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**BRIDGING THE EMPATHY GAP: REPRESENTING NEUROLOGICAL
DIFFERENCE IN CONTEMPORARY AUTISM NOVELS**

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SUMMARY OF THESES

The goals of the dissertation

The main goal of my doctoral thesis is to produce a coherent, integrated literary theoretical framework for interpreting contemporary, 21st century novels that deal with autism, and to perform a close reading of Anglophone autism novels, paying attention to the tropes, stereotypes and narrative strategies of the genre. In my work, I use the term “autism novels” to refer to literary works which feature at least one internally focalised character whose behaviour and mental faculties are recognisably autistic in our current definitions of the neurological condition. Therefore, I have selected four paradigmatic novels, Mark Haddon’s *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*, Elizabeth Moon’s *Speed of Dark*, Claire Morrall’s *The Language of Others* and Jodi Picoult’s *House Rules* to serve as test cases for interdisciplinary readings of autism in fiction. In the dissertation, I examine how these works articulate the mental functioning and social behaviour of the autistic character(s), and I scrutinise how the discourses and counterdiscourses of disability alter the possible positions the able autistic character can take in the novels.

The dissertation contributes to ongoing discussions in literary theory about the value of cognitive literary scholarship, insofar as my work constructively criticises some of the excesses that characterise the theoretical foundations of this new school. Theory of Mind has been a lynchpin in naturalising accounts of how and why we love reading fiction, which brought attention to autism as the constitutive outside of normal, able-minded consumption of fiction. I comment on the role of ToM in cognitive studies of narrative, and I examine whether an approach based solely on ToM can satisfactorily interpret the travails of the autistic characters. I have sought to elucidate the problems with a pure-ToM explanation of autism by surveying the history and the state of the art in psychological research on the neurological condition, especially when it touches upon issues of narrative production and reception. This survey corrects the erroneous view that Theory of Mind is the core deficit that hampers the autistic mind’s integration into cognitive literary theory or that autists are entirely devoid of ToM. In a similar fashion, I try to debunk the notion that autism is peripheral to cognitive literary theory and thus can be easily avoided: the dissertation puts the condition into the very centre of the cognitive project. For this reason, I create a complex, interdisciplinary strategy of reading in which disability studies, narratology, clinical and cognitive psychology work in tandem to extend the paradigm of cognitive literary theory and include the limit case of autism within its purview. In this new formulation of the paradigm, cognitive studies of narrative can interpret neurological difference flexibly and imaginatively, it remains sensitive to the lived experiences of autistic individuals while it can enact a critical reading of disabling discourse as well.

Interpreting the novels, then, becomes a way of testing the scope, validity and sensitivity of the theoretical framework I have constructed on a diverse array of texts, each with a different ideological bent and an alternative set of genre conventions. The main targets of analysis include the diegetic depictions of attention, pretence, make-believe, the imagination and autistic difficulties of parsing fictional works, as well as the cross-neurotype behaviour of neurotypicals (NTs) and autistic characters. In addition, I emphasise the unique narrative competences of autistic storytellers. One can apprehend several idiosyncratic features in their narration, such as lists that interrupt the flow of the narrative, non-fiction lectures on a favourite topic, overly mimetic diagrams and maps, all of which contribute to the authors’ self-reflexive criticism of normative narrative. I focus on authorship within the texts as a metafictional device that enables the ethical

representation of autistic agency. Although the neuroatypical characters often attempt to write their stories, they struggle with putting their thoughts and emotions on paper, and in the case of several characters, another person intervenes in the production of narrative to harmonise it with conventional expectations. By following these themes and gestures in the four novels, I demonstrate how the protagonists of autism fiction become critical readers, authors and autotelic individuals.

