

Multimedia

Review of *To Siri with Love*

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In a market crowded with autism memoirs, Judith Newman's *To Siri with Love* (2017) stands out. For one thing, Newman, a professional writer whose work has appeared in publications ranging from *YM*, the now-defunct teen magazine, to the *New York Times*, is a conversational and utterly relatable narrator of her family's experience with autism: her twin boys—Gus, who has autism, and Nate, who does not—are now teenagers.

Newman succeeds in avoiding certain tendencies that make autism memoirs feel predictable. For example, while most narratives of autism hew toward the extremes, describing perhaps a boy “smashing his head against the wall and finger painting with the blood” or, even more likely, “the eccentric genius who will one day be running NASA” (p. xvi), Gus's strengths and challenges, as depicted by Newman, are like those of many people on the autism spectrum: more mundane.

As an educator of future teachers at a liberal arts college, I find that many of my students assume *most* people with autism have savant-like attributes. Which makes sense. Because unless they have friends or family members on the spectrum, their points of reference are probably people like Temple Grandin, whose gift for “thinking in pictures” allowed her to revolutionize the modern field of animal husbandry, or Shaun Murphy, the protagonist in the ABC drama *The Good Doctor* (which aired in 2017 and is based on a 2013 South Korean series), a pediatric surgeon who has autism and savant syndrome. Indeed, an inadequate understanding of the full range of the autism spectrum can have consequences beyond mere misperception. For educators, the cost can be ill-preparedness to meet the needs of students in their classrooms.

In Newman's memoir, Gus is portrayed as a gifted pianist with a (mostly) easygoing temperament. While serving as his apartment building's doorman, a paid gig that he nabbed long before his brother or peers were gainfully employed, Gus got into the habit of “escorting” his neighbor Becky, a recent divorcée, and her pit bull, Francesca, to their door after their last walk of the evening. Becky said that on the rare nights she didn't see Gus, her “day felt incomplete” (153-4). But in spite of tender interactions like these, Gus, like many people on the autism spectrum, requires support in many domains—social interactions among them.

The hook for Newman's narrative is Gus's humorously fulfilling relationship with Apple's personal assistant, Siri. Indeed, the memoir is an elaboration of Newman's 2014 *NYT* essay of the same title. Newman includes several snippets of Gus-Siri dialogue and these—more, perhaps, than her own observations and recollections—help readers understand

autism as a phenomenon, at least in a day-to-day sense.

GUS: OK! Well goodnight!

SIRI: Ah ... it's 5:06 pm.

Gus: Oh sorry, I mean good-bye (131)

With this exchange, readers can easily imagine how Gus and his peers with autism might be soothed by Siri's precise language and gentle frankness. Wryly, the author notes that the bot "doesn't let my communications-impaired son get away with anything."

If precision is one hallmark of autistic conversation, perseveration is the other. The fact that Siri indulges Gus in "semidiscuss[ing]" his favorite topics "tirelessly" (133) quickly endears her to him:

GUS: Siri, will you marry me?

SIRI: I'm not the marrying kind.

GUS: I mean not now. I'm a kid. I mean when I'm grown up.

SIRI: My end-user agreement does not include marriage

GUS: Oh, OK. (142)

Newman's humorous style and asides to the reader makes the memoir engaging but at times can strip situations of the more complex emotional resonance they likely deserve. In ruminating on why Gus developed autism, for example, Newman jokes: "older father + reproductive technology + twins = trifecta of bad juju" (24). Yet another shortcoming involves the placement of the Siri material, most of which was pulled from the *Times* article. For some unknown reason, the author withholds almost all of it until two-thirds the way into the narrative. Readers will wonder why.

And yet, in moments, the memoir does delve into the thornier questions related to raising a child with autism. For example, realizing that Gus's obliviousness protects him from certain discomforts of a neurotypical childhood, Newman muses that "through pain there is growth. I think about this all the time" (88). And she concludes ultimately that she *does* want Gus to feel more self-conscious and embarrassed—that such steps are part of becoming a more fully realized person. She also grapples with whether or not Gus will one day want to have children. Her current stance is: "A vasectomy is so easy. A couple of snips, a couple of days of ice in your pants, and voila. A life free of worry. Or one less worry for me" (116). And while readers can undoubtedly see the compassion (and anxiety) underlying Newman's perspective, as the author herself admits, you can't say something like that without sounding a little bit like a "eugenicist."

Reflecting on the broader theme of the text, Newman observes the ways in which

technology can promote independence and even *interaction* for Gus and others with disabilities. Such a perspective, she contends, is an important counter to the “current notion that technology dumbs us down and is as bad for us as Cheetos” (p. xvi). Technology, as this book shows, often soothes Gus while also drawing out a certain relaxed social self. Readers may wonder if, with time, his easy interactions with Siri will eventually help him develop more comfort in the more complex arena of human-human interactions.

Newman, J. (2017). *To siri with love*. New York: HarperCollins.