes central to Christopher, however, is to define his own understanding of what disability really is, based on his own observations and logic. In the opening of chapter 71 he reflects on how he is expected by his neurotypical environment to say that the other kids at his school have “learning difficulties”, a term he finds problematic:

But this is stupid because everyone has learning difficulties because learning to speak French or understanding Relativity is difficult, and also everyone has special needs, like Father who has to carry a little packet of artificial sweetening tablets around with him to put in his coffee to stop him getting fat, or Mrs. Peters who wears beige-coloured hearing aid, or Siobhan who has glasses so thick that they give you a headache if you borrow them, and none of these people are Special Needs, even if they have special needs. (Haddon 56)

What also should also be noted, is the way Christopher copies and recounts verbal expressions and the explanations of these – in the same manner as someone explained them to him. In his reflection on what makes disability a disability, he refers to “none of these people are Special Needs”, highlighting how someone outside his world-view refers to individuals with developmental disabled as “being special needs”, rather than “having special needs”. This description underlines an essentialist understanding, where the individual that is experiencing life with a disability ultimately *becomes* the disability in his/hers essence. The essentialist understanding of disability is verified by the way Christopher and other kids at his school are nicknamed “Special needs” by neurotypical children. This example shows how Christopher through narrating his reflections, destabilizes the whole category that defines him and other children as “Special needs”, through first arguing of how everyone has “special needs”.

Christopher also counters the clinical model of understanding disability when he argues why he, as a person with Asperger’s syndrome, would make an exceptional astronaut. Chapter 83 is fully devoted to Christopher’s reasoning about why he could perform as an astronaut, despite his diagnosis. On page 32, however, Mr Jevons dismisses Christopher’s reasons by telling him that it is very difficult to become an astronaut. The requirements Mr Jevons lists are that you have to become an officer in the air force, take orders, and be prepared to kill other human beings. Also there is a requirement of perfect vision to become a pilot, a requirement that would be a problem for Christopher. Still, following the Christopher’s logic,

none of these requirements have anything to do with performing as an astronaut. The political and socially constructed requirements an individual has to fulfil in order to become an astronaut, is arbitrary to the everyday working-life of an astronaut.

## 2.2 Narration

In *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* Haddon makes use of the narrative strategy of letting the individual with AS control the whole narrative (or at least that's what we are led to believe), by arranging the protagonist-narrator as the implied author of the novel. Through using the experience of the impairments connected with his having AS, Haddon's novel is narrated and focalized in a manner that enhances curiosity and reflection in readers.

The first thing we learn about the focalization of the novel, is that the story is narrated through a first consonant first-person narration (Suzanne Keen 37), which highlights the immediacy of reports. There is no "introduction" in the beginning or "equilibrium" conveying a framework for interpretation; Christopher simply starts relating what is right in front of him. He ends his narration without commenting on how the experiences "changed his life," but simply stating that "And in to years' time I'm going to take A level Physics and get an A grade" (Haddon 267). The only exception from the general rule of Christopher reporting events as they happen is when he relates past events. In this form of analepses (Rimmon-Kenan 120) the narrator operates with hindsight and authorial comments on his own personal growth, or feelings connected with memories.

Secondly, Christopher is an example of an *unreliable* consonant first-person narrator. There are a number of markers in the novel that prove his unreliability, for example, Rimmon-Kenan argues that the very unusual use of footnotes in fiction works to undermine the

credibility of the text, *and* the reliability of the narrator (Rimmon-Kenan 101). An example of footnote can be found on page 175, where Christopher writes “12This is really true because I asked Siobhan what people thought about when they looked at things, and this is what she said”. Christopher’s unreliability not only refers to his actions or intentions in certain situations, but also to his limited knowledge of how society and communication works. He often finds himself in situations he does not understand, leading him to temper-tantrums, where he screams, hits or indirectly threatens to stab people that touch him (Haddon 189). The first example of this limitation or restriction is found in the first meeting between Siobhan and Christopher, where the issue of facial expressions is brought up:

But it was difficult to decide which of the diagrams was most like the face they were making because people’s faces move very quickly. When I told Siobhan that I was doing this, she got out a pencil and another piece of paper and said it probably made people feel very (picture of facial expression) and then she laughed. I tore the original piece of paper up and threw it away, And Siobhan apologized. And now if I don’t know what someone is saying I ask them what they mean or I walk away (Haddon 3)

Christopher never comprehended that the answer to Siobhan’s question was “uncomfortable”, while readers of any age group would be able to read the facial expression chart with the blink of an eye, and understand the full content of what Siobhan was expressing. Still, the narrative moves forward from this situation without answering Christopher, showing how he as protagonist and narrator has a more limited understanding of his own experience than the reader of the novel has.

What might also be recognized in the quote above, is that the novel consists of prospective, permanent gaps in is created within the text because of the unreliable, dissonant first-person narration. Since the reason behind these prospective gapes are the issues Christopher has in understanding and using ToM, the gaps in information can be completed by the common knowledge of the reader. The gaps in the information provided by Christopher force the reader to fill the gap in order to create the understanding one might expect to get from a novel, as Rimmon-Kenan states – it always enhances curiosity.

Whatever category the gap belongs to, it always enhances interest and curiosity prolongs the reading process and contributes to the reader’s dynamic participation in making the text signify (Rimmon-Kenan 130)

There are few commentaries or descriptions in the text, leaving the need for causality a question the reader has to fill in for it self. Christopher Boone's narrative voice does not explain or describe, and the text clearly suggests that he is having difficulty with the use of descriptive language. The interesting effect of combining these narrative strategies is that even if Christopher only presents the *story*, the reader experience a rich *plot* when adding to the story their own knowledge of the human mind and social communication. The lack of what one might call "classical narration" and "classical plot" in this case proves to be one of the strengths of the narrative.

Mark Haddon's choice of using first-person in the novel, in combination with narrative restriction, becomes the most effective, narrative strategy in order to narrate Christopher's experience. This narration forces the reader to take on Christopher's world-view; and it also allows its readers to experience the symptoms of AS by narrative limitation. "Mark Haddon makes use of dramatic irony through out, ensuring through descriptions that the reader understands more about what is going on than Christopher himself does" (Bates 48).

Although Christopher mentions his own problem with understanding emotions, his social limitation is experienced by the reader through the restricted narrative, rather than through a didactic approach. In her Doctor of Letters, *Narrative Representations of Asperger's Syndrome*, Julie O'Connell investigated contemporary novels written by author with ASD, and novels written by neurotypical authors.

Furthermore, I discovered that third person narration can lend itself to another kind of duality. In their attempts to demystify AS, some writers took it upon themselves to "educate" readers about the disorder, which came across as heavy-handed. Regarding the novels assessed, Bill Greenwell says "They may work as novels in their own right, but their use of Autism is didactic (279)

A good example of a novel that takes on an educational style or didactic approach in representing ASD, through a third-person narration, is the 1964 bestseller called *Dibs – In search of self*. The non-fictional novel portrays Dibs, the autistic boy that through guidance and play therapy initiated by his therapist Axline is released from the "Autistic trap". This novel promotes play therapy as a cure for autism, but it also describes autism and its symptoms through a third-person narrative, where the voice and the key of understanding of

autistic experience is Axline, the therapist. In this case, the therapist concluded, through using the clinical model as it was presented in the 1960 – that the mother was to blame for the development of ASDs, and labelled her the “refrigerator mother”. The reason to bring up Axline’s works is simply to contrast the narrative strategies of Haddon’s novel with the narrative strategies that have dominated the field of disability, and especially intellectual disability such as AS and ASD’s, since the occurrence of the diagnosis in the 1960.

One of the results of Haddon’s narrative strategy of showing Christopher’s cognitive limitations in relation to social interaction, is that when we read the sections of the novel devoted to the circumstances surrounding the death of Christopher’s mother, may leave the reader wondering what really happened;

But mother was cremated. This means that she was put into a coffin and burnt and ground up and turned into ash and smoke. I do not know what happens to the ash and I could not ask at the crematorium because I didn’t go to the funeral (Haddon 43).

Although we know little about the family and their traditions, we might assume that no diagnosis or illness could prevent a 13 year old boy from going to his mother’s funeral, and the fact that he did not go only contributes to the mystery of what *really* happened to Christopher’s mother. We also learn that Mrs. Shears spends the night with Christopher’s father right after Mother died, which, by any social standard would be unnatural. At least one might argue that an older reader would use their knowledge of convention and norms to put two and two together. The community of readers, or the interpretive community, as described by Bennett and Royal, might readers find the story unfulfilling, as it is presented through Christopher’s voice.

Any individual reader is necessarily a part of a ‘community’ of readers. Every reader, he suggests, reads according to the conventions of his or her ‘interpretive community’. The individual reader’s response, according to this model, is determined by the conventions of reading into which he or she has been educated within a particular socio-historical context (Bennett Royle. 13).