The dissertation's methodological approach

Earlier literary scholarship on autism and the reception of the autism novels I analyse are both characterised by their ambivalent attitude to the empirical sciences (i.e. experimental psychology or cognitive neuroscience). On the one hand, cognitive literary critics, such as Lisa Zunshine, Alan Palmer, David Herman, and to a lesser extent, Stefan Iversen, Brian Boyd or H. Porter Abbott frequently employ the terminology and concepts of psychologists and neurologists to give a better explanation of why reading literature is a unique experience. On the other hand, they apply these concepts uncritically, they fail to provide a historical context for their emergence, they do not delve too deep into the alternatives of the approaches they do criticise while they omit a thorough survey of the influence these findings had in their respective disciplines. It is not as if the psychiatric/medicalising model of autism, the so-called 'deficit model' is not in need of criticism, though – the psychological literature often describes autists by the faculties they *lack*, rather than their *actual strengths*, their alternative profile of abilities. This is the root of all the disabling psychiatric power that constrains autistic agency, since these clinical discourses rhetorically discipline the autistic mind-body and devalue the autistic voices raised against such labelling.

The doctoral thesis begins to amalgamate empirical research with evolutionary speculation, critical scientific literacy with creative literary interpretation and historical context with the newest findings in science in order to solve the thorny problem of conducting ethical research into the representations of autism. E. O. Wilson describes this vision of knowledge as a "consilient" distribution of labour, whereby disciplines mutually support one another as they create more accurate models of the world, with greater explanatory power than separate disciplinary attempts can provide. In this vision, the humanities (such as literary scholarship) are constrained by the empirical results and the theoretical models that sciences of ontologically prior entities construct. This concession has a benefit, though: it can reinforce the structures of knowledge that prove to be valid with far more epistemological power. On these principles, Marcus Nordlund has devised a hermeneutic model that is capable of consilient literary interpretation.

Within his system, Nordlund distinguished between three subtheories: the theory of reality, the theory of text and the theory of context. The theory of reality describes the set of cognitive mechanisms the reader operates during the reception of the literary work of art. It includes the horizon of expectations and the reading strategies she brings to the interpretations of storyworld. These encompass metacognition, the Theory of Mind, or Marie-Laure Ryan's "principle of minimal departure," which states that readers will apply all the real-world knowledge they have to fictional storyworlds, unless they encounter anomalies within the story that cannot be mentally simulated with real-world assumptions. This extends to neurotypical attributions of mindedness and mental content to other human beings, too. In my theory of context, I enumerate the most important discourses that participate in the creation of the autism label and the negotiation of the power that comes with labelling and being labelled, because they are available as interpretative aids when we begin to read the stories. They include popular scientific narratives and non-fiction bestsellers about autism, autistic autobiographies, the neurodiversity movement's publications,

even the pop-cultural characters with autism who appear in films and TV series. The theory of context also soaks up common beliefs and misconceptions, such as the vaccines-cause-autism scare or the idea that autists are computer nerds. These notions give rise to readings which would interpret autism novels as metaphors about our failing standards of sociality in the information age, or about the uncertainty of scientific expertise and a fundamental suspicion towards expert knowledge. I work with and criticise these readings to the extent that they divert attention from the concerns of autists and re-channel the interpretative focus to the anxieties of the NT population. Finally, in the theory of reading, I take the speculations of philosophy about the ‘problem of other minds,’ the enigma called the ‘paradox of fiction’ and its related sub-problems as they travel from aesthetics to cognitive psychology and literary studies. In this adventure, I summarise how the different fields conceive of readers that empathise with non-existing characters, and what autism means for these discourses when they legitimate normative models of empathy and (mind) reading.

I portray the development of clinical knowledge about autism as an additive, progressive research programme, which had to overcome many obstacles and false starts before it could begin to create a holistic perspective of autism as a psychological entity, even though it still has some blind spots and is far from offering a complete picture of its etiology. Well before the description of the condition in the 1940s, we already have accounts of feral children whose behaviour is consistent with our present-day knowledge of autism spectrum conditions, so it is reasonable to assume that this disability has been a constant form of neurological alterity in the history of the human species. In my review of clinical and critical studies, I contrast two explanations of autistic difference: first, the psychogenic hypothesis, in which the psychodynamic relationship between adult caregivers and infants is the source of the disorder, and genetically and neurologically inflected explanations, which define the dominant model of autism today. After that, I explore how alternative etiological notions have affected the trajectories of the psychological research programme. I stress the importance of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders as a defining document of autism, and thus a major codifier of psychiatric power to label autists and exclude them from the territory of the normal. I follow the modifications of the DSM through its five editions, culminating in the changes made to the latest DSM-5. Using Vakitzri and MacDonagh’s astute critical reading of these documents, I review how the DSM instituted a cognitive cultural hegemony of the normal through its disabling discourse. To counter that trend, I use the theoretical purview of disability studies to expose the limits of the normative conception of the mind in clinical psychology and its effects on the self-identity of people with autism. I introduce neurodiversity as an alternative, strengths-based model of autistic ability, and evaluate its claims. Here, I stand by my description of the scientific method as an additive and progressive process that nonetheless brings its fair share of anomalies: instead of a straight road we have a maze, but it has exits. I also point it out that activism and disability studies discourse have influenced cognitive psychologists and autism experts, such as Simon-Baron Cohen or Barry Prizant to speak differently of autists’ abilities. I include the voices of the caregivers and parents, who warn activists that a purely strengths-based model is not conducive to their overt goals. Unduly emphasising autistic strengths could mean that we overlook their difficulties in establishing social contact and everyday life skills. As a result, they could even be denied services they need for their flourishing, so we need to recognise the areas of life they struggle with and aid them.

