

“Just be careful”:

Sexual Desire and Autism in YA Novels

Audrey Coussy

ABSTRACT

The past two decades have witnessed a rise in the number of autistic characters in YA literature, particularly autistic protagonists. In line with progress made by researchers and the self-advocacy from organizations and activists that have brought nuance in our understanding of autism, YA novels are offering more diverse representation of the spectrum, even if there is still room for improvement – for instance, the inclusion of more non-white autistic characters, non-binary people, and queer love stories. Autistic characters are now romantic leads in their own rights, and authors explore the way they experience sexual desire and sexuality through their neurodifference (e.g., the need to accommodate their heightened sensory sensitivities). Their desirability is also underlined through the loving eyes of their love interests, sometimes in the form of alternating narratives. All this counters the societal tendency to desexualize autistic people, and disabled people in general. This article explores how desire emerges from a mix of alterity and kinship in my primary corpus: all the love interests are neurotypical and they recognize the differences of the autistic characters while also sharing some of their special interests and feeling out of step with the world. It also considers how authors make use of autistic traits, such as sensory hypersensitivities and doing extensive research on topics of interest, to invite readers to take their time and be well informed when it comes to sexual intimacy.

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INTRODUCTION

Literature for young people started featuring openly autistic characters in the 1990s to the early 2000s,¹ but they were never the protagonists. The stories would revolve around the main, neurotypical² character's life, thoughts, and reactions, and how, in the end, they accept and support the autistic child, who retains a mysterious and elusive aura. The fact that these secondary characters were nonverbal (speaking few to no words) seemed to justify the silencing of their narrative voice: Lois Lowry's novel was literally titled *The Silent Boy* (2003) after its autistic character. Readers had no direct access to the autistic characters' inner lives, and they were presented as inherently innocent and 'pure at heart' – this vision was reinforced by their young age, with the characters usually aged below the threshold of puberty. Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (2003) can therefore be considered a turning point, "a kind of ground zero for the contemporary understanding of autism" (May n.p.). Much has been said about this best-selling book, which has been both praised and criticized for its portrayal of autism (even though the term is never mentioned).³ One of its major contributions to the representation of autistic characters was its format: a first-person narrative that gives agency to its main character and narrator, Christopher, and provides direct access to his inner life and experiences. Aged 15, Christopher is a teenager. It was therefore only a matter of time before the themes of love and desire would start to make their way into autistic characters' lives.

From 2010 onwards, autistic representation has experienced a significant rise in children's and YA literatures, as evidenced in recent studies (Irwin et al., 2015; Lemoine et al., 2016; Lemoine and Schneider, 2020). Meredith Gaffney and Julia Wilkins, for example, noted an important increase in the number of children's books listed on Amazon that dealt with autism, going from a total of 358 before 2010 to 643 published between 2010 and 2014 only (1024). While the first openly autistic characters conformed to a narrow vision of the

1 The most successful in English were *Truth or Dare* (2000) by Celia Rees and *The Silent Boy* (2003) by Lois Lowry, both appearing on the lists of literary prizes. Around the same time, the French author Kochka wrote two novels with a secondary autistic character, *Au Clair de la Louna* (2002, translated into English under the title *The Boy Who Ate Stars*) and *L'Enfant qui caressait les cheveux* (2002, not available in English translation), making her work particularly significant to autistic representation at the time. Why did autism become a sought-out topic in children's literature during this period? It can be linked to the advances in research that led to a revised and broader definition in 1987 in the third edition of the DSM (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders), the diagnostic manual used in the US, and the fourth edition (1994) started defining autism as a spectrum, adding more nuance to the diagnosis, and thus reaching more people.

2 'Neurotypical' refers to that which is considered the norm of cognitive functions and development.

3 See: Gyasi Burks-Abbott's "Mark Haddon's Popularity and Other Curious Incidents in My Life as an Autistic"; Sonya Freeman Loftis' *Imagining Autism: Fiction and Stereotypes on the Spectrum*.

autistic spectrum and were usually presented as gifted amateur detectives,⁴ more recent YA novels have focused less on these characters' intellectual prowess and more on how they try to navigate their social and emotional lives as young adults. Moving from a "deficit model" to a "neurodiversity model" (Van Hart 27)⁵, YA literature now features more complex autistic characters, who express a variety of emotions and desires, among them sexual desire. A growing number of YA novels cast these characters as romantic leads and love interests, thus disrupting a societal tendency to desexualize autistic people, and disabled people in general.

The topic of sex and autism has gained visibility during the past decade. First, researchers have started to highlight autistic people's desire for sex and romantic intimacy, debunking the common assumption that they are asocial, nonsexual individuals (Barnett and Maticka-Tyndale; Urbano et al.; Wedmore). TV series centering autistic people, such as *On the Spectrum* (created by Dana Idisis and Yuval Shafferman, 2018) and reality series *Love on the Spectrum* (created by Cian O'Clery, 2019-present), have explored this desire on screen. Most importantly, autism advocacy groups and activists on various platforms in-person and online (see, for example, the international hashtag #ActuallyAutistic used on social media accounts) have brought nuance and lived experience to the subject matter. The *Handbook on Relationships and Sexuality for and by Autistic People*, edited by Elesia Ashkenazy and M. Remi Yergeau in 2013, was a collective effort sponsored by the Autistic Self Advocacy Network, The Arc, and the Autism NOW Center, and it was groundbreaking. As the editors underline in their acknowledgments: "In the months we spent planning and editing and poring over pages, we realized, all too quickly, how little has been said about autism and sexuality" (iii). Organized in six parts,⁶ the handbook offers a comprehensive approach to gender, intimacy, and relationships that shows how diverse and complex sexuality can be. Without dismissing the specific challenges and questions faced by autistic people, this handbook could prove highly informative and beneficial to all teenagers and young adults, neurotypical and neurodivergent alike.

In this article, I intend to cast a light on YA authors' not-so-hidden agendas: to present autistic characters as romantic leads in their own rights, and to invite readers to "think

4 Notable titles, in addition to Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, are Siobhan Dowd's *The London Eye Mystery* (2007), and Ashley Edward Miller and Zack Stentz's *Colin Fischer* (2012).