One might discuss what the main plot of the novel really is, since of the two main conflicts of the story seem to happen simultaneously. Firstly, The murder of Wellington, the plot in which the protagonist himself is engaged. But the second mystery, and the one that engages



the reader, is not the one of who killed Wellington, but rather the question of what happened to Christopher's mother. In this manner, Haddon forces the readers to experience two world-views at the same time, and the narrative strategy of restriction that serves to narrate the reality of Christopher's AS, also become the key strategy in driving the plot forward.

## Writing Christopher's World

Mark Haddon has structured the narrative text through Christopher's eyes. The use of consonant, first-person narration is not the only narrative strategy used in the novel, but Christopher's personal experience is described by constructing the story around prime numbers, diagrams, pictures, symbols, signs, charts, maps and a changing style of letters. Haddon's use of these elements is not restricted to a certain section of the story, and they do not occur on random. Most pages of the novel contain elements that deviate from the classical form of novel writing. An example of this might be found in chapter 103, where Christopher follows the suggestion of Siobhan to add description to his novel, because "The idea of a book was to describe things using words so that people could read them and make a picture in their own head" (85). Siobhan serves as the mediator between Christopher's world and the neurotypical world, and offers explanations and corrections that make communication flow easier between those two worlds. In this chapter, she establishes what the neurotypical expectation of a novel is, and then mediates this to Christopher. Even if it seems that Christopher understands what he is supposed to do, he fails to do so. He is not satisfied with describing the garden and the sky using only words, due to the fact that he considers language unstable, and far too subjective. Language offers too many possible meanings; all determined by factors Christopher can not access or understand with pure logic, for example when people use the saying "When pigs fly!" as a response to something that is very unrealistic.

I think it should be called a lie because a pig is not like a day and people do not have skeletons in their cupboards. And when I try and make a picture of the phrase in my head it just confuses me because

imagining an apple in someone's eye doesn't have anything to do with liking someone a lot and it makes you forget what that person was talking about (Haddon 20)

Christopher's understanding of language as fundamentally unstable shapes the content of the narrative text. When substituting descriptions with diagrams or maps, the risk of misunderstanding is minimized. When he describes what the cloud looked like, he offers the verbal description first:

Furthest away in the sky where lots of little white clouds which looked like fish scales or sand dunes which had a very regular pattern. Then, next furthest away and to the west were some big clouds which were coloured slightly orange because it was nearly evening and the sun was going down. Then, closest to the ground was a huge cloud which was coloured grey because it was a rain cloud. And it was a big pointy shape and it looked like this (Haddon 86)

When reading the verbal description Christopher gives us of what the cloud looked like, it is obvious that verbal depiction can not give us a clear enough understanding to form a picture of it in our minds. The section informs us of Christopher's effort, but also informs us of what a picture can do that words cannot do. The visual elements included in the narrative text might contribute to secure language as a medium for Christopher, minimizing the risk of misunderstanding, and thereby creating a bridge between his world and the neurotypical world.

In this sense, the author secures the communication between Christopher and the readers through including various forms of visual elements. The other function of this inclusion is showing readers how Christopher's mind works. The constant effort to structure information in schemas offers insight into how Christopher prefer to order his experiences with numbers and points (Haddon 105). It also highlights how Christopher is drawn to patterns and logic in stressful situations, such as on the train from Swindon to London. Instead of depicting the shifting sounds of the train, the people entering the train or leaving, or the chaos of the experience, Christopher is focusing his attention to the pattern on the walls (Haddon 227). The pattern does not change, and offers a system of logic that seems to calm him down.

Visual elements not only offer structure to Christopher's impressions, but also in some cases it serves to communicate the way structure and order crumbles when an overload of information happens. One example of this function is the way signs; letters and pictures are mixed together in Christopher's brain when the stream of information becomes overwhelming on the underground station in London. When looking at page 209 in Haddon's novel, one may ask why he chose to include a whole page of information that both the protagonist and the readers cannot interpret. The answer might simply be that through *reading* Christopher's experiences, through experiencing Christopher's symptoms, the reader is forced to feel the same helplessness as Christopher feels. Page 209 in Haddon's novel provokes empathy and understanding as a reader-response.

Using diagrams and different visual elements in a narrative text would not have the same effect if the first person narration was not as restricted as Christopher's narration is. Even if the reader always knows more than Christopher about social convention and the hidden meanings of language, the reader is forced to follow Christopher's lead when it comes to understanding the visual elements included. On page 199, Christopher finds a letter that was written by his mother *after* Father explained to him that she was dead. The reader is allowed to see the envelope through Christopher's eyes, but we have to follow Christopher's description and logic in order to understand the mystery of who sent it. At the underground in London we encode visual elements together with Christopher, without any superior knowledge of what he should do, where he should go or how the story will progress.

## 2.3 The Representation of the Mother

Having now explored how the narrative strategies and the representation of the diagnosis creates dynamic representation of AS, the next question that can be raised is how the family

of the individual with AS is treated. More specifically, how the *mother* is presented, considering the importance given to the mother within the clinical model. In Haddon's novel the relationship between mother and child with AS is presented in a manner that emphasizes the power of first person narration, and that at the same time works as a response to the tradition of Bruno Bettelheim.

Father had never grabbed hold of me like that before. Mother had hit me sometimes because she was a very hot-tempered person, who means that she got angry more quickly than other people and she shouted more often. But Father is a more level-headed person, which means he doesn't get angry as quickly and he doesn't shout as often (Haddon 103)

In this section of the novel, Christopher presents the emotional environment of his home, depicting his father as the calm, levelheaded person that has never hit or grabbed Christopher. What is more interesting, however, is the way that Christopher in a matter of a few lines depicts his mother as unreliable, due to her emotions. Although this description of his mother is rather dramatic for us as readers, his mother Judy Boone is not presented as emotionally deprived as Bruno Bettelheim suggested that a mother of a person with AS would be. Bearing in mind that Judy Boone by Christopher's own reports hits, grabs and shouts, there is still an overweight of positive reports of memories and feelings. One of the moments in which Christopher connects his mother with positive, emotional impressions is when describing her: "Mother was a small person that smelt nice" (24). Considering the importance of Christopher's invented system of determining whether a day is a *Good Day* or a *Black day* (31), the description of the get-well card he made for his mother (35) expresses his best wishes for her, and might also be interpreted as his way of expressing how he missed her when she was in hospital.

Even if Judy Boone - through Christopher's descriptions - might be understood as emotionally unreliable, she is quite the opposite of the mother Bettelheim described. She is not emotionally deprived; on the contrary, she carries her emotions on the outside of her skin. In addition, there is nothing that suggests that she is unable or unfit to care for her son - rather there are examples of how she goes to great lengths in order to adapt to her son's diagnosis, to

comfort and calm him down. One example of her emotional competence as a mother is the section where Christopher and his family go on holiday, and his mother is swimming:

And Mother said, 'Look. It's lovely'. And she jumped backwards and disappeared under the water and I thought a shark had eaten her and I screamed and she stood up out of the water again and came over to where I was standing and held up her right hand and spread her fingers out in a fan and said, 'Come on Christopher, touch my hand. Come on now. Stop screaming. Touch my hand. Listen to me, Christopher. You can do it.' And after a while I stopped screaming and I held up my left hand and spread my fingers out in a fan and we made our fingers and thumbs touch each other. And Mother said, 'It's OK, Christopher. It's OK. There aren't any sharks in Cornwall,' and then I felt better. (Haddon 97)

Christopher underlines how behavioural problems in a person can cause stress on the person's caregivers. Ed Boone and Judy Boone are both described as parents that sometimes find themselves emotionally overwhelmed by the challenges of living and caring for a person with Asperger Syndrome. In the following quote, Christopher argues of how a person can *change*, and he explains how he does not have as many behavioural problems any more. The focus is not how Christopher as a person causes overwhelming amounts of stress on his parents, but on how his behavioural problems causes stress, described by Christopher in this section:

I used to think that Mother and Father might get divorced. That was because they had lots of arguments and sometimes they hated each other. This was because of the stress of looking after someone who has Behavioural Problems like I have. I used to have lots of Behavioural Problems, but I don't have so many now because I'm more grown up now and can take decisions for myself and do things on my own like going out of the house and buying things at the shop at the end of the road (Haddon 59)

Here, Christopher clearly highlights the effects of his own behaviour. The emphasis is not on Christopher being disabled, but on how the behaviour at times can cause stress on the surroundings. The stereotyped assumption of AS being essentially interlinked with behavioural problems is challenged by the way Christopher develops and becomes more independent.

As already stated, first person narration gives the author the opportunity to speak *with* the individuals that does not have a voice, or have limited capacity of expressing that voice.

When dealing with AS-literature, the person with AS is not the only subject being voiceless. Traditionally the mother has been described through the clinical model, and authors have spoken on *behalf of her* with a narrative tone deprived of empathy and understanding.

Christopher mentions his mother hitting him sometimes (130), and that she was more hot-tempered than his father. Even if the novel is written through a restricted first-person narrator, Haddon gives room for the personal voice of the mother through a series of letters.