Getting closer to the actual novels, I briefly explore two non-fiction genres that are relevant to the literary production of autism novels: autistic autobiographies and works elicited by Facilitated Communication. I discuss how they affect novels with autistic protagonists. These two related

discourses articulate problems of authorship that also appear within the novels, since several characters dabble in some form of writing and experience trouble with finding their voices. While clinical discourse has treated the autobiographical writings of able autists with considerable caution (like Temple Grandin's first book, co-written with Margaret Scariano) because they suspected that the NT writer significantly altered the narrative of Grandin, disability scholars have also triumphantly presented works by nonverbal authors, elicited through FC, as pinnacles of self-writing, although the method of writing these texts casts serious doubts on their authenticity. With regard to these developments, I conclude that autism novels have been influenced by both discourses, but they have taken a step backward and chose to reflect upon them with a certain candidness. The main difference between autobiographies and novels lie in the fact that despite their common topic, professional authors use a host of characters with different perspectives to create a polyphonic panorama of experience, which mingles autistic insights with the neurotypical gaze. At the same time, neurotypical authors imitate an autistic voice, they mimic the dynamic of authorship that FC-literature produces, although they do so with a more ethical stance. Autism novels are more reflexive than autobiographies on the production of the narrative because of their metafictional devices, they depict complex social relationships within a multiperspectival composition, and their novels dwell upon more abstract subjects in a more coherent way than the autobiographies do, but with more authenticity than the FC narratives.

It is these considerations that prompt me to look for relevant methodological tools in cognitive narratology and literary theory, asking some pertinent questions about autism in literature. First of all: is the autistic mind readable? If it is unreadable, is it only unreadable for NT readers? What do we have to look for, what is different in a novelistic depiction of autism from that of an NT character in the same work? Are they reliable narrators? What patterns structure their narratives, how do they relate to the conventions of typical narrative that rests upon the principles of relevance and sociopragmatic standards? To shed some light on the readability of the autistic mind, I take the commentary of Stefan Iversen and H. Porter Abbott as my starting point, who write on such interpretative enigmas in beast transformation narratives and Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener," respectively. They construct the idea of the "unreadable mind" and the "unnatural mind" in narratology to make it clear that the typical reader encounters these characters as an interpretative challenge, a hermeneutical impasse. Both authors rely on the findings of cognitive neuroscience and psychology, but they handle the literature only partially, they cherry-pick their scientists and omit troubling results from their survey which they had access to. Still, I show how both terms can be rescued from languishing in obscurity. If we want to understand why we instinctively feel that aesthetic nervousness when we encounter a figure like Bartleby, who resists cognitive norms and easy reading, we must look to a hybrid narratology, in which cognitive science and disability studies enter into a dialectical relationship.