5 The term "neurodiversity" was coined in the late 1990s by the Australian sociologist Judy Singer (who is autistic herself) to describe the variations in the human brain regarding sociability, learning, attention, and other mental functions; neurodiversity includes autism, ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder), and dyslexia, among others. This term challenges the prevailing views that these variations are abnormal or pathological, and it advocates instead for their recognition as a social category, much like gender.

6 Part 1: Identity and becoming; part 2: Expectations, communication, and commitment; part 3: Signals: Bodies and being; part 4: Gender and sexuality; part 5: Debunking myths and stereotypes; part 6: Abuse.

carefully about and plan for sexual relationships” (Reynolds 122). I will do so using a primary corpus of 10 realist novels written in English and published between 2009 and 2021.⁷ Since there were few titles dealing with autistic characters experiencing sexual attraction until very recently, I chose to include works from several countries (Australia, UK, US), and from openly neurodivergent authors and presumably neurotypical⁸ authors. First and foremost, I wanted to offer a selection reflective of the portrayal of autistic desire and desirability over the years. I will first highlight the evolution of autistic characterization towards more nuance and diversity, before studying the way characters experience desire through their neurodifference, and what makes them desirable in the eyes of their love interests.

“I’M NOT THAT INNOCENT”: AUTISTIC CHARACTERS AND SEXUAL DESIRE

The Headache of Defining Autism

As Julia M. Rodas notes, “pinning down a definition of autism itself is at least as great a headache as categorizing autism’s distinguishing language practices” (9). People usually turn to the most up-to-date definitions given by the DSM or by the ICD (International Classification of Diseases, established by the WHO), which list autistic features that fall into two categories: a) difficulties in communication and social interactions; and b) repetitive and restricted interests, activities, and behaviours. Subscribing to this medical approach, however, quickly reduces the spectrum to a list of symptoms and deficits – problems that need to be solved, individuals that need to be fixed. It is not surprising, then, that facets of current research and funding bodies dedicated to autism still perceive it as a disease and are actively trying to find a cure to this neurodifference. Hence, Rachel F. Van Hart’s call for a more nuanced definition, grounded “in the social, rather than clinical, realm” (28). Van Hart suggests five categories: 1) Hypo- and hypersensitivity, which can exalt physical responses to outside stimuli but also lead to a meltdown, a shutdown, or an autistic burnout (experiencing symptoms similar to those of an emotional or professional burnout); 2) an affinity for repetition and ritualization; 3) language difficulties (trouble communicating, literal

7 Julie Buxbaum’s *What to Say Next* (2017); Heidi Cullinan’s *Carry the Ocean* (2015); Z. R. Ellor’s *May the Best Man Win* (2021); Emily Franklin and Brendan Halpin’s *The Half-Life of Planets* (2010); Tara Kelly’s *Harmonic Feedback* (2010); Rachael Lucas’ *The State of Grace* (2017); A. J. Steiger’s *When My Heart Joins the Thousand* (2018); Francisco X. Stork’s *Marcelo in the Real World* (2009); Anna Whateley’s *Peta Lyre’s Rating Normal* (2020); Jen Wilde’s *Queens of Geek* (2017).

8 I use “presumably neurotypical” to underline that before the late 2010s to early 2020s – that is, before the boom of social media accounts sharing diverse autistic lived experiences – people were far less likely to realize they might be on the spectrum. This boom has played a great part in democratizing access to diagnosis and self-diagnosis, although there is still a long way to go.

interpretation of figurative speech); 4) social difficulties (e.g., trouble with social codes); and 5) mindblindness,⁹ meaning autistic people have trouble anticipating and understanding the thoughts and feelings of others. The latter category is, however, contested by researchers and self-advocates as too simplistic, as well as “empirically questionable and societally harmful” (Gernsbacher and Yergeau 102) because “the claim disputes autistic people’s autonomy, devalues their self-determination, and discredits their credibility” (110).¹⁰

The definitional points outlined above have been and continue to be very influential in the public perception of autism (which is reflected and perpetuated in the publishing world), and they can be helpful to start talking about it. However, they should not constitute the be-all and end-all of our understanding, since they offer a narrow, pathologizing picture of autism. A lot remains unknown. It is, after all, a spectrum, as illustrated by a well-known saying in the autistic community: “If you know one autistic person, you know *one* autistic person”. Indeed, Rodas underlines that “at the centre of autism definitions, then, is the autistic person, and autism is only and always expressed through the particularity of autistic individuals” (10); it is also “located in particular physical bodies” (11) that stim (i.e. self-stimulatory behavior, which can help regulate, express one’s self, seek pleasure, etc.) through dancing, body-rocking, hand movements, or vocalizations, for instance. Autism is therefore very much an embodied experience. The community is also characterized by the diversity of sexualities and gender identities of its members: two recent studies (Sala et al.; Warriar et al.) have highlighted that autistic individuals more frequently identify as non-heterosexual, compared to neurotypical individuals, and that transgender and gender-diverse people in general are three to six times more likely to be autistic than cisgender people – all of this is confirmed by the lived experience shared by autistic people across the world on various forums (see, for example, those on *Wrong Planet*) and social media accounts, as well as in books and anthologies.¹¹ This offers an ideal creative context for authors writing fiction featuring autistic characters, as it gives them a rich palette of characterization to choose from. Why, then, do we encounter so many cis-male, heterosexual autistic characters?

9 The term “mindblindness” was coined by the British clinical psychologist and professor of developmental psychopathology Simon Baron-Cohen in 1985, and designates “the notion that autistic people are pathologically impaired in recognizing and attributing mental states” (Yergeau 12). In other words, autism is supposedly characterized by a lack of Theory of Mind: “By theory of mind we mean being able to infer the full range of mental states (beliefs, desires, intentions, imagination, emotions, etc.) that cause action. In brief, having a theory of mind is to be able to reflect on the contents of one’s own and other’s minds” (Baron-Cohen 174).

10 M. Remi Yergeau further deconstructs mindblindness and Theory of Mind in the introduction and first two chapters of *Authoring Autism: On Rhetoric and Neurological Queerness* (2017).

11 See: *Trans and Autistic: Stories from Life at the Intersection* (2020), edited by Noah Adams and Bridget Liang, and Erin Ekins’ *Queerly Autistic: The Ultimate Guide For LGBTQIA+ Teens On The Spectrum* (2021).