I'm not like your father. Your father is a much more patient person. He just gets on with things and if things upset him he doesn't let it show. But that's not the way I am and there's nothing I can do to change that (Haddon 133)

She goes on with presenting a scene where Christopher has a meltdown in a shop during Christmas-shopping. The scene is dramatic, and through using the first person narration in the form of a letter, the personal experience of the helpless mother is shared with the audience. The shopping it self *had* to be done, Christopher's meltdown could not be controlled, people stared at them, bowls were breaking and Christopher wet himself. Any mother would surely break to pieces in such a situation. What the letter describes is the case of a completely normal mother, who is put under an extreme amount of pressure. In contrast to the tradition of leaving the so-called refrigerator-mother mute, Judy Boone has her own voice in the letters, and she has the opportunity to explain her own emotions and reactions.

## 2.4 Marginalization: I'm not a Spazzer

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I'm not a spazzer, which means spastic, not like Francis, who is a spazzer, and even though I probably won't become an astronaut I am going to university to study Mathematics, or Physics, or Physics and Mathematics (Which is a joint Honour School), because I like mathematics and physics and I'm very good at them" (Haddon 33)

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In contemporary adolescent literature featuring disability, one often finds examples of disabled characters being compared to other characters with lower social function. *The Curious Incident* is no exception; Christopher compares himself with, and labels other characters as "stupid". Abby E. Meyer in her Article *But She's not retarded": Contemporary Adolescent Literature Humanizes Disability but Marginalizes Intellectual Disability* argues

that children or adolescent literature featuring disability published after 1990, serves to destabilize the idea of what is normal and what is not. Still, she finds that this is primarily done through promoting physical disability as a category of identity, much in the lines of Rosemary Garland Thompson. Through giving examples from such literature, Meyer proves how intellectual disability is not included or defended by members of its own category, on the contrary, characters with other disabilities are separating themselves from those with intellectual disabilities:

The texts illustrate that disability must be understood as an identity category, celebrate difference and inclusivity, and make strong arguments for accommodation. At the same time, however, many of these narratives struggle to permit normalization, pride and empowerment for people with intellectual disabilities by explicitly valuing and emphasizing intelligence and by consistently marginalizing those with intellectual disabilities (Meyer 269)

Christopher Boone is a good example of how the marginalization of individuals with intellectual or developmental disorders is a contemporary problem. On page 33 he utters that “I’m not a spazzer, which means spastic, not like Francis who is a spazzer”, and again on page 56: “All the other children at my school are stupid. Except I’m not meant to call them stupid, even though this is what they are”. Even with these examples of how Christopher divides the group of disabled people in “intellectual” and “stupid”, it is the novel’s constant focus on the value of the intellect that serves to marginalize the people with intellectual or developmental disorders that are less functional within social community.

Christopher is a person with AS that one might label as high functioning, at least in a social and intellectual perspective. He does not dream of studying maths and physics at university level - he knows that he has the abilities needed to do so. The most striking evidence of how Christopher Boone stands out from other individuals with AS, is the fact that he writes his own novel. Mark Haddon does not use Theory of Mind when constructing Christopher’s narrative, by basing the narrative on logic rather than creative writing. Living with AS would make writing a novel a difficult matter due to the impairment of ToM. There are of course AS authors, and creative writing is possible in some cases. Bearing in mind the popularity of the novel, readers might be lead to believe that most people with AS are able to write novels, or

that they all have “Special powers” just like Christopher with Mathematics and Physics, or that most people with AS refuse physical contact. Many have argued that Christopher Boone is the source of a new stereotyped understanding of Asperger Syndrome, a stereotype that does not value people with AS that does not have “special powers”, can’t write novels, or that are unable to perform socially.

Marginalization of intellectually disabled within novels like *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* is a silent process, which is easily overlooked while reading the novel. Still, separation between what or who is considered “smart”, and who is considered “stupid”, is not a new invention. In the example from *Dibs*, (Axline, 1964) the autism-conversion narrative builds on the notion of turning a low-functioning Aspergen into a high-functioning Aspergen. Even if *The Curious Incident* can’t be described as an autism-conversion narrative, the marginalization of intellectually disabled leave traces of autism-conversion narrative on the novel. Through establishing that Christopher in his childhood was deeply troubled with behavioural problems (Haddon 59) and describing the transition of him becoming “More grown up” with less behavioural problems, suggests that he overcomes some of the symptoms of his own diagnosis. The scene that describes to what extent Christopher is able to overcome his own symptoms is summed up by his journey to London.

Because there were too many (signs) and my brain wasn’t working properly and this frightened me so I closed my eyes again and I counted slowly to 50 but without doing the cubes. And I stood there and I opened my Swiss Army Knife in my pocket to make me feel safe and I held on to it tight. And then I made my hand into a little tube with my fingers and I opened my eyes and I looked through the tube so that I was only looking at one sign at a time and after a long time I saw a sign that said “information” (Haddon 210)

Here, Christopher overcomes his own diagnosis through intellectual problem solving, and through reflecting upon the limits of his own diagnosis. This is not to say that it is impossible for a person with Asperger Syndrome to overcome their own impairments, but in the literary tradition of Autism, this journey to London might mark the revelation of when Christopher overcomes his own diagnosis, and turns from low-functioning and reliant on help from caregivers, to high-functioning and self-reliant. This point becomes problematic, considering that Christopher as a literary character is rarely questioned by the reader – only experienced.



If a reader uncritically believes that all people with AS can “grow” out of the symptoms of their won diagnosis, the novel finds itself replacing one stereotype of AS with a different stereotype of AS.

## Chapter 3 – Representation of AS in *Mockingbird*

Caitlin Smith, the protagonist narrator of the novel *Mockingbird* by Kathryn Erskine, shares with Christopher Boone the condition of having Asperger Syndrome. They also share many of the same characteristics, such as their age, and their love for logic and structure.

Interestingly enough, they both have to deal with the death of a loved one: Caitlin with the recent death of her older brother, Devon.

*Mockingbird* was written by former lawyer Kathryn Erskine, and published in 2011. The novel won the U.S National Book Award for Young People’s Literature in 2012, and is deeply motivated by the author’s personal experience of having a daughter with Asperger Syndrome. Starting the novel by introducing that the novel is written “In hopes that we all might understand each other better” (Erskine, 1) it is clear that one of the motivations behind the novel is to raise the public awareness on Asperger Syndrome.

When looking at contemporary popular culture, there is a general pattern that the characters with AS are preoccupied with science, mathematics or solving crime. In addition, most characters with AS are male, which comes as no surprise considering the statistics and genetics of the diagnosis. According to Hyman and Levy, ASDs affects more boys than girls, with gender ratios ranging from 2:1 to 5:1 (Hyman, Lewy. 326). Examples of characters with AS are Sheldon Cooper in *The Big Bang Theory*, together both dr. Zack Addy and Dr. Temperance Brennan in the popular crime series *Bones* has AS, detective Sonya Cross in *The Bridge*, or even the character Sherlock Holmes in the BBC series *Sherlock*. Although these iconic characters within contemporary popular culture all have the diagnosis; AS is rarely

mentioned as the reason behind the odd, atypical behaviour of the characters, but rather kept a secret. In the cases already mentioned, the characters are tolerated within their social environment *despite* their behaviours, due to the fact that they are immensely smart, or in some other ways gifted. Sheldon Cooper in *The Big Bang Theory* is often the source of frustrations and problems of his gang, and his compulsions, special interests and lack of social custom makes the audience laugh. Mark Haddon's Christopher Boone fits in with this general assumption of individuals with AS being male, interested in science or mathematics, and preoccupied with solving crimes. I argue that the use of AS and ASDs in the TV-shows already mentioned, are using the diagnosis as a mirror wherein the complexity of neurotypical communication and understanding is seen. Often the characters undermine the logic of the neurotypical structure of communication, by asking for logic or coherence. They do not serve as realistic representations of AS, but the abnormality of their worldview becomes a vehicle for the neurotypical community to learn and expand their view of their own neurotypical, social communication.

Kathryn Erskine's protagonist Caitlin Smith challenges many of these assumptions, being female, preoccupied with arts and drawing, and interested in finding closure for her community in the aftermath of a school shooting. This chapter is devoted to looking at the way Erskine creates a novel that reflects the personal experience of living with AS through its narration, how it includes figurative language, and arrests the literary trend of comparing high-functioning individuals with ASDs to low-functioning individuals with ASDs.

### 3.1 Representing the Diagnosis

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*Mrs. Brook says people have a hard time understanding me because I have Asperger's so I have to try extra hard to understand them and that means working on emotion (Erskine, 11*

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Asperger Syndrome is mentioned for the first time on page 11, and is subsequent to the first two chapters where readers notice Caitlin's atypical behaviour. She experiences a sensitivity to light, sounds and smells (2), and a feeling of "floating and falling floating and falling" (3). We are also introduced to one of her greatest challenges by living with AS; She does not like looking into peoples eyes, not even her relatives, as exemplified in this situation: "Dad says to Look At the Person so I look quickly at their nose or mouth or an ear but I still don't remember" (5). Here Hyman and Levy explains the shunning of eye contact in more detail:

People without ASDs generally look at the eyes of a person to whom they are speaking, whereas most people with ASDs look at the person's mouth. When people with ASDs have eye gaze, it tends to be intense and without the social awareness of when to look away (Hyman, Levy 348)

Before revealing the fact that Caitlin has AS, we also understand that even if she is a fifth grader, she still has her own "manner-chart", with stickers. This suggests to the reader that Caitlin undergoes a form of pedagogical correction for unwanted behaviour. Most strikingly, however, is the AS-trait of not liking to be touched, not even by her own father, as in this example: "He lets me stay there and pats my head through the sweater. If it's through the sweater I don't mind" (9). Even if Caitlin mentions her dictionary, and her special interest for words and their meanings, many of the traits mentioned on the first few pages of the novel underlines a shifting focus, where the impairments that Caitlin experiences are given more attention.