When we introduce narrativity and tellability into the mix, these two basic concepts of narratology can explain what makes autism novels difficult to read, which are otherwise marketed as entertaining, middlebrow literature. That unease comes from the autism novel's questioning of neurotypical norms of narrative structure. Non-narrative chapters and passages are abundant in these works. The plethora of lists, illustrations, floor plans all disrupt a conventional reading of the novels. First-person narrators digress from their main topic, they expound upon their favourite obsessions, which might be interesting to some, but they are definitely tangential to the main thrust of the story they are trying to tell. Descriptions are needlessly detailed, almost blueprint-like, whereas narrators are silent on the internal workings of the characters, including their own experiences and thoughts, or other characters' bodily, outward signs of feeling. This makes their

stories behaviourist narratives, but unlike a regular behaviourist narrative, they are *internally focalised*, as the reader has to interpret the affective plot of the story from the information-poor descriptions of the autistic POV protagonist. NT readers can still make sense of the novel's events because they have access to a wide variety of scripts and schemata, which describe the usual course of conduct in most interpersonal affairs. They can flexibly apply these cognitive structures to new series of events, whereas autists cannot learn new social scripts easily and they struggle with their proper application in new contexts. It is for this reason that the underreported mental events are interpretable to most neurotypical reader despite the gappy descriptions.

The structure of the dissertation

The theoretical background chapters are designed to build up to the chapters that close-read the novels in the following manner: Chapter 1 is intended to be an extension of the preface, in which I position myself to the subject of my research and I describe my interdisciplinary approach to autism in literature. Chapter 2 could be rightfully called the *ars poetica* of the dissertation, where I discuss the motivation behind the combined use of cognitive science, clinical psychology, disability studies and narratology in studying the autism novel and the pitfalls of narrower, more disciplinary readings, which ignore aspects of these novels to their peril. Chapter 3 surveys the clinical history of autism, in which I explore different manifestations of autism besides Theory of Mind as they appear in the behaviour, mindset and worldview of autistic people, including the psychological theories that were devised to account for such neurological differences. Chapter 4 is a counterpart to the one preceding it: this section reviews the criticisms of the medicalising model of the condition and contextualises the appearance of autism in the age of modernity. This is also the place where I outline the demands of the neurodiversity movement, where I sketch out the ethical dilemmas of labelling something as a disability and refusing that label. In a shorter, separate section, I analyse the critical commentary of autists' autobiographies and some general concerns about autistic authorship.

The fifth chapter is the theoretical heart-and-soul of the thesis. In this bulky chapter, I follow the travelling concept of Theory of Mind as it journey between scientific discourses in the humanities and the natural sciences – it is also the place where I examine how literary theorists utilise the term and what costs are associated with the adoption of the ToM discourse. Here, I discuss that mind-reading and mindblindness are vehicles for arguing from false premises that an intact ToM is essential to take pleasure in reading, and these false premises are due to superficially misreading the clinical picture on autism. Similarly, I dedicate a section to an important figure of cognitively-inflected reader-response criticism, Norman Holland. His aesthetics, grounded in neuropsychanalysis, relies heavily on a model of autism by Colin Martindale, which I criticise on the basis of its inconsistencies. With regard to the narrativity of the autism narrative, I note that it is a discourse still in development, to which neurotypical novels also contribute. I concur with Ian Hacking's observation, who believes that this is the beginning of a new language game, in which autism gets articulated for the first time. Finally, I scrutinise some interpretative strategies to read autism narratives metaphorically, sometimes even outright ignoring autism when it is present in the story. With a critical examination of unnatural narratology, I make "unreadable minds" (such as Melville's *Bartleby*) a bit more readable when I read the autism back into the unreadable subject. Chapter 6 is the last contextual stretch on the road to the literary readings, where I work through several typologies of autism narratives and list the tropes literary disability studies have found within the genre, as I begin to connect this dry taxonomy with my corpus.

