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This book’s somewhat awkward title indicates its hybrid, multiple aims as Ralph Savarese, a professor of English at Grinnell College, engages with five autistic adults to read four important US novels—Moby-Dick, Ceremony, Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?, and The Heart is Lonely Hunter—and two short stories. The book manages to mix memoir, literary appreciation, and interviews (with a fascinating set of “naive” readers) into a satisfactory blend. The results certainly dispel the canard that autistic people don’t understand literature, although it also reveals that, like neurotypical people, some autistic people read better than others.

New research suggests that autists have a talent for sensory engagement in addition to their well-documented ability to concentrate on details sans abstractions. How, Savarese asks, might these talents “contribute productively to the reading process?” (6). His analysis of what his coreader Tito Rajarshi Mukhopadhyay calls “hyperfocusing” prompts Savarese to declare that “[w]hat literature professors call ‘close reading’ might as well be called ‘autistic reading’” (38, 54). The oft-recognized autistic talent for pattern recognition might also be a useful skill for tracing themes and motifs. The results turn out to be mixed.

Savarese, however, seeks not to persuade us to view Moby-Dick differently but to “inspire people to view autism differently” (8). In this he succeeds: readers will learn more about autism than about literature. His interviewees’ responses rarely go much beyond identifying with the characters (hence, one wonders why Savarese didn’t select texts with more recognizably autistic protagonists). Although their responses are sometimes illuminating, as in the case of Dora Raymaker (whose empathy for Dick’s androids surpasses that of his protagonist), they generally shed more light on the reader than on the text. This is particularly the case with Melville’s novel, which Savarese reads with Mukhopadhyay, an amazing autistic author whose books poetically document his striking synesthetic perceptions and who interprets Moby-Dick as an allegory of his own relationship with autism.

An exception to this trend is Savarese’s co-respondent Jamie Burke, one of the few people with “classic autism” to have graduated from college. Burke displays a wonderfully sensitive mind and a poetic way with words. His spatial intelligence discovers unique ways to approach Silko’s novel, a work, Savarese notes, that “seem[s] especially to reward a visuo-spatial intelligence” (70). Here as elsewhere Savarese’s forays into
neurological science yield his sharpest insights. He adduces research on autism as a sensory-motor disorder to show how autists’ relative lack of “sensorimotor priors”—the capacity to imagine actions before performing them—may leave them “immured in mesmerizing intensity” (79). Even more striking is this axiom, which should be memorized and recited by all disability studies scholars: “Disability reveals the fiction of the self-reliant individual by emphasizing the complex accommodative ecologies that make life possible for all of us” (85). In other words, we’re all dependent and interdependent.

The most revelatory reading comes in his third chapter, “Andys and Auties,” perhaps because the text fits the reader so well. Raymaker questions protagonist Rick Deckard’s assumptions about androids by reminding us that the same stereotypes are often applied to autistic people: both, for example, are alleged to lack empathy. Although her identification with androids risks reinforcing the stereotype of the autist as robot or machine, Savarese’s neurological research suggests that autists, unlike psychopaths, “struggle[ ] with cognitive and motor, but not emotional, empathy” (107). No monolithic phenomenon, empathy is an aggregate of “partially dissociable . . . systems” (qtd. in Savarese 107). Autists’ empathetic overstimulation may interfere with cognitive empathy, thereby making them appear less empathetic.

The converse difficulty vexes reader Eugenie (a pseudonym), a dancer who struggles to translate emotions into cognition (124). Multiracial, Jewish, and Deaf, she spurs Savarese to explore how such intersectionality might influence her reading of Carson McCullers’s novel, which includes a major Deaf character. Predictably, her responses largely remain in the emotional realm. Yet, surprisingly, she presents herself as conventionally feminine, thereby thwarting the intrepid academic’s desire to place her within the “usual suspects” of intersectional thinking (140). Here Savarese helpfully demonstrates how “diverse” or “queer” paradigms may merely replace one set of confining categories with different ones. He doesn’t, however, acknowledge that “autism” may be another such category. Thus, he seems to suggest that Eugenie’s struggle to make her body dance as she would like is characteristic only of autists, but any neurotypical musician or dancer faces similar challenges.