Hyman and Levy informs that the effect of having AS might not only be seen as odd or atypical behaviour, but it may also be recognized by more dramatic forms of behaviour, such as self-harm (349) or temper-tantrums. Caitlin does harm to herself when she rubs the wood on the bottom side of Mrs. Book's table (Erskine 17), and when she tries to cut oak with a quarter. Both are examples of the author addressing personal experiences of self-harm, but avoiding to understand them or make Caitlin understand them. Such an event as a TRM is described by Caitlin and her father with a tone that show how such experiences has become a part of everyday life for the family.

In this way, *Mockingbird* does not introduce Asperger Syndrome as an enigma, mystery or a puzzle that should solved. Even if the readers are allowed to read and wonder why Caitlin thinks and acts like she does, the diagnosis is revealed early on. One might conclude that the diagnosis it self is not the core problem of the novel, it is not the puzzle that has to be solved. It is merely an important part of the framework on which the story is set. If we look at the way Kathryn Erskine chooses to present the diagnosis in *Mockingbird*, Asperger is presented as a problem situated *outside* Caitlin. "Mrs. Brook says people have a hard time understanding me because I have Asperger's" (11), it is a problem *people have*, not a problem Caitlin has. As a result of this, Caitlin has to "try extra hard to understand them and that means working on emotion". This manner of presenting the Asperger Syndrome clearly echoes the social perspective on disability, where the diagnosis is not an isolated problem, but a problem that primarily is situated within society.

### The Autism-Conversion Narrative

As earlier noted, Caitlin does not represent the general, autistic population. In an interview with Eisa Ulen, Erskine emphasizes her motivation in making the story of Caitlin as universal as possible:

I wanted to make the story as universal as possible. Every kid is different, just like every kid with Asperger's is different, although there are certainly traits that are similar and are used to define the condition, such as (over)reactions to noise or touch, lack of eye contact, difficulty in social situations, etc. (Erskine in Interview by Eisa Ulen)

Although it is accurate that some symptoms of AS are similar from individual to individual, it is, however problematic to state that the story is made as universal as possible. Considering Caitlin's development through the second half of the novel, I draw connections between autism-conversion or success narratives and *Mockingbird*.

Mark Osteen places the exploration of the autism-conversion narrative under "clinical models" in his collection of articles called *Autism and representation*. The reason for this is that autism-conversion narratives often include a medical solution to the "problem" of autism, and offers an "antidote". The autism-conversion narrative is described by James T. Fisher in his article *No search, no subject? Autism and the American Conversion Narrative* describes in this manner:

"The conversion narrative – a record of the quest for a transformed or redeemed self – is such a pervasive motif in the American idiom that contemporary versions are rarely identified as such or contextualized against the genre's evolving history, from colonial-era Protestant narratives of spiritual conversions to its many subsequent permutations in classic and vernacular American literature" (Fisher 51)

With a first glance, there might not be much suggesting *Mockingbird* as a classical example of autism-conversion, in the same terms as the previously discussed work of Virginia Mae Axline's novel *Dibs – in search of self*. Still, I argue that the second half of Erskine's novel is closely linked with ideas of autism-conversion. First, Caitlin's behaviour is constantly corrected through the novel. This is done either by Mrs. Brooks, her father, the other kids at school. She also experience correction through the memory of her brother Devon. Caitlin argues of how she lives comfortably without friends, in her own controlled, safe environment. In her experience, people are loud (44), they touch or run into each other (56), and it is difficult to do or say the right thing when you cannot access their feelings through empathy (119). The first half of the novel, she opposes to the idea of working on friendship.

She lets me look up friend in her Dictionary. It says: somebody emotionally close. *There's that evil word again. Emotionally. That is not one of my strengths. But you can develop that strength. I look away and suck on my sleeve. I'm not ready to develop that strength just yet.* (Erskine, Chapter 3)

In the chapter called “Shoes”, placed exactly halfway through the novel, Caitlin’s attitude towards friendship changes dramatically. Caitlin tries her best to be a friend to Rachel, but her lack of empathy makes the situation worse for Rachel, and not better. “*CAITLIN!* Emma yells. *That was so mean! Didn’t anyone ever tell you have to be a friend?* That’s when I realize that that maybe I should listen to Mrs. Brook when she talks about friends. Now that Devon isn’t here to tell me” (119) at this moment, Caitlin moves from opposing to work on friendship, or developing the skill of empathy, to dipping her toe in empathy (122). The dramatic change in Caitlin’s behavioural pattern is marked by the way she comforts the bully of the novel, Josh, by patting him on the back when he is sad. “If this is empathy I hope Josh can feel some of the empathy that’s starting to come out of me” (209).

Autism-conversion narrative ultimately ends with the therapist (Mrs. Brook) succeeding in getting through to the patient (Caitlin), and as a result, the patient succeeds in finding Self as it is conceptualized in a neurotypical understanding. This means that the patient learns how to feel empathy, and achieves self-awareness. In *Mockingbird*, Caitlin overcomes as good as every obstacle that was introduced in the beginning of the novel. In the final chapter of the novel, her development is manifest in these ways:

- She is having eye contact with a person.
- She draws with colours because she finally understands how to draw a complete picture.
- She can tell that Michal wants to play with Josh, which means that she is able to imagine what someone else is thinking.
- She remembers her manners.
- She sits on her hands to stop them from shaking in public.
- She says that she does not need her manner-chart anymore.

According to this list, there is nothing about her knowledge or experience that suggests that AS may continue to be an obstacle of communication or ToM. Here, Julie O’Connell treats

another fictional character called Thea, that also overcome the symptoms of AS. In this pursuit, I find O’Connell’s reflections the topic relevant to the autism-conversion narrative:

It isn’t necessarily a bad message to tell the reader that one can “overcome” AS. But is it an accurate message? Does it tell the whole story? I maintain that some behavioural changes are possible through therapeutic and psychopharmacological “rehabilitation”, but writers should also demonstrate, without prejudice, the permanence of the condition. By presenting AS in this more comprehensive way, they will enlarge our understanding of neurological differences and construct a more balanced reality of the syndrome (O’Connell 125)

Even if it is possible for people with AS to develop a greater sense of self-awareness and ToM through structured therapy – it seems implausible for Caitlin to overcome such fundamental deficits in her neurology over the course of a few pages, and even though the description might be *positive*, it is not a realistic representation of AS.

## Process of Conceptualization

Even if the disability of having Asperger Syndrome is presented through a socio-constructivist perspective, there is evidence of how the categories of able/disabled are questioned. The second time Asperger Syndrome is mentioned, Caitlin is the one asking whether Mrs. Brook has AS or not. The reason is simple; she is very persistent, which is a skill Caitlin recognizes as her own.

We are at recess and I think Mrs. Brook might have Asperger’s too, because she is very persistent which is one of my skills. She is stuck on her Let’s Make Friends idea even though I am making it very clear that I am no longer interested in this conversation (81).

If persistence is trait connected with having AS, than a lot of people, including Mrs. Brook could have AS. By introducing this idea, Caitlin deconstructs the concept of normal or abnormal, making such traits of personal character as “persistent” a part of what is normal, rather than abnormal. In other sections of the novel, Caitlin underlines the fact that neurotypical people doesn’t seem to follow their own rules of normalcy.

You shouldn’t smile when you do something bad because a smile is supposed to mean you’re being nice. I wish people would follow the Facial Expression Chart like they’re supposed to. (29)

Even if Caitlin's argument that people should follow the facial expression chart derives from a social misunderstanding, she has a point. The rules of the Facial Expression Chart is made up of neurotypical people for people with AS to understand them better, to structure social communication in a logical way. Caitlin, then, understands that there is no structure of logic to find within the neurotypical communication.

