

Does Stereotyping of Autism Occur in MG and YA Literature? An Examination of Titles Published Between 2000 and 2022

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Abstract

This study presents a content analysis of the online listings, covers, reviews and extracts of 153 middle grade (MG) and young adult (YA) fiction titles, published between 2000 and 2022, where a main character is identified as autistic. Titles were selected using a combination of lists available at Amazon and Goodreads and those compiled by autism advocacy organisations. Such titles were found to have significantly increased in prevalence over the period. However, an analysis of the texts shows that publishers can still improve autism representation in MG and YA fiction by encouraging development of under-represented groups commissioning sensitivity readers, establishing disability positive recruitment policies and making reasonable adjustments that support autistic authors.

Keywords

Autism, Asperger's Syndrome, neurodiversity, stereotype, middle-grade, young adult, fiction, publishing.

Introduction

Recent research has identified that representation of autism across the media is problematic, particularly in terms of stereotyping autism as a condition experienced by white, male, heterosexuals. This can lead to



Popular MG and YA titles featuring an autistic main character

underdiagnoses of under-represented groups. Advocacy groups and authors from the autistic community have also campaigned to see more books authored by autistic writers.

This research examines a sample of middle-grade (MG) and young adult (YA) fiction titles where the main character is autistic, published between 2000 and 2022, in light of these issues. Autism is a lifelong disability which affects how people communicate and interact with the world. In the United States, 1 in 44 children are diagnosed with an Autism Spectrum Condition (Autism Speaks 2022). There are around 700,000 adults and children on the autism spectrum in the UK. According to the UK's National Autistic Society, autistic children are three times more likely to be excluded from school (*What is Autism?* 2019).

Children's literature is an important influence on the formation of a young person's understanding and attitudes, it is also commonly read by professionals working with young people. Representation of autism in children's literature therefore provides a valuable opportunity to inform and increase awareness of the condition. Bullying is a key concern for autistic children and greater awareness serves to increase tolerance and understanding from their peers.

Inclusion of autistic characters in children's literature also supports autistic children by providing them with a character and narrative with which they can identify. Autistic adults, such as Kat Williams of Autistic UK, have described the comfort provided by reading fiction while an autistic child and teenager. "When you're neurodivergent, you very often can't find characters that you relate to, especially when you're a teenager growing up, figuring out that you are different to a lot of the people around you." (Williams cited by Jordison 2020)

A synthesis of the existing scholarship reveals that accurate representation of autism is lacking and this is a societal concern. Autism is classed by scholars and physicians as a "spectrum" and each individual with autism can experience it in different ways. What unifies each person with autism is that most will universally experience difficulty with social communication and interaction (Hens 2021).

With such a diverse range of autistic experience, it is impossible to achieve a universally representative fictional depiction of what it is to personally experience autism, yet portrayals of autism as the experience of a white, male, heterosexual with savant-like characteristics have been prevalent in media portrayals, and many published fictional works.

A study of three popular televised comedies with autistic main characters found autism to be portrayed as a savant syndrome of white heterosexual male experience (Ressa 2021). In 2005, the *Guardian* wrote of a “huge demand” for books about autism, a phenomenon it termed “spectrum publishing”. This was considered to be borne of the success of Mark Haddon’s *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night Time* (Adams 2005): a portrayal of a young, white, male with savant-like characteristics.

The true prevalence of autism does not vary by race or by sub-groups relating to gender (Gibson cited in Heilker 2012, 34). Heilker’s research into the stereotyping of autism as “white” describes negative implications and poor outcomes for children of colour, including under-diagnosis, incorrect treatment, and the perception of autistic traits as “bad behaviour” (2012). A disparity between the diagnoses of boys and girls with autism is an established issue for autism researchers. Girls are less likely to be diagnosed with autism at an early age because they do not meet the expected stereotypes (Arky 2022) consequently missing out on support and treatment.

Attempts to explain autism through fictional works for young people therefore must be given careful consideration. A limited and skewed portrayal of autism can, for an autistic child or young person, be extremely isolating’ (Vohra 2017). According to Lee, the crux of the issue is that with autism there is often a literal lack of voice, due to autism being a condition that affects social communication and a wider lack of representation, and so a writer is able to invent whatever they want (2019). This view illustrates that problems of representation can sometimes be attributed to the limitations caused by the disability itself rather than a lack of reasonable adjustments to the environment.

