

Book reviews

Neurotribes. The Legacy of Autism and How to Think Smarter about People who Think Differently

Steve Silberman
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There are many books about autism. Some of them receive wide recognition, others do not. Some of them become pioneers in their subject, others achieve less. Fictions often fare well in the book markets. But it hardly ever happens that a non-fiction on autism, written by a journalist, gets as much attention as Steve Silberman's *Neurotribes* received in 2015. It was awarded the prestigious Samuel Johnson Prize in 2015 and attracted praise across the British and US press. Journalist of the online magazine *Wired*, Steve Silberman became a sought after author last year, and gave several interviews both on radio, television and on the internet. What made his book so successful?

Neurotribes is a fascinating and often entertaining overview of the history of autism, and a compassionate statement and support to the growing movement of neurodiversity, a still novel approach to understanding what autism is. In his book, Silberman argues that autism is less a primarily medical condition and more one of the many different ways the human brain may function, hence autism should not be seen as a disorder, but it is part of diversity that has always been present in nature and history.

The book does not follow a rigorous academic line of thought, rather presents us with engaging stories that are related to autism, for example the history of the diagnostic category, the lives of pioneering professionals in the field, and the lives of autistic people and their families. Therefore, the structure of the book is only loosely

chronological, and the organisation of the book's 12 chapters reflects on several projects and inquiries that all lead to the main conclusion. In some chapters, Silberman attempts to rewrite the history of autism, and in others he gives us biographies of historical figures whose influence was important on autism. These two types of chapters mingle and complement each other well.

In the first type of chapters, Silberman's string of biographies includes Hans Asperger (chapter 3), Leo Kanner (chapter 4), Bruno Bettelheim (chapter 5), Bernard Rimland (chapter 7) and in shorter extent, others like Lorna Wing and Ivar Lovaas. They all stand in front of Silberman's scrutinising eyes and we get a host of details about their backgrounds, families, religion and education. In fact, sometimes we have too many details in front of us: Silberman devotes long pages to information that seem irrelevant and make some of his descriptions redundant.

In the second type of chapters, Silberman illustrates how people on the autistic spectrum lived (including those who were not formally diagnosed), and how they contributed to science and culture. There are several chapters on this string: chapter 1 on the eighteenth century scientist Henry Cavendish "the wizard of Clapham Common" and nobel-winning theoretical physicist Paul Dirac; chapter 6 on early twentieth century inventor and science fiction magazine publisher Hugo Gernsback and computer scientist and "father of artificial intelligence" John McCarthy. "The Introduction: Beyond the Geek Syndrome" on computer geeks and chapter 11 "In autistic space" also belongs to this line – the latter describes the struggles of the early self-advocacy, famous author

Temple Grandin and the gatherings of the Autreat, a regular meeting organised by and for autistic people. All these autistic champions and initiatives contributed to bringing about a better world for humanity, and progress to their peers in the same “neurotribe”. Silberman’s intention is clear: he proves that being different can be good and may lead to important contributions to humanity.

Silberman does not forget about less famous autistic people either: the lives of autistic youth Leo Rosa and Tyler Bell can be read about in chapter 2 and chapter 8, respectively. Their names and lives become recurring themes throughout the book, and the author uses these (real) stories to illustrate the lived realities of average families. It is the pitfall of the book that both examples are representations of middle-class American families with a solid financial background. Autism has many faces, especially if pricy therapies are unavailable for families, and it would have been good to include this aspect when trying to find cases that seem to represent the “typical”.

On the other hand, Silberman’s tendency to add rich data to portraits often gives unique colours. This is the case about the lives of Leo Kanner and Hans Asperger. I felt we learned important things about Hans Asperger (Chapter 3), and how he and his colleagues had to steer their lives under the terror of the rising fascism in pre-World War Vienna. Was he saving children from the eugenics based Nazi euthanasia programme? Or was he an opportunistic member of the Nazi party? Silberman argues he was not, on the contrary: he helped children escape euthanasia, for example by speaking up for “promising cases”. The author also adds empathetic descriptions of Asperger’s and his peers’ ground-breaking work at the *Heilpädagogische Station* (“therapeutic education unit”) in the *Kinderklinik* in Vienna. Here, Asperger’s work, which saw autism as an “autistic continuum” becomes the hero of Silberman’s

narrative. The statement Asperger made in his first public speech on autism on October 1938 stands like an ideal parallel to neurodiversity: “Not everything that steps out of the line, and is thus ‘abnormal’, must necessarily be ‘inferior’”.