The Autistic Archetype: A Cis-Male Centred Vision

In his discussion of Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, Gyasi Burks-Abbott links its popularity (and his criticism) to its use of the archetypal image of autism, even though the term is never mentioned in the book (290). What is this archetype Burks-Abbott refers to? It is, first and foremost, white and cis-male, with an emphasis on social cluelessness, rigid habits and rituals, a lack of empathy, an analytical mind, a high IQ, and a matter-of-fact tone and/or derivative way of speaking. Furthermore, the archetypal specific interests are usually male-coded in our collective mind (e.g., astronomy, mathematics and statistics, geography, transportation). The archetype draws from the biased selection in the autistic subjects by the first medical and social studies, with researchers building their definition and a vision of autism on white, cis-male autistics pronouncedly exhibiting traits of the spectrum – it even led to the theory that autism was caused by having an extreme male brain.¹² This archetype was bound to influence the autistic representation in fiction, with popular movies like *Rain Man* (dir. Barry Levinson, 1988) and TV shows like *The Big Bang Theory* (created by Chuck Lorre and Bill Prady, 2007-2019) or *The Good Doctor* (created by David Shore, 2017-present) all featuring a cis-male, autistic savant. The autistic archetype was first non-sexualized, like Raymond Babbitt in *Rain Man* or Christopher Boone in Haddon's novel, before being given (exclusively heterosexual) love interests: if Sheldon Cooper was portrayed as asexual¹³ in the first seasons of *The Big Bang Theory*, he ends up dating and marrying fellow scientist Amy Farrah Fowler. As for *The Good Doctor's* Shaun Murphy, one of his central storylines is his romantic feelings for his friend and neighbour Lea Dilallo.

In YA literature, Francisco X. Stork's *Marcelo in the Real World* (2009) was one of the first to present a variation on the autistic archetype. 17-year-old Marcelo is exceptionally smart, very literal, and has great difficulties reading social cues; this coming-of-age novel is also part-mystery, which necessitates Marcelo taking on the role of amateur detective, a cliché in autistic fictional representation.¹⁴ His special interests, however, diverge from the expected ones (classical music, religion, and therapy ponies), and he is one of the first Latinx autistic characters in YA literature, and likely asexual: “But I do not love her ‘that way,’ as Jasmine calls it. To love someone ‘that way,’ with the desire that someone like Wendell feels, does not

12 See: Simon Baron-Cohen's “The Extreme Male Brain Theory of Autism” (2002). The binary counterpart of this theory is the presumed existence of an inherently female version of autism, less ‘extreme’ and thus less identifiable; however, as Devon Price underlines, “women don't have ‘milder’ Autism because of their biology; people who are marginalized have their Autism ignored because of their peripheral status in society” (*Unmasking Autism* 8).

13 See: Sonya Freeman Loftis' “A Kiss on the Train: Autism, Asexuality, and the Conventions of Romantic Comedy”.

14 See: Chapter Five of Patricia A. Dunn's *Disabling Characters: Representations of Disability in Young Adult Literature* (2015).

seem possible for me” (Stork ch. 24).¹⁵ A contemporary of Marcelo, Hank from *The Half-Life of Planets* (2010) is, on the contrary, very much attuned to his sexual desire for the opposite sex: his attraction for Liana, the other main character, presents him with a “masturbation dilemma” (Franklin and Halpin ch. 12), because he is certain that she will somehow be able to tell that he masturbated while thinking of her. The novel refers to Asperger’s Syndrome to describe his disability. Up until 2013, when this term was assimilated to the more general expression of “autism spectrum disorder” (ASD), it was used to designate a so-called mild form of autism, meaning autistic individuals that needed less support and struggled less with communication and daily life. Hank summarizes it to Liana like this: “Asperger’s syndrome is characterized by difficulty with social skills, and also by intense and often narrow interests. Which I guess is what music is for me. [...]. Oh yeah, I tend to babble” (Franklin and Halpin ch. 10). In this excerpt, he mentions his special interest in music, more specifically rock music and guitars, which brings him closer to the typical portrayal of a teenage boy. A notable detail here is that, as a child, Hank used to have a more archetypal special interest, cartography (Franklin and Halpin ch. 15), which he abandoned in favour of his father’s passion for rock music as a way of maintaining a connection with him after his untimely death. If Hank does struggle with navigating a neurotypical world, he also sees the positive aspects of being on the spectrum, something quite revolutionary at the time of the novel’s publication:

Watching Liana sort through the puzzle of multiple meanings and intentions that seems to constitute her social life, I feel grateful for my utter ignorance of such things. I may not understand much about the way other people work, but I don’t have to second-guess myself. (Franklin and Halpin ch. 16)

This is not the case with David in Julie Buxbaum’s *What to Say Next* (2017), who states that he “very much wish[es] [he] were more like everyone else” (ch. 1): “If I got the chance to make some sort of cosmic upgrade – switch David 1.0 to a 2.0 version who understood what to say in day-to-day conversation – I’d do it in an instant” (ch. 1). Even though Buxbaum’s book was published later than the previously cited novels, with important advances in autism research and advocacy, it still retains strong aspects of the autistic archetype that Franklin and Halpin had managed to eschew: David is a white, cis-teenage boy who recites digits of pi to soothe himself, talks in precise numbers – “Did you know there are approximately 3,786,417 Davids in the United States?” (Buxbaum ch. 39) – and is always straightforward. Like Haddon’s Christopher, David relies on a written guide, here a notebook, to navigate his social life and peers, with an additional “mental *Pictorial Dictionary of Ambiguous Gestures*” (Buxbaum ch. 39). Yet Buxbaum seems aware of the diagnostic

15 Chapter numbers are given in place of page or location numbers when referring to e-books in several places due to my access to the primary materials.

evolution of autism and tries to bring some nuance to her portrayal of David: for example, he is very critical of the medical community and underlines the absurdity of trying to label and classify people on the autism spectrum, which is “multidimensional, not linear” (ch. 1), and despite his difficulties with social cues, he usually understands idiomatic expressions and considers himself empathetic to others. Furthermore, the story focuses on the evolution of his relationship with Kit, a neurotypical biracial girl, going from an initial friendship to romance by the end of the novel – with no mystery in sight for autistic David to investigate.