Autism advocacy organisations such as Autism Speaks have campaigned for more autistic authors, using the slogan ‘Nothing about us, without us’ (Birch 2020). Many autistic authors have also suggested that there should be more autistic authors to lend an authentic voice to children’s fiction. Many advocates of autistic and disabled communities continue to highlight a lack of true representation in children’s fiction. However, as Batchelor (2021) points out, it is impossible to know whether there are a low number of autism titles published or if publishers have failed to tag them appropriately so that they may be discovered as such. Batchelor recently called on the publishing industry to produce more statistics on disabled authors and disabled characters because, until these can be counted and tracked, progress

cannot be measured (2021). To provide data by which these phenomena may be measured, this research offers a content analysis of a representative sample of MG and YA fiction titles where a main character is identified as autistic.

Method

A sample of 153 titles were compiled by drawing on lists created by Amazon (2022), Good Reads (2022), Shortform (2021), A Novel Mind (2022) as well as a number of blog pages dedicated to thematic reading lists or autism. These are listed under the bibliography.

Each title was required to meet the following criteria:

- The main character is identified as autistic, or having Asperger's Syndrome (a type of Autism Spectrum Disorder) within the blurb, précis or highlighted review;
- The title is a chapter or long narrative fiction book of more than forty pages;
- The title is identified as suitable for middle grade or young adult;
- The title was first published between 2000 and 2022.

Book covers, blurbs, extracts and reviews are key vehicles by which a reader may select a book, and so were selected as materials for examination. Content analysis is a "systematic, quantitative procedure for coding the themes of qualitative material" (Vandenbos, 2007) and so was selected as the methodology by which it would be possible to derive data from qualitative materials such as the above.

The following coding system was applied:

Identifying the author's public disclosure of autism

Information on each author was examined to identify whether they publicly identified themselves as autistic. The author's biographical information either available on the Amazon website or the author's own website and a pre-existing list of autistic authors compiled by advocate and blogger Adriana White (2018) were screened. Authors were categorised as autistic if they described themselves as autistic, having Asperger's Syndrome, or as "neurodiverse" which, though an umbrella term for many conditions, can be commonly used to indicate autism.

Identifying the gender and sexuality of the autistic main character

Blurbs, extracts and reviews were screened in order to identify the gender of the autistic main character. Gender was identified by the pronouns used to describe the character. A sub-category of data collection was created to record whether gender expression or LGBTQI+

experience was a key theme, identified as such by its appearance in the blurb. Romantic interest between characters of the same sex was interpreted to meet these criteria, as well as description of the main character as “trans”, “bi”, “gay”, “pan” or “asexual”. It is possible that some characters’ pronouns may have changed in the course of the story but for the purposes of this study, the pronouns and themes identified in the blurb are measured.

Identifying the ethnicity of the autistic main character

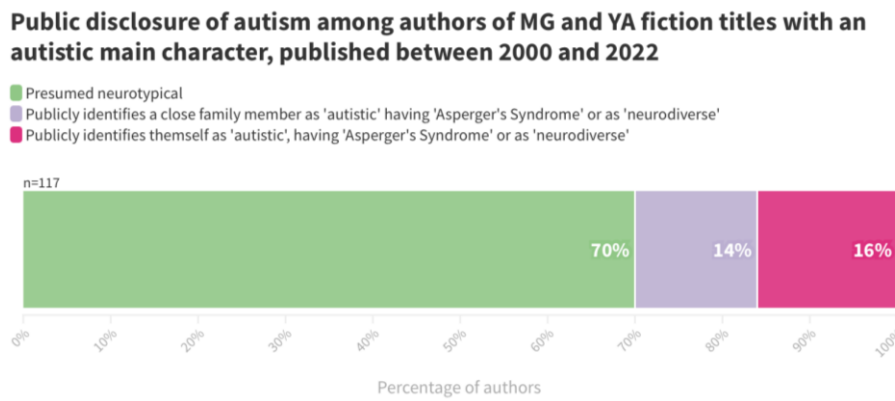
Covers, blurbs, extracts and reviews were screened for each title in order to identify the ethnicity of the autistic protagonist. Due to the nature of the materials examined, in most cases, it was possible to identify skin colour only, commonly by the cover illustration. In some cases, characters are identified in the blurb or review as “bi-racial” or “of colour” without further detail. It was therefore necessary to use the broad categorisations of “White NFI (no further information)” and “Of colour NFI” as skin colour was, in most cases, the only observable measurable. One title identified its main autistic characters to be Jewish in the blurb (*The Many Mysteries of the Finkel Family* by Sarah Kapit). No other ethnoreligious groups (Taras and Ganguly 2015, 31) were specifically identified.