The next four chapters feature a close reading of my chosen texts in chronological order. Chapter 7 is an analysis of *The Curious Incident*, in which I outline the possibility of a neuroatypical narratology and discuss some of its traits, based on autistic differences in narrative competence. These include the protagonist, Christopher's rudimentary storytelling skills, the chronicle-like serial narration, the irrelevantly lavish details within descriptions, a redundant recounting of quotidian events that originate from a lack of a shared set of social scripts, and the appearance of object-oriented ontology within the narrative. Chapter 8 interprets *Speed of Dark* in an ethical context, that of scientific and medical ethics. The recurring themes of the novel and the underlying tone that questions received knowledge warrants me to introduce an anachronistic idea, "the social norms of cognition," devised originally by Nicholas Dames to identify a persistent trait in physiological novel theory, the Victorian precursor to cognitive literary theory. I transform this notion to better accommodate autism fiction and I redefine it as a set of expectations by a neuromajority which distinguishes between autistic and typical cognitive abilities, and I trace its disabling effects in the novel. Chapter 9 is a gender-conscious reading of Claire Morrall's *The Language of Others*, which is a moving portrait of a pianist-turned-librarian Jessica Fontaine, whose unique mindset leaves her vulnerable to the ruthless advances and exploitation of Andrew, a manipulative mindreader. I pay close attention to the consequences of trusting and doubting expert opinions that construct the norms which define Jessica and Joel's place in society. I use this novel to extensively document how an autistic person becomes a neurocosmopolitan soul, an individual who is familiar with more than one neurotype and moves between mind-worlds with ease. Chapter 10 discusses Jodi Picoult's *House Rules*, showcasing the detrimental effects of attributing a lack of empathy to autistic people. I interpret the way different strategies of authorial empathy are deployed to generate sympathy for autists, and I work through the implications of the metaphors the characters use to frame autism and to redefine disabling norms. I return to the importance of autonomous autistic authorship and how the generic optimism of middlebrow fiction affect the horizon of expectations for the readers of these works.

Chapter 11 ends the dissertation on a hopeful note of reconciliation. In it, I summarise the general argument and specific points I have made within the thesis. My most important point is that autism is yet to receive the attention it is due in cognitive literary criticism. In order to construct a balanced, neurocosmopolitan version of cognitive narratology, without (mind)blind spots, we need to account for the presence of autism in its very theoretical foundations. The dissertation concludes with a glossary and a list of works cited.

The results of my inquiries

The dissertation's primary contribution to literary theory is that it places autism at the centre of cognitive literary studies, removing it from its earlier, pariah-like status. I break the condition free from the shackles of pathologising discourses and integrate it into a truly interdisciplinary framework. Although Lisa Zunshine and Ralph James Savarese have already begun this journey in their recent joint contribution, to my knowledge no-one has written a longer scholarly piece which uses the terms and tools of cognitive narratology to read autism fiction. I wanted to break new ground in the way it processed and criticised the findings of experimental psychology, to make their continued relevance and progress clear for the sceptical ears within disability studies. Psychological research and clinical work have shaped and will shape the identity and coping skills of autists, but we have careful experimentation to thank when we no longer blame the mothers for their daughters' and sons' autism, that work is the reason why we know that autistic

people can develop their social skills over the course of their lives. Besides these, I have demonstrated that real-mind discourses are useful if we want to identify and apply narratological terms more accurately, may they be as simple as “thought report,” or as hard to fathom as “socially distributed cognition.”

In my dissertation, I have sought a fine balance between literary scholars’ default mode of interpreting a text metaphorically and the ethical challenge from disability studies to take the difficulties of the autistic protagonists seriously, to read literally and referentially, to disregard approaches which see autism novels merely as expressions of neurotypical concerns. Since autism is characterised by literal language use and an imperviousness to conventional metaphors just as much as it is characterised by a unique, metonymic vocabulary, I had to constantly remind myself of the self-reflexive methods writers employ to question the taken-for-granted nature of writing and reading fiction. Writers depict autistic characters as consumers of fiction who learn to read critically and are able to write their own stories. Even though I had to take a stance on the ethics of representing autism, I was much more interested in the contextual narratological analysis of authorial tricks and techniques to represent autistic consciousness in the novel.

I have found that the composition and narrative design of autism novels resist neurotypical expectations of a good story and the tales of autistic storytellers do not conform to normative standards of narrative simply because they *don’t want to* conform. This is in no small part due to autists’ detail-oriented cognitive style, their insensitivity to social nuances and their impaired sociopragmatic language use. In the novels, the reader continuously encounters long lists and lectures that halt the narrative, and she often does not receive enough contextual information to draw conclusions about the characters’ state of mind from direct textual, corpusemiotic clues. Instead, she has to supply her own frames of interpretation as a good neurotypical reader, who has access to a wide range of social scripts. This underreporting is ubiquitous: it is present in Jacob’s book-within-a-book and in Christopher’s notebook as well, but the standards of narrative are also redefined in Lou’s lyrical linguistic experiments in *Speed*. One can also trace the overly detailed descriptions to real autists’ different cognitive granularity, which carves nature up into much smaller pieces and does not integrate sensory information as much as NT brains do. This sort of investigation is spearheaded by David Herman’s work in narratology, who considers the granularity of descriptions to be of immense help in understanding the mental landscape of a focalised character.