As we can see, YA literature, and fiction in general, features many white, cis-male autistic characters; to echo what the neurologist and writer Oliver Sacks¹⁶ said regarding Haddon’s Christopher, “I don’t think there is anything false or misleading here, but it can’t represent the whole spectrum” (Gussow n.p.).

Writing the (Whole) Spectrum: Autistic Girls and Queer Characters

Contextualizing her YA novel *The State of Grace* (2017) on her publisher’s website, autistic author Rachael Lucas mentions the difficulty girls and women on the spectrum face to get a diagnosis: “Diagnosing girls is harder because we’re all so used to the male stereotype – the geeky maths genius from *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, Sheldon from *The Big Bang Theory*, the little boy in *The A Word*” (“Rachael Lucas on Autism” n.p.). The root cause of this phenomenon, which has been repeatedly documented during the past decade,¹⁷ is once again the bias shown in the early studies, which shaped the definition of autism based on a narrow pool of white, cis-male patients. A number of researchers working on this topic argue that the social conditioning of girls, with its emphasis on people-pleasing and self-erasure, leads to an invisibilization (i.e., an erasure) of their neurodivergence. The lack of representation in YA literature for her own autistic teenage daughter was one of the reasons that led Lucas to write this book about autistic 15-year-old Grace, her difficulties at home and at school, her love of *Doctor Who* and animals/horses, and her budding romantic relationship with neurotypical Gabe. Grace jokes about how she does not fit the autistic archetype in the following passage, where she muses on the fact that her neurotypical best friend Anna checks more boxes on the cliché autistic list: “Anna is the queen of stationery and notebooks and paper in general. I do sometimes wonder whether I sneezed one day and

16 Oliver Sacks (1933-2015) was a British neurologist whose work and research helped reframe autism in a more positive and compassionate way, and his interview of Temple Grandin (first published in 1993 in *The New Yorker*, and later featured in his 1995 collection of essays *An Anthropologist on Mars*) introduced to the world the now famous autistic professor.

17 See: Apporva Mandavilli’s “The Lost Girls”; Laura Hull and William Mandy’s “Protective Effect or Missed Diagnosis? Females with Autism Spectrum Disorder”; Michelle Dean et al.’s “The Art of Camouflage: Gender Differences in the Social Behaviors of Girls and Boys with Autism Spectrum Disorder”.

she caught autism from me, or at least the bits everyone reads about, because unlike her I've never written a list in my life, and I'm hopeless at math, and I don't have a special superpower like drawing entire cityscapes from memory" (Lucas, *The State of Grace* 34).

The same year, autistic author Jen Wilde published *Queens of Geek* (2017): one of the two love stories of the novel revolves around Taylor, an autistic teenager who finally comes to terms with her feelings for her best-friend Jamie, a neurotypical, 18-year-old Latinx boy. The following year, another autistic girl, Alvie, was the protagonist of A. J. Steiger's *When My Heart Joins the Thousand* (2018): on her way to be legally emancipated from social care, the 17-year-old tries to deal with the demands of daily life/living on her own, while keeping her beloved job at a zoo and getting closer to Stanley, a 19-year-old boy she just met. But before Grace, Taylor, and Alvie, there was Drea. Written by neurodivergent author Tara Kelly, *Harmonic Feedback* (2010) features Drea, a 16-year-old autistic girl with ADHD who loves music, guitars, and sound design, and who tries to adjust to her life in a new town while falling in love with Justin, a neurotypical teenager at her school. It is worth noting that all of these female characters are white, cisgender, and heterosexual, and that Alvie is the only one with a disabled love interest (Stanley has brittle bone disease).

While acknowledging that autistic girls and women are under-diagnosed and tend to be diagnosed later in life, Devon Price posits that "what people *call* 'female Autism' is not actually a phenomenon of gender. It's a phenomenon of erasure" ("Wentworth Miller" n.p.). He suggests another term and approach: "What people usually refer to as female Autism is in actuality something I like to call *masked* Autism – a manifestation of the disorder that arises from racism, homophobia, transphobia, and classism just as easily as it arises from sexism" (Price, "Wentworth Miller" n.p.). Price refers here to 'masking', shorthand for autistic social camouflaging, which consists of the erasure of autistic traits (e.g., stimming) and the attunement of the autistic person to their interlocutor (such as mimicking their body language or intonation) in order to interact more safely with the outside world and to fit in. Masking demands a lot of energy and concentration from the person on the spectrum and can prove detrimental to their mental and physical health. To counter this phenomenon of erasure, YA authors need to go beyond the binary of heterosexual, cis-male/cis-female autistic experiences and find inspiration in the inherent diversity of the autistic community. One of the first gay autistic characters appears in Heidi Cullinan's *Carry the Ocean* (2015): early on, Emmet falls in love with Jeremey, his neurotypical neighbour who suffers from depression and anxiety, and the story explores the various stages of their romantic relationship, with them moving in together in the end. Following the word-of-mouth success of this novel, Cullinan self-published a sequel two years later (*Shelter the Sea*, 2017). Another gay love story is at the centre of Z. R. Ellor's *May the Best Man Win* (2021) and features Lukas, a gay cis-boy whose autism is only known by his ex, a neurotypical trans-boy named Jeremy. The novel plays on a 'will-they-won't-they' tension between the two high-schoolers who are battling to be elected prom king. Also recently, autistic author Anna Whateley gave us the

first pansexual autistic cis-girl in *Peta Lyre's Rating Normal* (2020), with Peta falling in love with neurotypical cis-girl Sam. The way she simply states her pansexuality to Sam is quite refreshing: "I'm not experimenting, even though I don't know what I'm supposed to do. I do feel attracted to guys too, but I've always liked people regardless, you know..." (Whateley 165). Finally, going back to Kelly's *Harmonic Feedback*, its heroine Drea could be considered demisexual, even though at the time of publication the term was not well known, because she implies that she is only attracted to someone with whom she can connect: "People were like wallpaper unless I knew them. Physical appearance was just that – an appearance. Some guitars were beautiful works of art, but I didn't want to play one unless I connected with it" (ch. 2).