The cover illustration or photograph was the chief area of examination and the character depicted either alone, or most centrally when more than one was pictured, was assumed the main character. Ethnicity was identified in reference to Cedarseed’s Guide to Human Types (2017). Where the character was clearly identifiable as the main character and illustrated or described as white skinned, the title was classified as “White NFI”. Where the character is clearly identifiable as the main character and illustrated or described in a blurb or review as being of colour, the category “Of colour NFI” has been used to classify the title.

Where the autistic main character was clearly identifiable as “White” and is depicted among a group of non-autistic characters that includes a character of colour, the title is identified as “Autistic main character is White NFI, other non-autistic main characters are of colour NFI”. Where the ethnicity of the autistic character could not be definitively identified via any of these sources the title is classified as “Unknown”. Where there are characters depicted as objects or creatures that display autistic traits, the title is classified as “Not Applicable”. A full list of titles where characters were identified as of colour and Jewish is provided in Appendix 1.

Results

Fig.1



The data supports the claim that autistic authors are in the minority. Thirty percent of authors either have autism themselves or have an autistic family member and so just under one third could be described as having a lived experience of autism. However, it was observable in the course of this research that many authors presumed to be neurotypical gained understanding of autism by working as specialist teachers or therapists.

Gender and sexuality of autistic main character

Fig.2

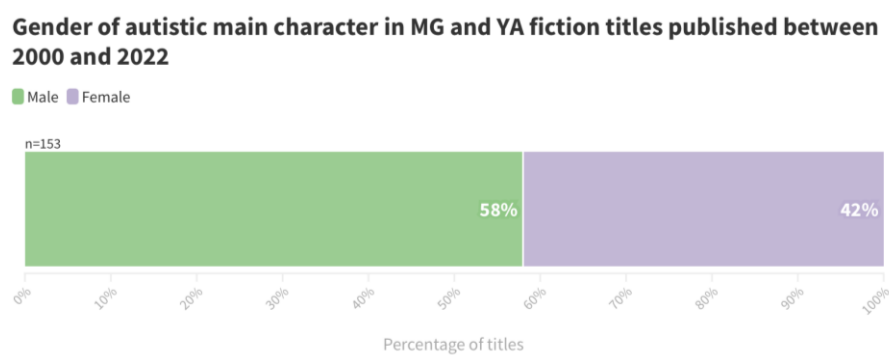
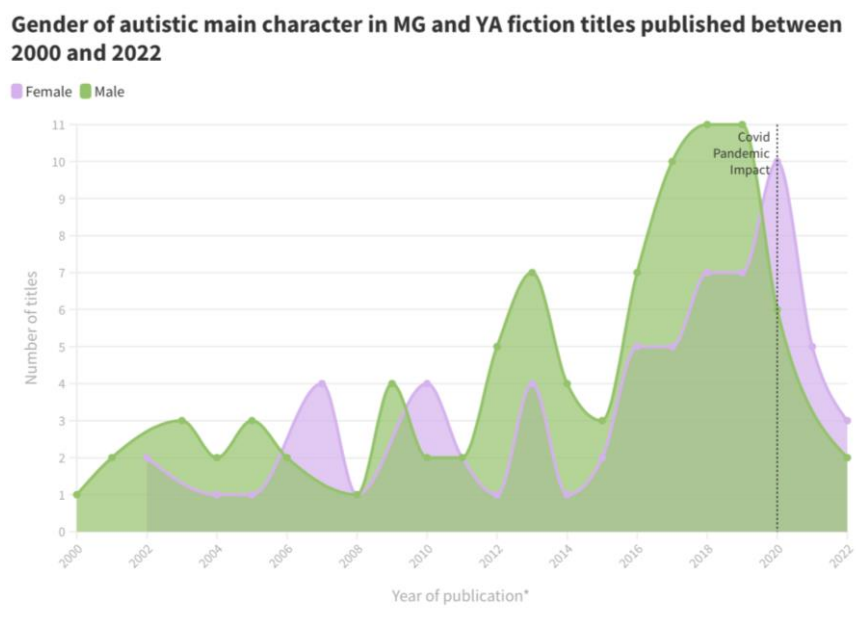
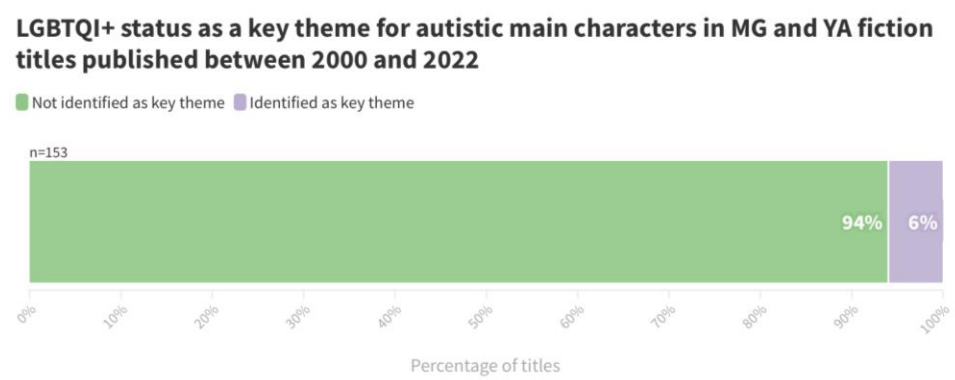