## 3.2 Narration and Language

### Representation of the Impaired ToM

I wanted you use first person to really get inside Caitlin's head and have readers see the world in the way she sees it. If they could live in her shoes, I felt they could better understand why she talks and behaves like she does (Erskine in interview by Eisa Ulen)

Caitlin's impaired ToM is marked through the novel by the absence of internal monologue, featuring it as one of the impairments of having AS, and representing it realistically. In classical first-person narrations, one would expect to find reference to the internal state of the protagonist, while the narrative in this case emphasizes how AS effect Caitlin's ability to anticipate behaviors, negotiate difficulties, and respond productively to change. Ilona Roth explains the association between ToM and self-awareness, by introducing how different modes of thinking about one self also is impaired when living with a deficit in ToM. Often, the internal monologue in fiction is used to relate the physical and emotions of the protagonist, the ability to feel empathy, and ability of *imaginative thinking*. Here, Roth explains what imaginative thinking is and why it is a problem for a person with AS:

Imagination denotes a cluster of related phenomena including pretense and fantasy, metaphorical thinking (In "as if" mode), counterfactual thinking (In "What if?") mode, creative thinking and imagery. These are all mental processes in which the mine operates with concepts and ideas that may have no correspondence with past, current of future reality" (Roth 147)



In both of the novels, *Mockingbird* and *The Curious Incident*, the narrative strategy of consonant, first-person narration pairs up with restricted or limited narration that subsequently follows of having an impaired ToM. The reader is effected by this combination, in that he or she always understands more of the plot than the protagonist narrator does, as exemplified by the analepses where Caitlin and Devon are watching a movie together:

Even when I was five years old and we watched *Bambi*. Bambi's mother is shot dead. You don't see her die because it's a cartoon but you hear the gun and you see Bambi call and call for his mother and she never comes back so she is definitively dead. Devon kept saying, *she can't be dead! She can't be dead*, and I said *she's DEAD Devon!* He started crying and saying, *She's coming back! She has to come back*, so I had to yell at him *SHE'S DEAD AND SHE'S NEVER COMING BACK*, and Dad had to come and take Devon out of the room because like Dad said, *you shouldn't say things like that!* I don't know why Devon couldn't Get It that the mother was dead. Our mother died two years before we watched *Bambi* so he should know that mothers die and that they never ever come back again no matter how much you cry or call for them (Erskine 48).

In this particular situation, having an impaired ToM makes it difficult for Caitlin to understand how her brother Devon connects Bambi's loss of his mother, with his own loss of his mother. The transference of emotion between Bambi and Devon is easily recognized by most readers, but Caitlin cannot access this knowledge. She becomes the outsider, the one unable to participate in this invisible, emotional bond between people. The effect of writing the novel in first-person, however, becomes evident when one follows and listens to the logic in the way Caitlin relates it, and the reader is forced to become a listener in the story, and required by the first-person narrative to understand Caitlin in her own terms. Because of the narrative strategies of consonant, first-person narration combined with the absence of internal monologue, the reader has to project his own emotional and empathical knowledge to the text in order to fill in the blanks. This form of reader response might be considered one of the accomplishments of *Mockingbird*, in that the reader must *experience* the differences between themselves and the AS-representation by "living in her shoes".

## The Written Style of *Mockingbird*

The AS-experience is also represented through the written style of the novel. While reading, one might notice how random words are capitalized, as for example *Closure*, *The Day Our Lives Fell Apart*, *Get It*, *Your Manners*, or *A Plan for Healing*. In a normal sentence within the novel words are formatted with capital letters, even if rules of writing normally would not suggest doing so. I Look At The Person is a concept that occurs with capitalized letters on almost every page, underlining the difficulty that Caitlin experience when adapting to the expectation of looking into someone's eyes when speaking to them. Most of the concepts of communication that are capitalized, are explained by Caitlin herself or Mrs. Brooks, and the strategy of capitalizing the concepts serves to index what we as readers learn about Caitlin's way to relate each concept to herself. As an example, when the concept *The Day Our Lives Fell Apart* appears in the middle of a sentence, we instantly know that it refers to the confusing experience of Devon disappearing from Caitlin's life, and her father slamming the door to Devon's room shut. As we learn from the list of Caitlin's skills, looking up stuff in books is one of them. She is therefore skilled at finding concepts in books and dictionaries, and applies the same level of structure to the information she needs in order to decode situations she does not understand. The capitalization of letters in concepts may also refer to Echolalia or echoing speech that in many people with AS experience, seeing as Caitlin echoes concepts without really understanding what they mean. (Example: *Your manners* vs. *My manners*. Erskine 60). Echolalia is one of the ways children learn key concepts in early childhood, repeating and echoing the words people around them are using, as explained by Levy and Hyman:

“Echolalia, however, is usually gone before 2 years of age, whereas in children with ASDs it may persist in a perseverative (Uncontrollable repetitious) fashion into childhood and beyond. It is speculated that the child with ASD may use perseverative language to provide structure and a known outcome in a social situation that the child does not understand” (Hyman and Levy, 348)

Some parts of the novel are so full of concepts, capitalized letters, capitalized words, italics, and errors in punctuation, that it seems confusing with a first glance. The written text invites us into Caitlin's head, especially through distinguishing between big experiences and small

experiences. Caitlin is sensitive to sounds, as one understands when reading of her reactions during PE or recess, but even if auditory experiences and sounds often are formatted by capitalization, big experiences, or experiencing something *very much* appears to be stressed by capitalized letters, too. “That’s a LOT of work” (87), “William eats DIRT and SCREAMS when he gets mad. I AM NOT AUTISTIC!” (176) “Special IS god” (176).

### Narrative Voice Figurative Language

Although the mentioned examples of narrative strategies dominate most of the narrative in *Mockingbird*, there are places where the representation of AS must be problematized further. At times, the narrative is loaded with figurative language and metaphors. The voice of Caitlin seems to blend with that of the author, and the neurotypical language instructs the representation of AS.

As already established, Caitlin is a high-functioning savant with artistic skills. She has a sophisticated language, and she formulates, and expresses herself well in social situations. It would however be wrong to settle on an idea that her level of artistry, or her sophisticated use of language is the general norm for all people with AS. This is not to say that her level of artistry is improbable, but it is worth noting that savant skills such as Caitlin inhabits, are only found in 10 % of the autistic population (Murray 249). In addition, Rozema states that Caitlin and many of the other Asperger-narrators in contemporary fiction “*aren’t just good with language their all-around brilliant!*” (Rozema 28). Critics such as Mills, Chew, Roth and O’Connell all agree that figurative or descriptive language as it is found in *Mockingbird* is exceptionally rare to find amongst people with AS. Here, Rozema highlights the problem for such representation of AS:

The autism community has a favourite saying that reflects the diversity of the autism spectrum: “if you know one child with autism, you know one child with autism.” Young adult fiction has thus far known only *one* child with autism: the high- functioning, hyper- verbal savant with Asperger syndrome. (Rozema 28)

In fact, the complex use of metaphor and symbolic actions are written through neurotypical knowledge of language, and intended to be read by neurotypical readers. This is established by the way the voice of the author seems to blend with Caitlin's narrative voice. As an example, Caitlin takes off her shoes and touches the floor with her toes, stating, "at least I tried dipping my toe in empathy" (Erskine, 122). The image represents Caitlin's endeavour to learn empathy, and to expand her own ToM, and the same imagery is repeated in the final pages of the novel, marking how Caitlin finally learns how to feel empathy.

I look down at my shoes and socks. Slowly I push off my shoes and let the cool grass tickle my feet through my socks. Then I bend down and pull my socks off and stand right on top of the grass and the earth and I feel a shiver run up my legs and all the way to my neck and it gives me a little chill. But after I move my feet from side to side a little bit I get used to the prickly cool feeling and it starts feeling softer and more like an okay touch. (Erskine 231)

In her exploration of what she calls the "autistic idiolect", Dr. Kristina Chew is discussing how figurative language, like metaphors and metonymies consists of arbitrary connections between word and concept. The process of conceptualizing, or recognizing how a word (signifier) points to a certain concept (signified) is a lifelong language project for a person with any form of ASD.

A child with autism can be described as living in a world of contingent relations. He/she does not grasp meaning automatically, inasmuch as this involves a symbolic register in which something can stand for something else because of similarity. Thus do autistic individuals have "concrete" thinking and language. And therefore learning how to think using figurative language like metaphors must be a part of his or hers speech and cognitive education. (Chew 138)

Dr. Chew and O'Connell both agree that mastery of figurative language can be accomplished by people on the spectrum, through a process of learning and experimenting with creative writing. In the sections of *Mockingbird*, however, the example of Caitlin taking off her shoes and socks is a metaphor of her learning empathy, and it comes across as a metaphor instructed by the author, not through the personal experience of Caitlin. One reason is that the use of the metaphor is placed outside of Caitlin's own reflection, and that it is written in a manner that readers may understand, but that Caitlin herself cannot access. Julie O'Connell argues that

self-awareness and the use of figurative language by people with AS goes hand in hand, but in the example of Caitlin standing barefoot on the grass, she has no self-awareness as of the symbolic meaning of her actions. It seems as if the intention of the metaphor is to give the reader a deeper understanding of Caitlin`s learning process, but doing so by placing Caitlin outside the full understanding of the metaphor. In other words, Caitlin becomes a puppet and the representation of AS in this case becomes a vehicle for a neurotypical understanding of autism. This becomes a problematic section of the novel, seeing as the other narrative strategies are used in order to motivate the reader to understand Caitlin on her own terms, and through her own worldview.