AUTISTIC CHARACTERS AND SEXUAL DESIRE: A HEIGHTENED SENSORY EXPERIENCE

Since the second half of the twentieth century, YA and children's literature have taken a marked interest in the inner lives of their characters, an evolution that, using Mikhail Bakhtin's terminology, Maria Nikolajeva summarizes as: "a shift from epic toward polyphone discourse, from depicting primarily an external flow of events toward attempts to convey the complex nature of human consciousness" (191). Most YA novels use internal focalization and first-person narration to bring the readers closer to the characters and to how they experience the world – and, in our case, their sexual desire. This applies to all the titles in my primary corpus. How do they portray the autistic experience of sexual desire? It is first and foremost inherently linked to the characters' heightened sensory sensitivities, which can complicate or exalt the expression of this desire. While other senses can be represented (*Peta Lyre's Rating Normal*, for example, mentions Peta's synesthesia, a common condition for people on the spectrum, and how much she enjoys the smell of Sam), authors tend to focus on two senses to explore the autistic sexual desire: sight and touch, which lead to kissing, and (much) more.

Intimacy at First Sight: Autistic Eye Contact

Eye contact is generally a charged experience for autistic people, who tend to avoid it. This trait is so emblematic of the ASD community that autistic author John Robison referred to it in the title of his memoir *Look Me in the Eye: My Life With Asperger's* (2007). This avoidance can be met with confusion and/or annoyance, as attested by Taylor in *Queens of Geek*: "I've lost count of the times people have called me a bitch or a snob, misinterpreting my shyness or lack of eye contact as disrespect or rudeness" (Wilde ch. 9). Several characters from my

corpus mention how overwhelming eye contact can be for them. As Emmet states in *Carry the Ocean*: “Direct eye contact is way too loud and intense, and it feels wrong even though my mom and dad and aunt say it’s rude not to look someone in the eye” (Cullinan ch. 1). In *When My Heart Joins the Thousand*, Alvie mentions that, to her, eye contact is “too intimate”, and she elaborates using a striking metaphor: “it feels like we have our hands in each other’s guts, feeling around where it’s tender and bloody” (Steiger ch. 10). Even their neurotypical love interests perceive the intimate nature of eye contact for autistic people, like Kit in *What to Say Next*: “He delivers his speech to my feet but then suddenly looks up and stares into my eyes. The eye contact feels raw and intimate, and I shiver” (Buxbaum ch. 10). There is rawness, even violence, emerging from these descriptions, and the difficulty to meet the other’s eyes seems at first to present a real obstacle to the expression of sexual desire for autistic characters.

Emmet, however, sees the advantage of this autistic trait that makes him rely on his peripheral vision and enables him to look at Jeremey, his neighbour on whom he has a crush, without him noticing: “When I watched Jeremey, my autism was a superpower. I could sit on my deck for hours, tracking him as he moved around his yard” (Cullinan ch. 1). A lot can also be conveyed through intentional eye contact on the part of the autistic characters, carrying the weight of their emotions. It can be a grateful flick of the eyes, like in *The Half-Life of Planets*, when neurotypical Liana publicly defends and praises Hank (Franklin and Halpin ch. 11), or a strong glare, like in *May the Best Man Win*: “Lukas doesn’t make eye contact unless he means it, and his brown eyes hit me like a nail dug in deep” (Ellor ch. 5). In *Queens of Geek*, Taylor makes and holds eye contact several times with Jamie when she wants to share with him how she feels: “And even though you didn’t need to step in’ – I pause, making eye contact with him – ‘I’m glad you did. You said everything I wanted to say, but couldn’t” (Wilde ch. 9). Intentional eye contact, in fact, turns out to be a powerful way for characters on the spectrum to express their sexual desire and bring it into (fore)play. It is best exemplified in this remark by neurotypical Kit in *What to Say Next*, when she is kissing David for the first time: “This guy knows exactly what he’s doing. [...] How to pause and look into my eyes, really look, so tenderly I feel it all the way down in my stomach” (Buxbaum ch. 30). In this scene, Kit also notices David’s attentive touch, which increases the intimacy and sensuality of the moment: “He even traces the small zigzag scar on my eyebrow with his fingertips, like it’s something beautiful” (Buxbaum ch. 30).

Touch and Stimmy Hands

Touch can be an action as charged as making eye contact for some people on the spectrum. Their hands help them navigate the world, express themselves, and have stimulating sensory experiences. Autistic researcher M. Remi Yergeau talks lovingly of their “stimmy hands,

hands that wave, and flap, and tussle rubber bands – hands that create and transform space as much as they occupy it” (13). *The State of Grace* shows how Grace runs her hands on her surroundings to navigate the space, occupy the space, and feel the different forms and textures of the world, be they wooden chairs (Lucas 2) or garden walls (114). Autistic hands also “story and proclaim, denounce and congratulate. [They] say both *fuck you* and *thank you*” (Yergeau 13) – a collection of essays from autistic authors edited by Julia Bascom was meaningfully titled *Loud Hands: Autistic People, Speaking* (2012). Lucas’ heroine notably recounts a traumatic period in her childhood where professionals repeatedly tried to “quiet [her] hands”, underlining that stimmy hands are indeed a form of self-expression, a language: “When I was little and they sent me to the Jigsaw center, they used to try to get me to stop. *Quiet hands, Grace*, they’d say, and they’d hold them in my lap, smiling. And I’d want to scream at them” (*The State of Grace* 191).

Touching and being touched are therefore not things autistic characters take lightly in my primary corpus. The other’s touch is usually unwelcome because it carries too much sensory stimulation, which can be physically painful. In *When My Heart Joins the Thousand*, Alvie tells the readers as much very early on in the story: “I don’t like being touched, because it hurts, but when I’m the one controlling it, it’s bearable” (Steiger Prologue). Interestingly enough, her love interest, Stanley, has brittle bone disease and thus understands perfectly how touch can hurt. They meet in the first chapter and spend the whole novel getting to know each other and themselves, their desires, their bodies, and their specificities, slowly working up to the sexual relation they have in the penultimate chapter of the book. If, during this intimate moment, part of Alvie still “wants to pull away” because “the instinctive fear of human touch is still there, pressing against the base of [her] throat,” she stresses that “there’s pleasure, too – a slowly undulating heat” (Steiger ch. 18). This is what sets apart the love interests of the autistic characters in my primary corpus: their touch, even when overwhelming, brings pleasure. It is also a departure from the comforting touch of family and friends, something *Harmonic Feedback*’s Drea mentions to her boyfriend Justin, to his great relief:

“It’s hard to explain. You make me feel connected to the world in ways I’ve never felt connected before. Usually I hate it when people touch me, but with you – it’s comforting. Not in the same way as my mom.”