Fig.3



The data shows that most autistic characters are male but by a relatively small margin of 8%. As Fig. 3 shows, female representation increased markedly from 2016 onwards and despite the decline in titles (for which the impact of the Coronavirus pandemic may have played a part) female characters held the greater representation between 2020 and 2022.

Fig. 4



Gender expression and LGBTQI+ themes only occurred in titles published from 2015 onwards, peaking in 2020. Eighty nine percent of those titles that included these themes indicated autistic main characters identified as female on the cover or blurb. Autistic males are therefore highly underrepresented in this area. It is possible that some characters may have been identified as LGBTQI+ within the content of the novels but this had not been highlighted in the blurb.

Ethnicity depicted for autistic character²

Fig.5

Ethnicity depicted for autistic character in MG and YA fiction titles published between 2000 and 2022

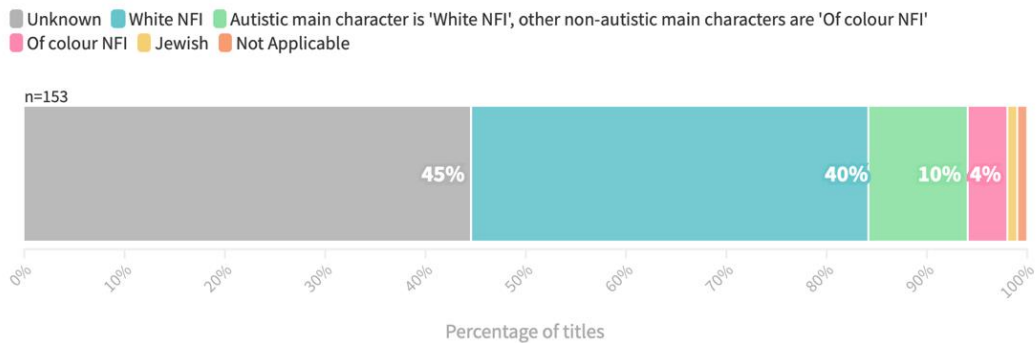
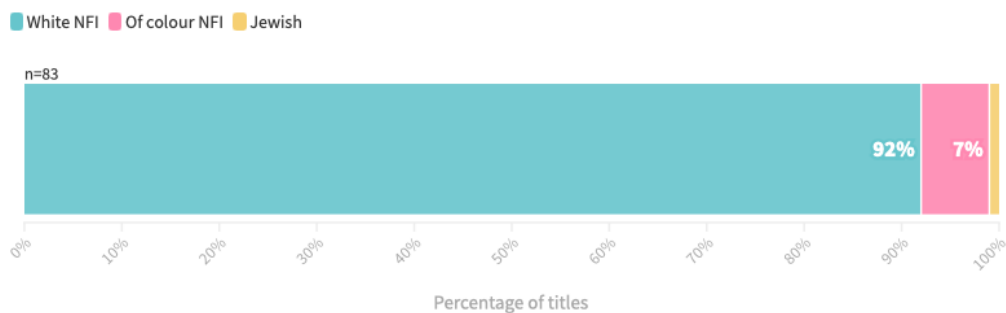