One of the important conflicts of the novel is for the whole community to find “Closure” (70) after the school-shooting. The concept of closure is introduced to Caitlin, and the storyline constructs her developing knowledge of what this concept means. The problem of closure is solved when Caitlin finally “Gets it”, or gets the meaning of it on page 220. As a result, she donates the Devon`s Eagle-scout project to the middle school during a memorial service. For one thing, it is problematic to see how closure for the whole community is actually accomplished, and the reader never really learn what it is she gets when she gets it. The link between a memorial service and the concept of “closure” seems haphazard. In addition, the concept “Closure”, becomes closely related to Caitlin overcoming the obstacles of living with an impaired ToM, leaving one interpretation of the concept “closure” to suggest that harmony and healing is accomplished only when the individual with AS overcomes the effects of having AS.

There is an alternative interpretation that offers a socio-constructivist perspective on Caitlin`s development: through the course of the novel, she learns to understand the *concept* of empathy, and she *feels* empathy (219). She also understands that closure does not simply involve finishing a material project such as Devon`s chest, but also it includes “*the state of experiencing an emotional conclusion to a difficult life event such as the death of loved one*”. Caitlin transgresses her problems with ToM by connecting the meaning of *closure* to actions,

such as organizing a memorial service for the community. This demonstrates how Caitlin as a character with AS has the ability to change, to learn and understand complex, social concepts such as *closure*, and she is able of learning to feel empathy.

### 3.3 Marginalization: “He eats DIRT!”

When evaluating representations of AS in literature, one tends to look for the ways in which AS is represented as normal/abnormal, comparing the worldview of the individual with AS to a neurotypical worldview. This is, however, not the only way a novel that feature disability draws comparisons. Many novels - amongst them *Mockingbird* and *The Curious Incident* – compare mental capacity or social function between different individuals with different disabilities.

In the novel *Mockingbird*, the comparison is made through neurotypical people in the story, not by Caitlin herself. There is one occasion where she evaluates the social skills of a boy with autism, concluding that she does not like him in her own environment. Even if we know that one of the impairments of Caitlin’s AS is a heightened sensitivity to sound, the novel does suggest that William H. does not fit into Caitlin’s environment, and that she prefers not to be close to him.

Josh is walking towards me and he’s smiling even though he runs into William H.’s Personal Space and knocks him down. You shouldn’t walk into someone else’s Personal Space. Especially not William H.’s. William H. is autistic. He’s in the other fifth-grade class. He has Mrs. Brook time too but Mrs. Brook says it’s good for everyone to be in a regular class. But he screams a lot so I’m glad he’s not in my class except for recess and PE. (Erskine Chapter 5)

Caitlin’s voice through the novel is informative, and her explanation of William H. is not different. She informs us that he screams a lot, without dwelling more on the subject. Through this marginalization and exclusion of a less functioning individual is allowed to seep into the narrative.

In the chapter called “Friends”, the issue of marginalization of disabled individuals is underlined. The chapter opens with Caitlin telling Mrs. Brook that it is time for her to make some new friends. Her attempt to make friends falls short, being dismissed by the other girls because of her “disturbing behaviour”. The girls compare her to William H., calling her autistic. The scene ends with Caitlin in her turn marginalizing William H. when she argues that *his* “disturbing behaviour” is a problem for her.

*Guys, guys! Another girl says. Stop it! Stop laughing! She’s autistic. Like William H. My hands are shaking really fast now. I am NOT autistic! Some of the girls laugh. William doesn’t talk. Can you HEAR ME TALKING? Okay but – William eats DIRT and SCREAMS when he gets mad! I AM NOT AUTISTIC!*

William H. is not defended by anyone else than Mrs. Brook though the novel. He is pulled out as an example of someone less functioning than Caitlin, during recess or PE. The fact that he eats dirt is mentioned three times through the novel, together with the way he usually screams, kicks and has a loud voice. Normally neurotypical people comments on the behaviour of William H, for example Michael in this case:

*Then I notice Michael’s face. Have you been eating dirt, I ask him. He frowns and shakes his head. Only William H. eats dirt. I know. So what’s the brown stuff on your face? (94)*

Even if the downgrading of William H. happens in many occasions through the novel, *Mockingbird* provides a medium for the protagonist, a person that cares for all the children, including those with disabilities. Mrs. Brook understands them and acts as communicators in situations that Caitlin does not understand automatically. Mrs. Brook as character serves the purpose of educating Caitlin into a better understanding and social interaction. In addition, Mrs. Brook offers the ideal of how one should relate to people with AS and other disabilities. “We all fall on the spectrum of behaviour somewhere” (177), Mrs. Brook, argues, underlining that William H. has several good qualities, even if he cannot speak. Caitlin attempts to marginalize William H. on basis of his skills, and Mrs. Brook replies by defending him on basis of his skills. Without the example of marginalization given through the character William H, the novel would not have the opportunity to arrest the idea of marginalization in

the way that it does. Mrs. Brook engages with the question of marginalization by arresting Caitlin's thoughts of William H. Mrs. Brook instructs Caitlin, and the readers, of how one should think about low-functioning ASD – arguing that value has nothing to do with function.

## Chapter 4 – Inclusive Education

Christopher Boone and Caitlin Smith are both fictional characters, but as the analysis proves, the narration of these characters represents AS by relating how their experience of the world differs from that of the neurotypical experience. In addition, the fictional, yet personal experience of these two protagonists emphasizes how communication between the person with AS, and the neurotypical person demands effort from both sides, because mutual understanding, in many cases, do not come naturally. On the neurotypical side, the traditional stereotyping and marginalization hinders a dynamic view of those with AS. On the other side, people with AS often struggle to navigate through rules, codes, verbal and non-verbal language, and communication becomes difficult. What one might learn from *The Curious Incident* and *Mockingbird* is, however, that all characters, with or without AS, develop knowledge and empathy through learning from each other.

The two novels leave us with an important, pedagogical question: How should one improve the opportunities for social learning and training, and how should one structure education in order to make it inclusive, both to people with AS, and to pupils who struggle in other ways? Before exploring this question specifically, I will turn the attention to LK06 (National Curriculum for Knowledge Promotion) and the way in which disability is dealt with in the core curricula of Norwegian education. Secondly, I will look at how the claims of the core curriculum are reflected through the subject curricula after year 10.

”Education should counteract prejudice and discrimination, and foster mutual respect and tolerance between groups with differing modes of life. Education should provide training in cooperation



between persons of different capacities and groups with diverse cultures (...) Many people are handicapped in relation to their surroundings. Education must convey knowledge about, and foster equal worth and solidarity for those whose skills differ from those of the majority. And, not least, it should promote appreciation that any one of us can be struck by illness or injury, by destruction, tribulations, or anguish, all of which can make us dependent on compassion from others. (The spiritual human being, core curriculum)

In this section of the core curriculum, words like “handicapped” and “persons of different capacities” clearly suggests persons with other needs, and other abilities than those considered majority. Seeing as the term “persons with different capacities” is followed by “and groups of diverse cultures”, the people with different capacities are often forgotten as a target for specific education. The core curriculum also states that education should provide training in cooperation between neurotypical persons and people with disabilities, or different capacities. One should be able to conclude from this, that specific education that promotes understanding of people with skills that differ from the majority should be provided, and that students should be given training in cooperation, which means “the process of working together to the same end”.

Even if these important aims of Norwegian education are formulated in the core curriculum, the competence aims after year 10 does not suggest any specific education that “provides training in cooperation between persons of different capacities and diverse cultures”. Diverse cultures, understood as people from other countries, with other religions or traditions, are however specifically mentioned in the competence aims of many subjects. All though the Norwegian translation might also be understood simply as to “provide training in cooperation between people that are different”, the reference that follows with “many people are handicapped” refers to people with learning disabilities, developmental disabilities, physical or psychological disabilities. Even if there are no competence aims that formulate specific education about disabilities, many of the competence aims in different subjects such as Norwegian, English and Religion all provide room for the specific education that the core curriculum suggest. Education that deals specifically with disabilities, then, falls into the domain of each school to prioritize, as the competence aims are interoperated into the local subject curricula.

## 4.1 Persons of Different Capacities

Considering that the core curriculum does not specifically state that education should provide training in cooperation between persons *with* disabilities and people *without* disabilities, I argue that the term “different capacities” also refers to the minority present in a normal, Norwegian class. According to research done by SSB (Statistics Norway), about 8% of all pupils in Norwegian primary and lower secondary education receive special education in 2014. This number of course only refers to pupils that have been through an expert assessment which concludes that the pupil is unable to benefit satisfactorily from ordinary teaching, according to the act of special education. It should be noted, that all pupils with ”capacities that differs from those of the majority” are not included within the 8%, and, that in an authentic classrooms least one of the pupils will need adapted education or special education. If we also include the number of pupils that have *higher* competence than that of the majority, one understands that many different examples of ”persons with capacities” are found in every classroom. Combined with the aims described out in the core curriculum, I find that there is a need to educate specifically about internal differences between people, and train pupils in how to understand and communicate with *each other*, and a need to structure education in a way that includes *all* the persons with different capacities.

## 4.2 AS and Ordinary Education

According to the act of education, “Education shall be adapted to the abilities and aptitudes of the individual pupil, apprentice and training candidate” (the education act, chapter 1, section 1-3) underlining the importance of adapting education to the needs of the individual. In the case of AS, the person’s intelligence and ability to receive new knowledge might not be the main obstacle of education, whereas cooperation and communication with peers might hold people with AS back from receiving ordinary education. Education through social activities in a classroom might not be the most effective way to adapt education, and, as the social barrier

is hard to cross, people with AS often receive individual education in separation from the social environment, from a teacher with special competence, a normal teacher or an assistant.