“God, I hope not.” (Kelly ch. 14)

Something as quaint as holding hands suddenly takes on renewed importance: *What to Say Next* ends with David and Kit holding hands, “the most honest of gestures. One of the ways through. Maybe the best one” (Buxbaum 150). This renewed importance is also conveyed by the italicized reaction of Leah, Grace’s best-friend in *The State of Grace*, when she sees Grace

and Gabe holding hands: “You were *holding hands*” (Lucas 135). There is sensuality in how Grace pays careful attention to the moments where her fingers intertwine with Gabe’s: “He reaches out a hand and I watch as our fingers touch, one by one, like starfish. We hold them as I speak” (Lucas, *The State of Grace* 106).

Hand-holding then leads to other touches, to more exploration. Grace, for example, feels “weirdly fizzy inside” when she remembers making out with Gabe and the way his body felt under her touch: “Not very long ago I had my hand inside that same shirt and I could feel the muscles on his back underneath” (Lucas, *The State of Grace* 165). In *Carry the Ocean*, the first intimate moment between autistic Emmet and neurotypical Jeremy occurs when Emmet helps Jeremy come down from a panic attack by rubbing his back and stroking his hair. Emmet is hesitant at first, before becoming more assertive – “[h]e touched my lips with three fingers, and I shuddered. He kept his fingers there, tracing the outline of my lips” (Cullinan ch. 6) – and he is able to guide Jeremy to make this moment pleasurable for both of them:

I touched his arm tentatively.

He jerked away. “No light touches. But you can touch me harder.”

I put my hand on his arm, a heavy touch.

“Yes.” His hand on my back tightened. (Cullinan ch. 6)

Going Slowly All the Way

While all the novels in my primary corpus feature at least one kissing scene, some have their couples go all the way. Perhaps because *Carry the Ocean* falls more under the New Adult category (ages 18-25), readers encounter graphic sex scenes between the two main characters as their love story unfolds, gradually moving from hesitant touches to kissing, masturbation, fellatio, and penetrative sex. ‘Gradually’ is the key word here, because Cullinan underlines throughout the book that her characters are intent on taking it slow, as stated by Jeremy: “Nobody penetrated anybody anywhere with anything, which sometimes disappointed me, but it was kind of a relief too, that we were taking sex slowly. I wanted to do everything with Emmet, but I wanted to do it right” (87). Emmet is also shown researching every new intimate act beforehand, and finding solutions to accommodate both his desire for Jeremy and his sensory sensitivities. Cullinan brings into play here a defining autistic trait – the inclination to do extensive research on topics of interest – in order to establish stepping stones in her characters’ growing sexual intimacy. The majority of my primary

corpus features this autistic trait in relation to characters preparing for physical intimacy. *What to Say Next*, for example, mentions David's research regarding kissing, notably thanks to the advice from his older sister, Lauren (nicknamed Miney): "How do I kiss her? Miney gave me a ton of advice, like not to jam my tongue down Kit's throat or to be too sloppy. She even made me watch YouTube tutorials on technique" (Buxbaum ch. 29). The authors' overall message seems to be that it is okay not to know and not to do everything right away when it comes to physical intimacy: they invite their readers to get curious about their sexuality and, most importantly, to be informed and take it slow.

For autistic characters, who are shown to be used to feeling out of step with the neurotypical world, there can be heightened anxiety around their sexual inexperience and the frequent impression that they are doing things wrong. In *Harmonic Feedback*, Drea explicitly shares this fear with Justin, and he finds the right words to reassure her, and, by extension, readers who may feel the same worry or shame:

"So it doesn't bother you, about me?" I asked.

"No. I wouldn't have even known if you didn't tell me."

"You're lying."

"I'm not. When you kiss someone for the first time, it's usually awkward. It doesn't matter how many people you've kissed before." (Kelly ch. 14)

With this reassurance, the couple is able to move on to more intimate acts. This, once again, happens gradually, as Drea gets used to the surge of various sensory feelings that comes with sexual relations: "We'd made out almost every day, and I liked it more every time. Even the sore lips and the dehydration. But our clothes stayed on, and his hands avoided my chest area. Part of me really wanted to do more, and another part was terrified of it" (Kelly ch. 15). The novel ends with the pair exchanging I-love-yous and having protected penetrative sex: "His body melted into mine, and I felt dizzy. Like I was in a really good dream. It hurt some, but he was gentle and I saw those stars everyone talked about. For the first time, I felt connected to a rhythm that wasn't my own" (Kelly ch. 18).

For sex to be pleasurable for the autistic characters across my corpus, the act has to be about connecting with the other person. In *When My Heart Joins the Thousand*, autistic Alvie is very open about wanting to lose her virginity: during her first conversation with Stanley, she asks him if he wants to have sex with her. But despite this frank interest, the novel shows failed attempts at physical intimacy until Alvie and Stanley are on the same page, know themselves and each other better, and Alvie's vision of sex changes from a "basic instinct, along with eating and defecating" (Steiger ch. 5) to a meaningful encounter with someone

she loves. Stanley is the one who decides, after a first failed attempt, to take it slow, especially since his disease requires him to move his body carefully in the world. He introduces courtship and foreplay (Steiger ch. 10), and he is the one talking about the necessity for their first time to “be special”: “I really want to do this right. I want to be prepared, and I don’t want to be stuck in braces when it happens” (ch. 36). While Stanley’s cautious stance often frustrates Alvie, she recognizes that he is right, and she values the honest communication at the core of their relationship. Good communication is also at the centre of the loving sex scene at the end of the novel, which features fellatio from Alvie, Stanley masturbating Alvie, and them having penetrative sex: every step of the way, both characters check on each other, making sure that this is an enjoyable moment for both of them.

The autistic experience of sexual desire can therefore be a way for authors to invite readers to pay attention to their sensations, their bodies, and their desires, and to educate themselves regarding sex and physical intimacy. We find here confirmation of Kimberley Reynolds’ observation that “even when books show teen sex as natural, accepted, and enjoyable, most also continue to remind young people of the need to think carefully about and plan for sexual relationships” (122). It is true as well that the authors in my primary corpus all depict physical intimacy as something natural and enjoyable, even joyful, between two characters strongly attracted to each other. The fact that one of these characters is autistic enables authors to present them as both desiring and desirable, which goes against the ableist desexualization of disabled people in general.