Fig.6

Identified ethnicity of autistic character in MG and YA fiction titles published between 2000 and 2022



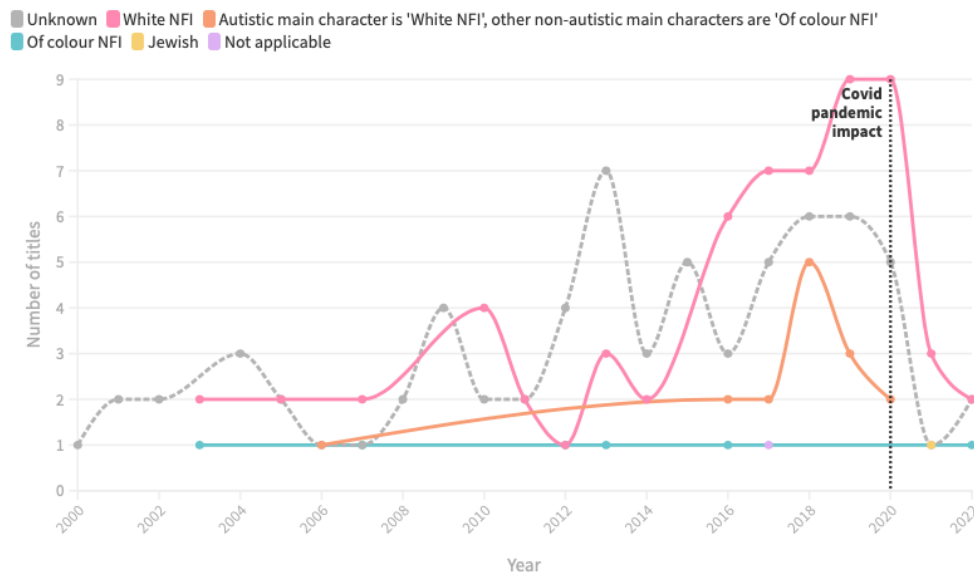
Ethnicity was not explicitly identified on the cover, blurb, extract or within highlighted reviews for almost half (45%) of the sample (Fig. 5). Four percent of autistic characters were identified as “Of colour NFI” and, as Fig. 7 below, shows, such titles were published with a regular but low frequency throughout the period. Fifty percent of the titles’ autistic main characters were identified as “White NFI”. When the categories of “Unknown” and “Not Applicable” are omitted, autistic characters are depicted as “White NFI” in 92% of cases, as shown in Fig. 6 (of these, 18% are titles with “White NFI” autistic main characters alongside non-autistic “Of colour NFI” main characters).

² Fig 5 adds up to 101% due to rounding.

Fig.7

Ethnicity depicted for autistic characters in MG and YA titles published between 2000 and 2022

n=153



In Fig. 7, the appearance of non-autistic main characters of colour alongside white autistic main characters (10% of the sample overall) shows an increase from 2006 onwards, likely due to greater awareness of the importance of ethnic inclusivity in MG and YA titles. In comparison, the occurrence of autistic characters of colour remains consistently low within the same timeframe, supporting that autism itself is most commonly portrayed as white. This supports the findings of both Heilker (2012) and Ressa’s (2021) research into other forms of media. The ethnic stereotyping of autism across cultural outputs may therefore include MG and YA fiction.

Limitations

The sample was limited to those titles listed and described in English. Though it was clear that a great many of the more successful titles had been translated into multiple languages, far fewer had been discernibly translated into English. Also, it was not always possible to definitively identify the date on which a title was first published, and, in those cases, the earliest available date was recorded. Time series charts and trends should therefore be interpreted as indicative only. It is possible that by coding an author as “neurodiverse”, which can cover a number of conditions, the number of authors classified as autistic is over-counted.