In Chapter 4, we turn to learn about the book’s other main character, Leo Kanner, whose life has always been central to the history of autism. Silberman gives us a detailed story of his work and his famous study published the *Pediatrics* in 1944, founding the label early infantile autism. Silberman presents Kanner’s personality as very career-oriented, “searching for spotlight”, and often employing “typically grandiose fashion”. It is possible that Kanner was informed about Asperger’s earlier work in Vienna which influenced his own findings – a reference Kanner himself never made openly, although Asperger had given lectures on autism five years prior to the “discovery” that made Kanner accomplished. Were Asperger’s findings transferred to the USA by Jewish refugee Georg Frankl, hence helping Kanner with his own study? Silberman implies: this is possible. He also highlights some of Kanner’s errors, for example, that he misinterpreted his data and explained autism as “rare enough” – a statement that would have an overwhelming effect on research for the following four decades.

The revision of the history of autism is, of course, not an easy job: readers must be brought closer to details that will convince them about the point the author tries to make. For example, Silberman’s decision to start the book with a lengthy description of a cruise where a group of software developers travel together, displaying many of the traits of autism, works very well: it brings us close to people we all know, computer geeks, IT-experts who help us in our everyday struggle with technology. They appear to be belonging to the same neurotribe with autistic people, subject to the book. It is also Silberman’s great merit to employ a

writing style that makes his book not only readable but eventually a real page-turner. With his impressive research and readiness to revise the official history of autism and turn it into the history of a “neurotribe”, this book will be praised by many who believe neurodiversity offers new and useful understandings. By its popularity, *Neurotribes* has quickly become the most successful account of the identity of a civil rights movement, the

movement of autistic self-advocates. Professionals, students, families and autistic people should all read this book and find that the map of autism is being rewritten today.

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Autism: A Social and Medical History

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Autism: A Social and Medical History is a chronological overview of the history of autism spectrum conditions, mostly from social and medical perspectives. Although many other books have attempted to present readers with “a history” of autism, Waltz’s book stands out in a number of ways. It is richly referenced but uses an accessible language, and its concise size makes it ideal for those interested in the topic but not willing to start longer volumes. Also, books on autism often focus on therapies, interventions or they claim to give us a new and “evidence-based” perspective, using the disciplines of psychology, psychiatry or neurology. Most of these books put societal issues on the margin. Mitzi Waltz’s book is different: it locates autism in a socio-cultural context and attempts to develop a narrative that treats diagnostic changes, medical categories and trends in services provision as integrally related to this wider context.

The book starts with the story of Ralph Sedgwick, a two-and-a-half-year-old boy, whose family brought him to Great Ormond Street Hospital in London, in

1877. The story of Ralph is not only captivatingly interesting, but also true: the details were obtained from the Hospital’s archives. This chapter catches the reader’s attention with colourful details about the Victorian age and how working class families lived in London. We get information about the wards of the hospital as well as available treatments, medical notes and the staff.

Chapter 2 is the start of the chronological presentation: it takes us through the eras prior to and after the enlightenment. We learn about how disease and impairment were seen in ancient Greek and Roman societies. Religious notions of illness are presented along with relevant notes from available sources: Christianity, Islam and Judaism are all referred to here. The stories of “changelings” featured in literature, for example, in tales by the Brothers Grimm, are put into the context of medieval societies. Waltz discusses pre-industrial notions of disability and madness, based on authors like twentieth century philosopher Michel Foucault and enlightenment thinker Jean-Marc Gaspard Itard.

In Chapter 3 we read about the rise of psychiatry but we get more details than just pure data on the history of a medical profession. Waltz manages to connect the spread of asylums and other forms of early institutions to the changes in production in nineteenth century societies. The evolving industrial