Textually, this manifests itself in the non-hierarchical perception of the autistic person’s environment, where every event and stimulus is of equal importance. Their stories lack the anthropic bias that is prevalent in typical narrative. In this respect, the frequency of lists and object ensembles are the best examples that illustrate a worldview in which causal relationships do not matter as much as adjacency – the list, even if it pertains to the autistic character, it does not narrate them, only offers a glimpse of their soul. It is with these assembled monologues of objects and facts that the autistic protagonist narrates their atypical identity as a player of a new language game, like Hacking suggested.

I proved in the dissertation that there is a more or less hidden *Bildungsroman* element within the stories, which shows that the autistic character acquires adequate social skills and becomes a more astute reader of people. The master narrative of these works is one of gaining knowledge, a shift from not-knowing to knowing and the price we pay for knowing something well and truly. On the pages of the novels, self-knowledge, metacognition and recognising other kinds of minds seem to be connected, as if they were inseparable parts of a more empathetic society. This is most palpable in *Speed of Dark*: Lou learns how human minds (are supposed to)

work, and he can use this knowledge to his own ends, so that he is not exploited anymore. Still, this metatheme is apprehensible in the other works as well. Knowledge of the self and the skill of narration work together to raise the consciousness of the protagonists to their own precarious state, and it compels them to create a new, neurocosmopolitan identity.

A neurocosmopolitan identity is by definition a hybrid one. The autistic characters who develop their mental and life skills to reach this state can position themselves strategically in the world and generate another viewpoint, distinct from pure-culture autism, which gives them more depth of vision on the social level without sacrificing their autistic predilections. The NT characters who gain some insight into the workings of the autistic mind (and can genuinely accept that real differences exist) begin show a lot more respect towards people on the spectrum. They can adopt the other neurotype's way of thinking for the moment, and they can translate their wishes so that they are heard by the other community. I have concluded that neurocosmopolitanism is a model in which "normal" characters let go of their NT privileges to allow the autistic person's flourishing. That is why the latter can bloom and express themselves more freely, because their idiosyncratic behaviour is not stigmatised by their immediate social circle. When social interactions are transformed to enable cross-neurotype intelligibility, the autistic character is not "normalised," and nor are the NT characters "autised," but they do learn each other's language and redefine the role of norms in social interaction through a shared narrative.

Although I have given some historical reasons as to why this specific cognitive disability has garnered so much literary interest (similarly to how the end of the 19th c. was the heyday of the Doppelgänger and the split personality), my doctoral research also argues that people's fascination with autism will not be on the wane for quite a while. There is something in the autistic mind that inspires a deeply human, universal thinking about the sphere of social contact within the writer. The condition of the autistic person highlights some constant elements of the human condition, like the ambiguity of attributing minded behaviour to others, or the relationship of nurture to what we inherit from our families, our anxieties about the legacy we endow the next generation with. This explains why three of the novels (with the exception of Moon's book) show autism as a condition that already affects childhood and young adulthood. Therefore, I have adopted a universalising discourse, which might cause some consternation in the ranks of an Anglo-Saxon academia devoted to a sociologically-inflected, intersectionist view of culture, based on differences in class, gender, race and sexual orientation. I thought it essential to transcend the ethnographic articulation of a unique voice even in the case of the autistic person, so striking in every respect, and I opted to create an inclusive interpretative norm based on solidarity, mutual concessions and mutual enrichment. That required me to reinstate the liberal humanist subject to its rightful position as an ideal subject, which is hardly a popular move in today's critical theory.