“I COULD KISS HIM FOREVER”: AUTISTIC CHARACTERS AS DESIRABLE LOVE INTERESTS

Going Against the Desexualization of Autistic People

YA authors who choose to portray autistic characters as sexual beings and desirable love interests offer a counternarrative to the common desexualization of people on the spectrum, and of disabled people in general. This tendency has its roots in ableism, as it discriminates against disabled people by infantilizing them, refusing them any sexual agency, orientation, or desire. As noted by Giorgia Sala et al., until the 1990s, this translated, for example, into “minimal empirical attention on the romantic and sexual interests of autistic people” (59). As Sala et al. elaborate, “[i]t appeared that autistic people were assumed to be disinterested in intimacy and their lack of apparent/professed interest when asked by researchers about their interest in ‘the opposite sex’ (sic) was taken as evidence for their asexuality” (60). This may explain why it took a long time for YA fiction to provide counternarratives on this topic: a

2015 study on the depiction of ASD in 58 YA novels found that, even though “most young adults, whether in real life or in young adult fiction, demonstrate some type of romantic interest in members of the same or opposite sex, [...] this interest is rarely found in the novels studied” (Irwin et al. n.p.). This study included two of the novels in my primary corpus, *The Half-Life of Planets* (2010) and *Harmonic Feedback* (2010), which can rightfully be considered pioneer books in that respect.

This ableist desexualization is mentioned in several of the novels discussed in this article, showing how authors, be they openly autistic or presumably neurotypical, are very much aware of this issue. It is one of the main difficulties that the lovers of *Carry the Ocean* face, as underlined in Jeremy’s eloquent summary of the public perception of his relationship with autistic Emmet:

I don’t think most people believed we actually were having sex, or if they did, they thought we were cute while we did it or something. People saw us walking down the street to the grocery store or wandering the aisles of Wheatsfield and acted as if we were escapees from the Island of Adorable, puppies dressed up in people clothes. Like we weren’t really boyfriends, like we were fake. (Cullinan ch. 16)

Their deviance from the heterosexual norm is not seen as a threat, contrary to the usual queer experience: “Because deviance cannot avoid challenging the status quo, deviance is often perceived as a threat” (Kokkola 124). Emmet’s autism seems to neutralize the ‘queer threat’ posed by the couple he forms with Jeremy in the eyes of heteronormative society. The novel opposes this with the inclusion of several graphic sex scenes, therefore claiming recognition for their “queer carnal desire”, to borrow Lydia Kokkola’s words (95).

Some autistic characters end up doubting themselves, their sexual desire, and their desirability. *What to Say Next*’s David defines himself as a “class loser” (Buxbaum ch. 23) due to his status as the high-school outcast. He has internalized the constant denigration from his schoolmates – something that started as early as kindergarten – and is quick to think of himself as “disgusting” when he experiences rejection:

Kit was right about one thing: I am *disgusting*.

I don’t say anything to Miney or my mother. I don’t really care what they decide to do. Doesn’t matter at all.

Notebook or not, I’ll still be me.

Someone who disgusts.

So instead I go up to my bedroom and close the door. (Buxbaum ch. 17)

In *When My Heart Joins the Thousand*, Alvie encounters ableist remarks from a co-worker who finds the idea that someone could be attracted to her outlandish: “It irritates me that Unibrow seemed to find his attraction to me so repulsive. Does he assume that just because I’m different, I’m incapable of having a sexual relationship with anyone? That I’m unable even to feel desire?” (Steiger ch. 5). She then starts questioning her own capacity to experience sexual desire, even though she is quite adamant about wanting to lose her virginity: “Is he right? The thought is like a flea burrowing into the back of my brain, itching, refusing to be ignored” (Steiger ch. 5). This is why it is important to offer a counter narrative inside the story itself, through the loving eyes of their love interests.

Offering a Loving Counternarrative

In *Alternating Narratives in Fiction for Young Readers – Twice Upon a Time* (2017), Perry Nodelman notes the recent multiplication of YA novels built on alternating narratives (15) in order to underline the way characters experience the events of the story, and notes that it is highly likely that their experiences will not be similar: “a second focalizer seems to demand an awareness of how the two different characters represented are in fact different – how they perceive and think about their experience in different ways” (7). This literary device is particularly interesting given our context, as the vast majority of our authors pair up their autistic characters with abled, neurotypical characters. Four novels in my primary corpus use alternating narratives: *The Half-Life of Planets*, *Carry the Ocean*, *What to Say Next*, and *May the Best Man Win*. Readers are given access to the inner lives of both leads and get to see the autistic character through the eyes of the person falling in love with them, which in itself is a powerful way to help unlearn any internalized ableist views. Autistic characters are presented as desirable people, inside and out. In *The Half-Life of Planets*, readers are privy to the growing attraction Liana feels towards Hank, presenting her with a frustrating dilemma as she vowed at the beginning of the novel not to kiss anyone during the summer, after being slut-shamed for kissing several boys. Unbeknownst to him, Hank becomes the forbidden fruit, and every moment Liana spends with him becomes charged with sexual tension, as demonstrated in the following scene, where the two are listening to music at her house: “His eyes are intensely beautiful, his mouth so ripe, his fingers chording on his thighs but reverberating on mine” (Franklin and Halpin ch. 15). In *What to Say Next*, we also witness Kit slowly falling for David, whom she has known since elementary school, the more she spends time with him. Mid-novel, David undergoes a makeover (a classic trope in teen movies), which precipitates Kit’s realization that she is attracted to him:

He walks by, his headphones covering his ears, his eyes fixed straight ahead, and he doesn't see us. He's obviously off in his own world, so I can get a good look at him without getting caught. His hoodie pulls across his broad shoulders and he's muscly under there. He smells good too. David's lemony. Fresh. Sweet. [...]. I glance back at him. For a moment I forgot how different he looks, and I'm startled all over again. My stomach clenches. Annie's not wrong. He's delicious. (Buxbaum ch. 14)

In *Carry the Ocean*, Emmet and Jeremy gradually go from neighbours to friends to lovers. While Emmet felt attracted to Jeremy at first sight, it takes the latter a bit more time to come to terms with his true feelings towards Emmet, and we see his relief when he learns that his feelings are reciprocated (Cullinan ch. 6). *May the Best Man Win* presents us with a different situation, as the two leads, Lukas and Jeremy, used to be a couple until Jeremy suddenly broke it off with autistic Lukas a year prior to the start of the novel. As they battle for the title of prom king, we notice the sexual tension that still runs between them, and we see them finding their way back to each other by the end of the story – falling for each other all over again.