In the final chapter Savarese interacts with the most famous autist in the world, Temple Grandin, PhD, hoping to glean her insights about two stories concerning animal-human relations. A renowned animal scientist, Grandin has written that she doesn’t “get” literature. In fact, we learn that she has a remarkably clear memory of several texts she read in college. But try as Savarese might, he cannot induce her to respond emotionally to either of the two stories. He eventually pauses to assail himself for trying to fit Grandin’s responses into a neurotypical norm (182) and proposes that her responses
constitute a “rejection of the ‘neurotypical propensity toward becoming a character’” (183). This is a surprising contention, given that all his previous readers display precisely that propensity. Actually, Grandin proves to be a limited reader of fiction because she does not integrate her intellectual responses with emotional ones. Rather than flagellating himself, Savarese might have just acknowledged a truth that all literature professors know and that his book proves: some readers are more competent and engaged with a given story than others are.

Savarese writes with passion and panache, despite an unfortunate tendency to fish for outlandish similes. For example, he likens Iowa weather to a confessional poem (75) and compares Raymaker to a tree “whose cycle of leafing was mysterious” (94). Elsewhere art is rendered as a fondue fountain (138), and reader-response criticism is compared to “introducing Mentos Mints to a jug of Diet Coke” (178). Rather than illuminating his argument or subjects, these tropes train the spotlight on the writer, thrusting himself before our vision, waving his arms. Occasionally, too, the scientific research yields thuddingly obvious conclusions. For instance, while discussing the power of Native American rituals, Savarese quotes a study that concludes, “when alignment to the rhythmic stimulus occurs in two interacting individuals, manifesting as increased motor coupling, their interpersonal attitudes toward one another become more positive” (qtd. in Savarese 84). In English: group singing and dancing creates bonds. Any camp counselor could tell us as much.

Savarese detects in Eugenie a “tension between accepting the label [of autism] and being proud of it and moving past labels . . . altogether” (152). This tension is also built into critical autism studies as it seeks to define itself in relation to autism advocacy. Thus, Savarese quotes the familiar axiom, “When you’ve seen one person with autism, you’ve seen exactly one person with autism” (11). Designed to prevent lazy generalizing, it also creates a problem: if autism is so radically heterogeneous, what does the diagnosis even mean? This heterogeneity collides with autistic advocates’ understandable and generally welcome desire to batten upon the diagnosis as a badge of distinction, to embrace rather than efface it. This conflict also plagues the neurodiversity movement. The need to cling to autism as a marker of identity, despite its radical heterogeneity, has resulted in reifying the condition such that certain self-appointed spokespersons presume to speak for all autists and reject any contribution from neurotypicals. This approach risks minimizing impairments, potentially withering supports for those most in need of them.

In this regard, one is forced to point out that Savarese’s neurodiverse readers are not that diverse. Although they vary in abilities and difficulties, all can read and write, interpret texts, and analyze their own responses, which in itself places them among the more fortunate of autists. Given his project’s aims, this slant is unavoidable, but it does render
his generalizations about autism less than entirely persuasive. He is also sometimes
guilty of doing what he elsewhere criticizes: creating a firm binary division between
typical and atypical, as when he asserts that “autistics appear to reflect how knowledge
is perpetually borne out of the sensing body and neurotypicals, how it is perpetually
freed from it” (40). Tell that to any neurotypical dancer, musician, or athlete. And are not
categories such as “the neurotypical brain” exactly the sort of generalities that he aims to
challenge (149)? Such lapses seem out of key with his championing of a “fluid,
neurocosmopolitan world” (188). Thankfully, they are not frequent; moreover, Savarese’s
epilogue softens these binaries as he cautions us to arrive at generalizations slowly and
tentatively (193). That is good advice for all of us.