Answering the criticisms of a too facile equation of liberal humanism with a complacent, anthropocentric worldview, I present object-oriented ontology, or more precisely, Ian Bogost's "alien ontology" as a Leitmotif of the dissertation that questions the validity of the human and explores its boundaries. While the autistic person's relationship to NTs is the basic driving force of the plot, emphasising the human element of connection, autistic cognition introduces a new philosophical perspective that dismantles liberal humanism in favour of a more dispassionate contemplation of the world. This is most visible in the emplotment of the characters, but it becomes most interesting when we dissect the narratological bag of tricks that convey it more subtly. It's as if writers wanted to express their own authorial negotiation between portraying autists in a more humane manner and arguing for a more stoic, flat ontology in a world of depersonalising information technology, where human beings are interpretable as data. The autism novel could be

a litmus test of whether this negotiation can be successful in the long run, so it will be well worth to follow the advances of the genre in the future.

Further directions for research

My dissertation is already quite a hefty volume, but I have had some forays into additional topics and aspects that would require more discussion. Alas, a thesis cannot be everything for everyone, and I had to omit every piece of material that was only tangential to the main arguments of the work. Obviously, the easiest way of extending this dissertation is to include more novels within its scope. That is also the least inventive continuation of my research, which has little by way of originality, and it does not promise substantial scholarly rewards. That is partly due to the nature of hermeneutic work, since interpreters of literature fashion their readings to suit their own interests, biases and general mindset, but it owes just as much to the narrow thematic focus of autism novels. Even so, I see some merit in bringing the interpretative framework I have devised to new novels, because it is likely that new themes and metathemes would emerge from the analysis of additional novels, which were initially obscured by the close reading of just a few texts. At the same time, little differences between a vast number of books carry more significance when it is just *one* novel that stands out from a large corpus, perhaps with a strange narratological device. In that case, even such a simple addition could well have methodological import, once the interpreter adopts a more distant reading strategy.

The autism novel is not only interesting as a genre of its own, for its portrayal of intellectual or cognitive disability, depending on which expression you prefer. Further research could look into secondary genre characteristics of the works, examining the effects YA fiction, science fiction or the legal thriller as a genre had on the plot and the cast of characters, possibly extending into inquiries about the sociology of their readership. Middlebrow fiction still has not received enough attention from literary studies, as literary scholars deem them too shallow, unremarkable and devoid of literary merit for prolonged scientific attention. Despite all that, they constitute the bulk of the literary market and form an inalienable part of the general reader's ideas about what good books do, so literary scholars ought to devote more time for middlebrow fiction in their studies and curricula. They could show how they reinforce or subvert middle-class values, how they project images of the family, how they spread ideas about education, work, entertainment, how the socioeconomic status and identity of real readers influence their interpretation of the novels. This leads directly to empirical research in reader response, which lays the foundations of data analysis for a project of this calibre. Research in this vein has already begun in the work of Marco Caracciolo, but he only surveyed on-line reviews from sites like Amazon, with data that is haphazard and uncontrolled, which could be improved significantly by a research protocol in a controlled setting, with an interview guided by the researcher's preliminary hypotheses. Empirical research, whether in an interview or a more mechanical, survey form could help us uncover the precise mechanisms which affect Suzanne Keen's authorial strategic empathising.

It would also be worth investigating whether the consilient, neurocosmopolitan framework the dissertation espouses could be applied to the literature of other mental conditions or neurotypical narratives. We can only determine the limits of generalizability and methodological validity by reading a carefully selected, sufficiently wide corpus closely. I'm afraid that my theoretical lens for the subgenre of the autism novel is too specific to yield surprising insights into works that stray further from that narrow genre. I have realigned cognitive narratology to suit the needs of reading the autism novel, and this can only be profitable in one other project, but there we can reap substantial rewards. What if we found texts that were written before the clinical

descriptions of the condition that are strikingly similar to the representational techniques I have identified in these contemporary novels? It would be a major boon for literary history to see nineteenth or early twentieth century texts in this new guise. Although I was cautious about the archaeological work some well-meaning scholars have conducted to unearth characters and writers from the prehistory of autism, I see nothing *prima facie* wrong with the possibility that artistic life represented such a unique profile of human cognition as autism. I have noted in other works that speculative canon creation is a risky affair, so it must be conducted with the utmost hermeneutic care, because once scholars learn about autism, they tend to see it in every quirk of character, every gauche turn of phrase, every little misunderstanding. There is a real danger that a zealous overinclusiveness with which scholars diagnose dead writers and non-existent characters empties the meaning of autism, eliding the troubles real people on the spectrum have in coping with a neurotypical world, day after day.