Because the materials examined were commonly cover illustrations, it was only possible to count characters that, for the most part, were illustrated or described as white or of colour. Due to the size of sample required to ensure representativeness, this was the most feasible method to measure the representation of ethnic diversity in children's books about autism. Under-diagnosis of children of colour is a key societal concern, as previously discussed in reference to Heilker's (2012) research into poor outcomes for those that go undiagnosed due to autism being stereotyped as a condition affecting whites only.

Discussion

The sample data analysed above shows that the availability of titles depicting autistic main characters has increased since the beginning of the 21st century, suggesting an increased demand for "spectrum publishing". Representation of autistic authors is indeed low in comparison to those assumed to be neurotypical, as autism advocates have suggested. However, authors may fear that declaring a disability could count against them, as do many disabled adults.

The same phenomenon identified by Ressa (2021), whereby autism is portrayed as white, male and heterosexual, also occurs in MG and YA fiction, though strong progress has been made in the representation of autistic females in recent years. For those titles that discussed gender expression and LGBTQI+ themes in relation to the autistic main character, it is possible that such themes may be considered too mature for MG and YA fiction. One third of the titles in the sample were classified as MG and two thirds as YA according to the age classifications provided on Amazon.com. However, as Cox (2021) asserts "there are children in every market who are gay, or trans etc. – and they need to know that is okay."

The survey reveals that, for those young autistic readers looking for representation, it is possible to discover a title with which to identify by first finding lists of books featuring autistic characters available online and then reviewing the covers, blurbs and reviews, although some groups will clearly have a wider range of titles than others. It would be useful to further analyse the sales volumes of these titles in order to assess which have achieved the greater readership and thus more influence over public attitudes.

Books have an impact on how readers view disability — including the autistic experience, which is often steeped in harmful stereotypes and myths (Leary, 2018) such as those identified above. There is also a risk that by focussing on certain traits of autism that are regarded as positive, such as special mathematical abilities, a stereotype builds that could be problematic or even harmful to those living with autism (Draaisma 2009; Varley 2018). Savant skills may make a plot "more interesting" while feeding preconceived notions of "what autism

is” but many autism advocates and authors have spoken against repeatedly using this stereotype as potentially harmful.

According to Ressa (2021), the danger of this misrepresentation lies in teachers treating every autistic learner as having superhuman abilities, when in reality two-thirds of autistic people have average to below average IQ ability. Mark Haddon, author of the highly successful title, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night Time*, which features a young boy with above average mathematical abilities cautioned that his book was being “used as a textbook for social workers, and for policemen... I never meant it to be a textbook,” (Singh 2015). Autistic author Kaia Sonderby has “noticed some (usually neurotypical) readers who seem like they’d totally be fine with Xandri [main character] being autistic as long as she doesn’t challenge any of their preconceptions about what autism is,” (cited by Walsh 2020).

The use of narrative voice, particularly epistolary styles, was observably common for the autistic characters depicted throughout the sample. Duyvis considers this style of writing to increase the perception that an autistic character is “unwordly”, “hyper-rational” and a “blank slate” and cautions authors to be careful not to feed into those stereotypes, even accidentally (2015). Another concern for the representation of autism was highlighted in a study by Stevenson, Harp and Gernsbacher (2011) which found that characters depicted as autistic were children in 90% of fictional books and 68% of narrative films and television programs.

This study argues that society's overwhelming proclivity for depicting autism as a disability of childhood poses a barrier to the well-being of autistic people of all ages. A common misconception is that autistic children can “grow out” of their autism when it is in fact a lifelong condition (Geekclubbooks.com 2021). Of the sample examined (n=153) all titles’ autistic characters were children or teens. While this is a likely outcome for books aimed at this age group, MG and YA titles that feature autistic adults would serve to inform children about the condition in adults and reassure autistic young people about their future.

There is also a perceived lack of positive outcomes for disabled characters (Butler 2022). Media interviews reveal a preoccupation with traumatic, personal, tragic details (Farrell 2021) relating to experiences of autism. Of the titles identified for this study (n=153) nine percent of titles involved an immediately recognisable theme of extreme violence, such as a school shooting or murder, or a sudden bereavement (often parental). Further to this, Brenna, an author and advocate for diversity in children’s literature, argues that “happy futures are going to take more than what we are currently offering in our communities,” (2013, 518). Elle McNicoll, an autistic author, has now set up the Adrien Prize to encourage greater publication of positive narratives or “happy endings” for disabled characters.