As earlier mentioned, the primary impairment connected with having AS, is that of ToM – shown through the understanding of social communication, informal rules and regulations, facial expressions, or the understanding of empathy. Statped, the Norwegian national service for special needs education, writes in their resources on Asperger Syndrome that;

“Students with AS have to learn social skills specifically. They often find it difficult to understand what others may take for granted. The pupil with AS will must have intellectual guidance in order to acquire social competence, because they perceive the world literally, and they often have difficulty understanding what is not said, and what is not visible” (Statped 11)

In adapting education to the needs of a person with AS, social education becomes a key component. Furthermore, even if one cannot apply the fictive worlds of Caitlin and Christopher Boone to the real world of special education, they both develop through the novel by being involved with a social, neurotypical environment, and the neurotypical characters develop in novel through involvement with the persons with AS. There is, then, much to gain from finding pedagogical methods to construct learning environments where people of different capacities and skills can meet, and learn to cooperate - Seeing as the core curriculum argues of training in cooperation. In addition, I argue that to include social training in education of people with AS is important when adapting education to their abilities and aptitudes.

### 4.3 A Structured Environment for Inclusive Education

In order to establish an environment that promotes inclusion of people with AS, and that promotes social learning, the first place to start with the teacher-to-pupil communication. According to Statped, one should adapt to a clear and specific form of communication, where the teacher avoids using relative concepts, unclear criteria or messages, or use of sarcasm and irony. Also, the teacher should try to limit the use of indirect communication, especially in

situations where important messages are given, or when behaviours are corrected or rewarded. When demands and criteria for behaviour are communicated through body language, or by using a language that contains metaphors or metonymies, there is a risk the pupils interpret or misunderstand important messages. In this, the teacher should make effort to take on the perspective of “If the pupil does not understand what I mean, it is my problem” (Statped 10). Statements such as “Good work” or “You could have made more effort” have the potential of confusing the pupil with AS, when the initial intention was to reward good effort or correct bad effort. One might also understand why figurative statements and expressions such as “Let me see it in black and white!” or “he went through a baptism of fire” can confuse a person with an impaired ToM.

To structure the learning environment in a class, correspondingly involves an effort to structure the lesson plans and learning activities, so that pupils gain an overview of each lesson. This can be accomplished by introducing the learning goals (both goals of social training, and of subjects) for each lesson, presented visibly on the whiteboard or PowerPoint-presentation. Statped argues that plans, rules and criteria, or a logical structure of lessons, might make it easier for a person with AS to participate ordinary education. In addition, the method of modelling new concepts, especially social concepts, is helpful. In the example of oral presentations, the whole class would benefit from looking at the teacher when he or she is modelling the example of a good presentation – considering that many pupils, not only those with AS, find it difficult to understand from written criteria what the teacher actually means with “a good presentation”, the class as a whole benefit from visualization and modelling. Statped also argues that a person with AS might find it easier to join the class in learning activities, if rituals such as standing up by the desk, is repeated at the beginning of each lesson – so that collective focus and silence is gained before the learning activity starts.

These suggestions, including learning goals for the lesson, rituals at the beginning of each lesson, structured and specific communication from teacher to pupils, and structure of the lesson that promotes clarity into what and how the lesson is organized – might all be seen as

initiatives that creates a better learning environment for a person with AS. They are, however, also initiatives that might improve the overall learning environment of the classroom, and making the environment more inclusive towards those who struggle. As already discussed, people with different skills and capacities, might also refer to those with an understanding of mathematics that are above average, those with ADHD, those with dyslexia, or even the pupils with problem behaviour such as aggression or low self-control. All of these groups benefit from a clear, specific communication – and especially those with problem behaviour:

“In a structured learning environment, the pupils know what is expected from them, and where they can turn for help. They are given messages of what to work with, where to sit, who to work with, how long they should work, how much they are expected to accomplish, and what criteria should be met in order to have their work approved” (Ogden 198)

Ogden also explains how the pupils with problem behaviour, similarly to those with AS, should not be given “try and fail” assignments. It is important, both to the students with AS and those with problem behaviour, that they are given assignments that promotes a sense of empowerment.

Pupils with AS and pupils with behavioural problems might experience a benefit when communication and overall structure is introduced in the learning environment, but they are also different. A person with AS might need a separate room in order to leave if the social situation becomes too stressful. It is also proven that people with AS benefit more from subject education if learning activities are preformed in separation from the class, where there are few distractions. I argue that education of people with AS should be flexible at this point; the subject-schedule and assignments should focus on both social training and subject education, which means that cooperative learning activities should be planned. According to Statped, a person with AS will have better learning conditions if he or she is prepared of when and how learning activities will be carried out, and that social training is most effective if combined with regular and supportive conversations with the teacher.

## 4.4 Cooperative Learning

As already established, many of the same initiatives and methods that are suggested in connection education a person with AS, are the same measures used to improve and prevent behavioural problems, or to meet other needs in the classroom. If we then are to conclude that, the overall structure and good communication is important in creating a healthy learning environment, than the second pursuit might be to find a didactical approach, and build a framework for lessons. In this pursuit, Johnson and Johnson writes that cooperative learning, or “learning together” has many beneficial effects:

Research concludes that cooperation, compared to competing or working individually, leads to A) better performance and more productivity, (B) more supportive, caring and committed relationships, and C) better mental health, social competence, a more realistic self-perception and better ability to deal with stress and adversities” (Johnson, Johnson. 18)

The didactical approach of performing “learning together” seems to address many of the problem areas connected AS, as it tries to facilitate education and learning activities that promotes interaction between pupils without, and pupils with AS. It tackles the question of how one should meet the needs of *both* the students with high *and* low competence in different subjects – while also implementing social training into lessons. Pupils with AS might benefit from such education, and in reference to pupils with behavioural problem, Ogden argues that “the most difficult pupils should spend as much time as possible together with their peers, and individual measures has better effect when implemented within the frame ordinary education (Ogden 198). The method of “learning together” stands out in a number of ways when choosing a frame where both social training and subject education should co-exist within one lesson.

It should be noted that the most effective way of performing cooperative learning that includes a person with AS, is when he or she is included in a formal learning group (Johnson, Johnson. 21), where the same group of people work together through a longer project, in order to finish a product. Making learning groups stay together for a longer period, increases

the beneficial effects of social training – at the same time as a person with AS would be more apt to cooperation when knowing with whom and how work is carried out. When implementing formal learning groups, the teacher might give each group-member a role – such as for example observer, leader or secretary. This opens the possibility of designing group models that are more likely to work for the parties involved. As an example, if the group project is to prepare a presentation on environmental changes and pollution, a person with behavioural problems who enjoys talking about cars or motorcycles, might be assigned a role where he or she has to take responsibility to investigate how cars pollute the environment. Also, the person with AS might have the initial role as *observer*, looking at writing a report on the social process of the group, according to the social goals the teacher set up in the beginning of the lesson. Even if the process of planning and designing such learning activities might be demanding for the teacher, research shows that such didactical methods works to improve the educational situation of those with other capacities.

1. In cooperative activities, students perceive low performing peers in multidimensional (as apposed to stereotypical) and dynamic (as opposed to static) ways. Low performing students are recognized for their areas of strength, which are revealed over the course of on-going and appropriately structured interactions.
2. Students tend to value high effort despite low ability. Therefore, if the low performer is trying hard in the group, he or she will be liked for making good effort.
3. Students in cooperative groups have expectations that all members will help to facilitate the group's attainment of the goal. These expectations are generalized to the low-performing group member – even when that person doesn't actually contribute to success.
4. Students like to assist low-performing peers. There is a norm of helping others in our society, and helpers become personally committed to doing so. This personal commitment is hypothesized to result in greater liking of the low performing peer. (Johnson and Johnson, 1989)

There are some notes to be mentioned in relation to cooperative learning. Formal learning groups, defined as a group working together over a longer period of time – might contribute to safety and comfort for a person with AS. But if the group is a heterogeneous group, with four or less members, there is a risk of overloading some of its members with responsibility. The heterogeneous group should have peers with different level of competence, both social and theoretical. As seen in the quote by Johnson and Johnson, some of the success of cooperative learning is that “students like to assist low-performing students”, and that helpers

become “personally committed to doing so”. In formal, heterogeneous, cooperative learning groups, that includes peers with AS or other disabilities, the teacher needs to pay close attention to how “the helper” deals with the situation, and preventing the helpers of the group to feel overloaded with responsibility or frustrated because of their commitment. Johnson and Johnson suggest that the teacher should avoid interfering in conflicts, leaving the members of the group to mediate with each other. However, in some cases observation and supportive conversations with individual group-members might be helpful in keeping the focus and motivation of group.

Even if cooperative learning, the role of the teacher becomes important in organizing and leading the groups. Johnson and Johnson also argues that many teachers, all though being aware of the benefits of cooperative learning, are unfamiliar with the key elements of this didactical method.