The narratological road I have taken was tailor-made for the interpretation of written fiction, but autism is there in every medium. Asperger's Syndrome and autism has conquered the silver screen, the TV, several plays and performances were put on stage – even a musical has been written on the condition. A transmedial study could aid literary scholars to better understand what changes when autism adapts to a new medium. I can think of one vivid example: I have seen a Hungarian production of *The Curious Incident* at a theatre in Budapest. While the original text is very narratorial, I was excited to see that the director experimented with the digressive chapters which abound in the narrative. They should be 'spoken' by Christopher but, actually, half of these interludes were *read by Siobhan* from Christopher's book, which left the actor playing the boy genius to act out the physically demanding parts, which is a brilliant solution and a nod to the frequent metareferences to Siobhan's interference with the text in the original. These sorts of observations, coupled with sound theory, could also enhance our understanding of why books, fiction and pretence play a huge role in the lives of fictional autists.

WORKS PERTAINING TO THE DISSERTATION'S TOPIC

- “Ahány autista, annyi élet: Az autistalét tapasztalatai az önéletírásban és a regényekben.”
(Accepted in 2015). *Filológiai közlöny*.
- “Autistic Consciousness Represented: Fictional Mental Functioning of a Different Kind.”
(Accepted in 2015). *Novelistic Inquiries into the Mind*. Eds. Joanna Teske és Grzegorz Maziarczyk. Lublin: N/A.
- “‘No One Who Minds Is Here’: Redesigning the ‘Social Norms of Cognition’ for the Contemporary Autism Novel.” *Americana E-Journal* 9.2 (2013. Fall). Accessible: <http://americanajournal.hu/vol9no2/makai>. Accessed: 03/24/2014.
- “Autism’s Loose Canon: Finding the Artist, Not The Autist.” In: *Trends in American Culture in the Post-1960s Period: Proceedings of the 9th Biennial Conference of the Hungarian Association of American Studies*. Eger: Líceum Kiadó (2013): 221-232.
- “Autlook – methods for representing autism in contemporary Anglophone literature.” In: X. Grastyán *Konferencia országos interdiszciplináris konferencia előadásai*. Szamonek Vera and Czeferner Dóra, eds. (2012), Pécs: PTE Grastyán Endre Szakkollégium, 213-219.
- “The Paradox of Reading Autistic Fiction.” (Accepted in 2013) In: *Proceedings of the Relational Forms II: Ex Certa Scientia Conference*. Eds. Márcia Lemos and Miguel Ramalheite Gomes. Porto: N/A.

LIST OF CONFERENCE PAPERS GIVEN ON THE SUBJECT OF THE DISSERTATION

- “Mind the Empathy Gap: The Autism Novel on the Border of Disability Studies and Cognitive Literary Theory”
Venue: European Narratology Network 4 Conference: Modelling Narrative across Borders, Ghent, Belgium, 16-18 April, 2015.
- “Towards a Consilient Literary Interpretation of Autism Novels: Elizabeth Moon’s *Speed of Dark* as Case Study”
Venue: HUSSE 11 – 11th Conference of the Hungarian Society for the Study of English, Budapest, 24-26 January, 2013.
- “The Paradox of Reading Autistic Fiction”
Venue: Relational Forms II: Ex Certa Scientia, Porto, Portugal, 13-15 December, 2012.
- “Autlook – methods for representing autism in contemporary Anglophone literature”
Venue: IV. International and X. Nationwide Interdisciplinary Grastyán Conference, Pécs, 12 April, 2012.
- “Autism’s Loose Canon: Finding the Artist, Not The Autist”
Venue: HAAS-9: Trends in American Culture in the Post-1960s Period, Eger, 22 May, 2012.
- “Reading Minds and Bodies: Social Biosemiotics, Empathy and the Autistic Mind in Literature”
Venue: BAS 2012 Conference, Timisoara, Romania, 13 May, 2012.
- “Acting Aut: Performing Autistic Selves on the Screen”
Venue: Re-Conceptualising Performance: Second International PhD Forum, Salzburg,

Austria, 18 January, 2012.