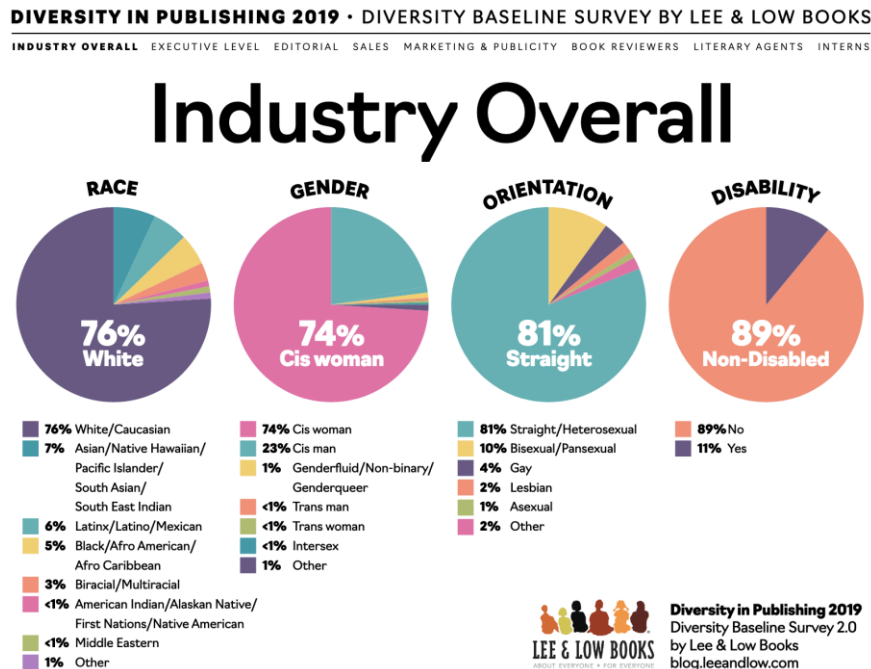
There are numerous examples of problematic titles within this sub-genre. In *Rogue* by Lyn Miller-Lachman, it is suggested that the autistic main character's father's chemotherapy led to her "mutated" genes (Stanko 2015). In 2017, autistic advocate Amythest Schaber started the #BoycottToSiri hashtag as a reaction to the widely criticized memoir *To Siri With Love* by Judith Newman³, a book written by a neurotypical woman about her relationship with her autistic son, who uses Siri to help him navigate the world. Autistic advocates believed the book maligned the autistic community and exploited Gus's right to privacy (Leary 2018). A *Wizard Alone* by Diane Duane focusses on the character of an autistic African American boy. In the original 2002 edition, the character is given the choice whether to "cure" his autism. The novel has since been revised in a new edition, created by new publishers, where his autism is portrayed as a strength and an integral part of him (Hillary 2015).

Sensitivity readers are experts on sensitive topics such as disability, often having direct personal experience, and can screen titles for potentially harmful content. While a character's depiction or incident in a book may not come across as biased or otherwise inaccurate to an agent or editor, a reader of a particular background may pick up on subtle—or not-so-subtle—signs that this representation is part of a larger, stereotypical pattern at work within the broader narrative (Burnett 2017). There are clearly a number of problematic representations among portrayals of autistic characters for which the increased use of sensitivity readers would support publishers to provide more authentic, less problematic stories. Training for editors in identifying and avoiding bias would also be beneficial.

The publishing industry can be criticised for not being sufficiently diverse itself. It is argued that more diversity among publishing staff, across all functions, would improve awareness and sensitivity to diversity, equality and inclusion within the books produced. It is interesting to observe the similarity between the results of the 2019 diversity in publishing baseline survey in Fig. 8 and the sample of MG and YA titles analysed above. The publishing industry is also, for the majority, white and heterosexual. Most people that work in publishing are not identified as disabled, as are the majority of authors of MG and YA fiction that depict autistic characters non-autistic. Autistic literary agents, editors, marketing professionals, publicists, early critics and reviewers, or authenticity readers could serve to catch problematic aspects of a narrative early (Baker 2017) saving publishers from potentially costly mistakes in terms of investment and reputation. The more representative books become, the more publishers will also gain from the "purple pound" (the purchasing power of the disabled community) (Batchelor 2021).