Whether they use alternating narratives or not, all the selected novels portray neurotypical characters who recognize, accept, and value the autistic traits of their love interests. If their characteristic frankness can lead to hurt feelings and misunderstandings, it is ultimately appreciated. In *What to Say Next*, for example, to Kit, David embodies honesty and realness, which is part of his appeal: “I think about what it might be like to kiss him. Not that I really think of him that way – like a boyfriend or even just a hookup – but still, I imagine kissing him would feel good. A true thing. A real thing. I imagine he tastes like honesty” (Buxbaum ch. 18). In *Carry the Ocean*, Emmet's honesty helps Jeremy feel “like a real person” (Cullinan ch. 4), and it is Alvie's directness that brings her and Stanley together in *When My Heart Joins the Thousand*. Furthermore, neurotypical characters notice and value their autistic lovers' caring attitude and attention to detail: in *The Half-Life of Planets*, Hank brings root beer to a date with Liana because she mentioned once that it is her favourite beverage; in *When My Hearts Joins the Thousand*, Stanley stresses how Alvie is “one of the kindest people” he has ever met (Steiger ch. 12), and how supportive she has been during this difficult period of his life, which leads Alvie to address the assumption that autistic people lack empathy (or, in other words, Theory of Mind), and deconstruct this for the reader. Neurotypical characters also enjoy the extensive research done by their love interests regarding sex and intimacy, because it enhances their own experience as well, as Jeremy notes in *Carry the Ocean*: “I loved being the recipient of his kissing research, and kissing with tongues was no exception” (Cullinan ch. 14). When Kit finally gets to kiss David in *What to Say Next*, she is surprised and impressed by his expertise, and she muses that she “could kiss him forever” (Buxbaum ch. 30).

Attraction therefore arises from alterity, for the autistic character as well as their neurotypical love interest. But the notion of alterity also means recognizing parts of oneself in the other, and how parts of oneself can be othered, as Paul Ricœur explored in *Oneself as Another* (1992). Neurotypical love interests very often share at least one of the special interests of the autistic protagonists, such as music, TV shows, books, or mathematics. Indeed, they are just as passionate about these topics. This can be a way for neurotypical characters to woo the autistic characters: in *The State of Grace*, for example, Gabe's love for *Doctor Who* helps him win over Grace. Ultimately, what attracts neurotypical characters to autistic characters is a shared sense of not quite fitting in: in *Harmonic Feedback*, Justin defines himself as strange (Kelly ch. 3); in *When My Heart Joins the Thousand*, Stanley's disability and personal history make him feel as isolated as Alvie does; in *Carry the Ocean*, Jeremy always feels out of step with the world because of his depression and generalized anxiety disorder. Even characters who are objectively popular somehow feel out of place, such as Kit in *What to Say Next*, who carries with her the guilt of her father's death and finds comfort in her relationship with outcast David.

Autistic characters are therefore desirable not only because of their differences, but also because of their shared experiences with neurotypical characters. This can be perceived as YA authors' attempts to encourage empathy and identification, thereby challenging the ableist discourses that readers may encounter in society. For autistic readers, the protagonists of these novels offer the possibility of identification, of recognizing their own experiences translated onto the page, which is bound to feel empowering: "The identity of a person or a community is made up of these identifications with values, norms, ideals, models, and heroes, *in* which the person or the community recognizes itself. Recognizing oneself *in* contributes to recognizing oneself *by*" (Ricœur 121). As for neurotypical young readers, they may recognize themselves – to a certain extent – in the tropes of feeling clueless and vulnerable in social settings, of fearing to miss or misunderstand romantic clues, and of dissecting interactions with other teenagers, especially love interests, associated with autistic characters. These readers thus can develop "a sense of empathy towards the main characters during the reading process" (Kümmerling-Meibauer 132).

CONCLUSION

As I have shown, the last 10 years or so have indeed been encouraging for autistic representation in YA literature, which now increasingly centres autistic characters written with more nuance and complexity. However, as highlighted earlier, there is still a need for more diverse representation – for example, in relation to gender and sexual orientation – in order to really cover "the entire range" (Rozema 27) of the spectrum. Regarding the theme of physical intimacy, it is worth underlining that the novels in my primary corpus all present

desire and sexuality in a positive light: if the authors' insistence on the importance of being informed can sometimes veer towards didacticism, they also portray sex and sexual desire as a source of connection and satisfaction – the opposite of the “discourse of panic and crisis” (210) that Lydia Kokkola found in the majority of the novels she studied for *Fictions of Adolescent Carnality: Sexy Sinners and Delinquent Deviants* (2013). This change in the discourse is important because, as Kristine Moruzi and Paul Venzo remind us in their introduction to the volume *Sexuality in Literature for Children and Young Adults* (2021),

child and teen readers have long used texts to inform themselves about becoming sexual and diverse modes of sexuality. [...] Fictional texts (whether aimed at adults or young people) offer opportunities for young readers to imagine sexual intimacy and to consider the emotional consequences without having to live them in real life. (2)

Recent novels have shown that holding hands and kissing are no longer the ultimate intimate act for all autistic characters: they, too, may want to go all the way, and authors use another autistic trait, directness, to openly address this desire in more or less graphic sex scenes, with penetrative sex still presented as the ultimate step of intimacy that should be a special moment between two people who love each other. Autistic traits such as sensory hypersensitivities and a tendency to do extensive research on topics of interest offer YA authors a new way of “providing accurate but not clinical information” to young readers (on the spectrum or not) regarding sex and desire, so “they know how to read situations and signals, understand their feelings, and talk openly about how to prepare for sex” (Reynolds 117). The overall message to autistic and neurotypical young readers alike, would be, then: “This is your choice. Just... be careful” (Steiger, ch. 14).

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