Many teachers think they use cooperative learning, while in reality they use traditional group work. There is a crucial difference between using traditional group work, and facilitating cooperation between peers (Johnson, Johnson 2006. 45)

The major difference between these two methods of group work is the importance of the social process. Cooperative learning should teach social interaction directly, instead of taking their cooperative skills for granted. The teacher should also be engaged in the social training of the pupils during their work, through observation and correction. For a person with AS, traditional group work, or dysfunctional, cooperative learning groups, might contribute to more stress and less social training than he or she would receive in when being educated in separation from the class. In such groups, the assignment becomes more important than the cooperative process, leaving the person with AS in greater risk of being recognized for their area of weakness rather than their area of strength. Also, with a heightened focus on the finished product of the group, might leave the members more focused on their own learning than to take responsibility for each other (45).



## 4.5 Teaching “The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time” in Reading Circles

Considering that not all classes are blessed with a peer that has AS, and that a first-hand experience of communicating with a person with AS is unachievable in many cases, I believe that pupils have much to gain from *reading* about AS in order to familiarize themselves of the condition. Tammy Kennedy argues of the effects of such education:

Students who are familiar with disability issues are more likely to reject negative stereotypes associated with disabilities and better empower themselves or others who may experience disability in some way. (Kennedy 62)

The analysis underlines the complications involved in fictional representations of AS, but still, memoirs written by AS-authors, or neurotypical works that serves to describe AS in a realistic and positive way, may broaden the general knowledge of the condition. It is, however important to promote the basic skills of *reading, writing, speaking*, and that cooperative education serves an effective method in this pursuit. In the following section I will briefly outline a literary project based on *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*. The novel contains a language and theme suited for readers in lower and upper secondary education, and it could be used as the basis for pupils to discuss disability in a manner that counteracts prejudice and discrimination, and fosters mutual respect and tolerance between groups with differing modes of life. These are the competence aims from the English subject curriculum after year 10, which serves as the basis of the learning activities I suggest using while teaching *The Curious Incident*:

Oral competence:

- Express and justify own opinions about different topics.
- Introduce, maintain and terminate conversations on different topics by asking questions and following up on input.

Written competence:

- Read, understand and evaluate different types of texts of varying length about different topics.
- Demonstrate the ability to distinguish positively and negatively loaded expressions referring to individuals and groups  
(UDIR, English subject curriculum)

## Learning Goals for the Book Project

According to these competence aims, and inspired by recourses from the Norwegian Writing Centre, I suggest using a *reading circle* as a form of cooperative learning when teaching the *The Curious Incident*. The first goal of using reading circles in education, is to make reading something more than an individual experience, and to foster positive experiences of both individual reading and reading *together*. The second goal is to make the study of literature an oral activity. The study of literature often circles around methods involving individual reading, and individual writing. If *The Curious Incident* should be the foundation of education in the English subjects of Norwegian schools (English or English specialisation) it is important to highlight the oral side of it, considering that English is the second or third language of many students. By introducing learning circles to the education, activities such as discussing the novel, and reading the novel out loud are both examples of education promoting oral skills, training the pupils to use English as a working language in authentic situations (Tornberg 17).

## Brief Outline of Working Method

Before starting the book-project, the teacher should demonstrate the criteria of a good group-discussion, by writing up the goals of the social training.

- Becoming skilful listeners.
- The discussion should be about the topic, the novel.
- Giving each other constructive feedback when needed.

- Encouraging each other
- Praising each other's effort.

Modelling and demonstrating a group discussion could be done by permitting some of the pupils to rehearse a group-discussion in front of the class, while the teacher corrects, and instructs them.

When starting this book project, however, the teacher should spend the first half of the lesson activating pupils in *pre-reading*. Here, pupils are asked what their impressions of the book are, by looking at its cover and reading on the back, discussing and sharing their anticipation and first impression of the novel. The reflections of the group and personal reflections are written down in their individual project-journals. The intention of this is for the pupils to share their knowledge, and at the same time prepare themselves to read the novel. During the second half of the lesson, the teacher reads out loud the first chapter of the novel, in order to collectively start the reading circles.

The individual member of the reading circle has a one role, both while reading and discussing the novel. The five roles are *director*, *section guide*, *connector*, *informer* and *wordsmith*. The intention of using different roles is to give the pupils an individual perspective or focus. The director, for example, should find questions in the text that sparks the group conversation. The section guide should find a section within the text that inspired or sparked an extra interest in him or her. The wordsmith should look for words that are new, unfamiliar, funny or important. When the reading circles meet for discussion, the individual member will contribute with different views and impressions of what they have read.

The five roles might be adjusted to the novel in a more specific way, and it may be beneficial to assign the reading circle specific questions that promote understanding of AS in particular. In addition, it enhances self-interest in the text. Such questions might be “how does Christopher describe the other kids at his school?”, or “why do you believe his mother abandoned her family and her son?”. Such questions will foreshadow the type of discussion

that will occur in groups, and secures that pupils reflect on the construction of disability within the text.

Through the following lessons, the reading circle should assign their own homework, and keep each other responsible in doing their individual reading at home. When the group meets together in lessons, they discuss their findings according to their roles, they read another section, and they write their reflections in their project-journal.

## Evaluation and Final Assessment

The individual project-journal becomes an important tool when evaluating if and how pupils executed the project, and if they participated actively during group discussions. In addition, it becomes useful when evaluating the social process according to the goals of social training. One method to promote personal reflection and self-awareness (Slemmen, 189) is to let the individual pupil read through their own journal, evaluating the social process for them selves before turning it in to the teacher,

In addition to the project-journals, it is possible to give a written assignment at the end of the book-project. Here, the teacher might formulate 5 questions, based on the five roles, and allowing the pupils to choose from one of them. As an example, the question to the wordsmith can be “Discuss the cause and effect of different usage of language. Describe how the protagonist and the other characters use language in different ways”.

The teacher should arrange for one lesson to sum up the main aspects of the novel, and allowing for class discussion. This is the place for the teacher to problematize certain aspects of the novel – establishing that the representation of Christopher is not the same as a universal representation of AS, and checking that a more dynamic view of AS is developing among the pupils.

## Thesis Conclusion

This thesis has demonstrated how AS is represented in examples of young adult fiction, by analysing two novels. Through the exploration of the theories and conceptual frameworks in which AS and other disabilities have been understood, the analysis of *The Curious Incident* and *Mockingbird* is moulded on the idea that representations of AS should be both realistic in its portrayal of impairments, and positive in its portrayal of disability as a socially constructed category of identity. These two arguments are important, taking into consideration the history and context of the people with AS, and how stereotypes have dominated the fictional and non-fictional representations, leaving the personal experience neglected. Amongst other authors, Gyasi Burks-Abbot claims that fictional representation of AS might establish and shape the public knowledge of the condition, and that representations like those of *The Curious Incident* and *Mockingbird*, may re-instate new, static, stereotypes that replace the old stereotypes; or they create more a dynamic view of people with AS.

Both novels are widely used in Norwegian education, both in translated versions and in English. Pupils find it entertaining to read the stories of Christopher and Caitlin, their quirky habits and unfamiliar logic. The novels are easily appreciated by pupils with varying competence, because of the simplistic language, interesting characters and unusual plot. Even if the novels for many reasons are found to be attractive, it is a moral responsibility for those involved in literary criticism to investigate novels written on *behalf* of people that have limited capacity of expressing them selves. In addition, it is the teacher's moral and professional responsibility to actually *teach* the novels; to problematize and discuss them according to criticism coming from experts, scholars and people with AS.

On the one hand, the two novels demonstrates a continued stereotyping of AS, but on the other they also present positive, realistic and challenging portrayals of characters with AS. Through their establishment of high functioning, savant protagonists, Erskine and Haddon replace old stereotypes with new ones. Caitlin and Christopher do not represent the whole

spectrum of AS realistically. On the other side, a positive, realistic and challenging portrayal of AS is demonstrated in the way the authors arrange the written narrative according to the personal experience of AS. This is done through the restricted consonant, first person narrator - and a narrative voice that allows us to experience the world as it is seen through the eyes of the character. The narrative in *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* is shaped, both in its language and through using diagrams and typographic elements, according to the personal experience of AS. Still, I argue that *Mockingbird* falls into the trap of educating a neurotypical audience about the realities of AS. The result of this didactic approach is that Caitlin as a protagonist becomes a realisation of neurotypical hopes and expectations, through overcoming the impairments of AS. A neurotypical writer instructs her development as a character, to match the expectations of a neurotypical audience.

The novels demonstrate how both neurotypical characters and characters with AS can change, develop and learn through cooperating and communicating with each other. They also underline the difficulties that often arise from such cooperation and communication. In the light of this demonstration, the didactical chapter is founded on the principles of education formulated in the core curriculum, and moulded on the idea that education can be made more inclusive of people with AS or other capacities that differ from those of the majority. This can be accomplished through structuring the learning environment according to the needs of those who struggle socially, through implementing social learning and education, and by using the didactical method of cooperative learning.

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