³ Not included in data sample because it is a memoir, not fiction.

Fig.8 (Lee and Low Books, 2020)



Agents and publishers should promote equality policies and be loud and proud about their willingness to sign and work with diverse authors (Batchelor 2021). Reasonable adjustment for autistic authors could include limitations on public appearances and time-outs for authors when over socialised. Autistic author, Elle McNicoll, did not meet barriers because her publisher “knew enough” (Farrell 2021). There are also a number of resources, such as We Need Diverse Books, Disability In KidLit, the Minorities in Publishing podcast, and the Disability Visibility Project, that publishing houses could partner with to seek out disabled employees and authors (Leary 2018).

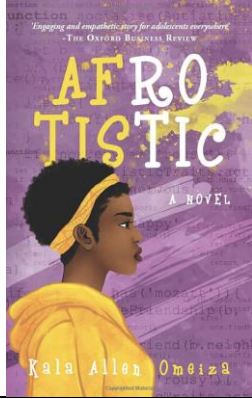
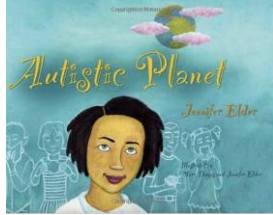
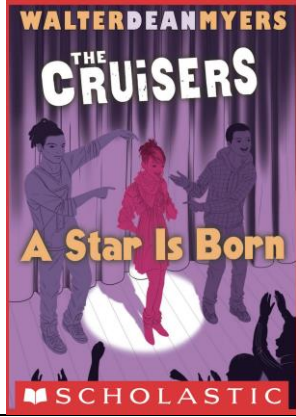
Conclusion

The data examined shows that concerns surrounding the representativeness of autistic main characters, particularly the stereotyping of autism as white, heterosexual and male are valid and such stereotyping is observable throughout MG and YA fiction. Though female autistic characters have increased in prevalence in recent years, MG and YA fiction more commonly portrays autism as a male experience. As the popularity of “spectrum publishing” continues to grow, this stereotyping has an increasingly pervasive impact on societal attitudes and outcomes for autistic children. A study similar to that of Reflecting Realities’ Survey of Ethnic Representation within UK Children's Literature 2019 (Centre for Literacy in Primary Education, 2020) to investigate the depth and accuracy of these depictions of autism in full would be highly valuable.

This dataset has limitations and should be interpreted as indicative rather than conclusive. By focussing on titles where a main character has autism, “issue” books, where difference is the primary focus, would have been more easily discoverable than those titles that included a more casual incidence of representation of autism where it was depicted as a natural and unsurprising occurrence. Such books, according to Cox (2021) enable the unfamiliar to become familiar and therefore more widely understood and accepted.

Further avenues for research should include quantification of narratives that portray autistic main characters as savants; that use narrative voices such as epistolary style; and that convey problematic messaging such as that autism can be cured. Particularly, future data capture should be linked to sales figures in order to assess which titles have been most influential. Robust statistics are difficult to gather as an external observer and screening information from a variety of sales and grey materials is less reliable than data provided by publishers, who should now heed the calls of advocates for better metadata tagging of relevant titles to facilitate discoverability, measurement, awareness and growth.

Appendix 1: Identification of autistic main characters' ethnicity

Title	Author	Category	Means of Identification
<i>Afrotistic</i>	Karla Allen Omeiza	Of colour NFI	Cover illustration 
<i>A Wizard Alone</i>	Diane Duane	Of colour NFI	Described as African - American in review (Hillary, 2015)
<i>Autistic Planet</i>	Jennifer Elder	Of colour NFI	Cover illustration 
<i>On the Edge of Gone</i>	Corrine Duyvis	Of colour NFI	Described as 'bi-racial' in review (Amazon.com, 2023a)
<i>Counting by Sevens</i>	Holly Goldberg-Sloan	Of colour NFI	Described as 'person-of-color' in review (Amazon.com, 2023b)
<i>The Cruisers, A Star is Born</i>	Walter Dean Myers	Of colour NFI	Cover illustration and excerpt available at Amazon.com (Amazon.com, 2012) 
<i>The Many Mysteries of the Finkel Family</i>	Sarah Kapit	Jewish	Amazon review (Amazon.com, 2021)

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