

Book Review

Title: *Autism: A Social and Medical History*

Author: Mitzi Waltz

Publisher: New York: Palgrave Macmillan, www.palgrave.com, 2013.

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Reviewer: Mark Romoser

As I write this, several Autistic people are at the White House, participating in its first-ever forum on LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bi-Sexual, Transgender) disability issues. In *Autism: A Social and Medical History*, Mitzi Waltz shows us just how unlikely this would have seemed, even a decade or two ago, and what a long journey it has been for them and their forebears.

To a large extent, the history of autism is intertwined with that of mental illness, and of neurological diseases, such as epilepsy. In fact, the word “autism” was not used until 1943, by Dr. Leo Kanner at Johns Hopkins University. Walsh has done a remarkable job of going through older case histories from as far back as 18th century Scotland and finding those of people who today would meet diagnostic criteria for autism. She analyzes a broad range of religious and folk beliefs that have been applied to Autistic people, such as “changelings”, children who were supposedly stolen by fairies or demons. Similar rhetoric is used today, for example by practitioners of methodologies such as Applied Behavior Analysis, who might say something like, “Act now or you will lose your child forever!”

Since 1943, the emphasis has shifted to finding the cause(s) of autism, and in many cases, a cure. By its very nature, autism is difficult to study in detail. This has led to some bizarre theories of causation over the years. Walsh comes to grips with the controversy surrounding Bruno Bettelheim and his “refrigerator mother” theory, which posits that autism is caused by mothers paying insufficient attention to their infants (pp. 73-75).

The first organizations devoted to the study of autism, such as the National Autistic Society (NAS) in the United Kingdom and the Autism Society of America in the United States (US), were composed solely of medical professionals and family members of Autistic people, leaving no voice of their own to Autistic people. Only recently has this balance begun to shift. Walsh chronicles how the NAS has become more inclusive of Autistic people, and how they have formed their own organization in the US, the Autistic Self-Advocacy Network (ASAN). (Disclaimer: The reviewer is a regional contact person for ASAN.)

This is a valuable work for any collection concerned with autism, or with disability history. Autism obviously did not spring into existence full-blown in 1943, but very little other work in the field reflects that. Several attempts have been made to place Sherlock Holmes on the

autism spectrum, but that is hardly edifying (Frith, 1989). Walsh takes things a large step further by dealing with real people from the 18th century to the present day.

Reference

Frith, U. (Sept. 1989), *Autism: Explaining the enigma*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Mark Romoser was diagnosed with autism at the age of 4, by the renowned Dr. Leo Kanner. After attending eight different schools and two colleges, he became a *cum laude* graduate of Yale in 1985. Mark has worked with top researchers in the autism field, including Dr. Fred Volkmar at Yale. Most recently, Mark has been employed at Silicon Valley Center for Independent Living, in San Jose, California, as a community advocate. Mark has presented on his personal experience with autism for over twenty years. He may be contacted at: markr@svilc.org.