

Depictions of Autism in the Media: A Comparison of Autobiography *Thinking in Pictures* and Films *Temple Grandin* and *Rain Man*

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I imagine the frustration you would feel if you were unable to articulate your thoughts in spoken words. Chances are, people would assume your inability to verbalize might stem from poorer intelligence. This problem plagues the autistic. Autism, a debilitating neurodevelopmental disorder, leads to impaired social skills, problems with verbal and non-verbal communication, and behavioral issues; the clinical hallmark of this disorder is a lack of speech during childhood (Caronna, Milunsky, & Tager-Flusberg, 2008). Once seen as a shameful disease, autism was attributed to lack of maternal nurturing. This view has changed in the last decade due to a drastic increase in research and advocacy (Caronna et al., 2008). Although the neurological and genetic cause remains elusive, scientists have observed differences in brain volumes in regions such as the cortical lobes, white matter, and amygdala (Caronna et al., 2008). About one in ten autistics are also savants, meaning they possess a genius ability and usually an advanced memory (Treffert, 2009). As the stigma associated with mental disabilities begins to lift, autobiographies and films have begun to emerge. Temple Grandin, diagnosed in 1949, wrote the book *Thinking in Pictures: My Life with Autism*. Then, in 2010, HBO Films produced the movie *Temple Grandin* starring Claire Danes. The most widely known depiction of autism, the film *Rain Man*, features a fictional autistic savant named Raymond Babbitt. A comparison of these two films and Grandin's autobiography yield fascinating insights into some of the facets of this disorder.

Despite the fact Temple Grandin could not speak until four and was recommended to be institutionalized, she went on to earn her Ph.D, design livestock-holding facilities that improve the conditions of animals, and write several books. Her autobiography *Thinking in Pictures* offers readers a glimpse into the mind of an autistic person. Most people depend on spoken and written language to communicate are verbal thinkers; Grandin thinks in pictures. She describes her mind as a video recorder. After mentally recording a moment or object, she can go back and see it from different angles to create novel images by combining those different viewpoints. Because Grandin thinks using free association, her mind jumps from image to image. The structure of her book mirrors this thinking pattern. The book is not narrative nor does it follow chronological order. For example, in chapter one, Grandin designs a vat for John Wayne's Red River feed yard in 1978; in chapter two, Grandin is two. Rather, the book is divided by categories, such as emotions and autism and autism and relationships.

Due to the lack of narration, this book seems somewhat emotionless. Grandin writes about her life so objectively, it feels like she is describing someone else's life. Grandin explains that when she recalls a past situation, she can review it without the initial emotion. When writing about being bullied or feeling socially isolated, she views the memory logically rather than emotionally. Grandin understands autism has created barriers in her life and cut her off from the social sphere, yet she shows neither remorse nor wishes to change. She does not try to evoke

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sympathy from the reader; her goal is to educate. Many times Grandin offers advice to autistics and parents of autistic children on topics such as medication. Grandin writes with dignity, demonstrating that just because someone thinks differently from the norm does not mean she is any less of a human being.

Like her autobiography, Temple Grandin captures many Grandin's traits, including her visual thinking process, but the movie evokes more of an emotional response from the viewers. To depict Grandin's thinking pattern, pictures will flash quickly across the scene. For example, upon hearing the word 'shoe', Grandin's mind will be flooded with hundreds of images of shoes and memories associated with them. She also interprets language very literally, so when her science teacher says 'animal husbandry', Grandin imagines a broom with a cow dressed as a bride. The audience also realizes her struggle with verbal language when she tries to speak French. Watching Temple Grandin lets readers to see what Grandin describes in her book. The book and the movie both allow the audience to temporarily see through autistic eyes

In contrast to the autobiography, Temple Grandin has more drama that keeps the audience emotionally invested. By making the movie slightly less informative and more emotionally touching, the directors and producers increased viewership. The movie is not always from Grandin's perspective, allowing the viewers to see how her autism affected those around her, especially her mother, Eustacia Grandin. Grandin explains in her book that she is unable to understand complex emotions, even from her family members. In the movie, we sympathize with her mother's struggles. We understand the sadness Eustacia feels because her daughter does not want to be touched. We understand the guilt she feels for sending her daughter to high school and college. We understand the worry and protectiveness she feels for her daughter as Eustacia watches Temple being bullied. Most importantly, we understand the love and pride she has for Temple. Grandin is unable to describe these relationships and feelings in her book because she does not feel them herself. Temple Grandin is a success story: it depicts Grandin overcoming her autism and inspires others.

Comparable to Temple Grandin, *Rain Man* fairly accurately depicts aspects of autism; however, the ultimate goal of this film is to earn a profit and gain critical acclaim, not to educate. In *Rain Man*, upon hearing of the death of his estranged father, Charlie Babbitt returns home only to discover his father's fortunes were left to his autistic savant brother, Raymond, who he did not know existed. Like Claire Dane's character, Raymond has social and behavioral problems. They both do not like physical contact and are sensitive to certain noises. Raymond likes to stick to a specific routine, such as dinner at 6:30, and any deviation from this schedule causes stress. Analogous to the character Temple Grandin, Raymond finds change scary. Also, they both rock and exhibit similar body language.

However, some scenes in this movie are unrealistic. Upon learning of Raymond's advanced memory and math skills, Charlie takes Raymond to Las Vegas to count cards. This scene seemed far-fetched because a casino would be very loud and stimulating, and most autistics are very sensitive to auditory and visual stimuli. In another scene, Raymond dances and kisses Charlie's girlfriend Susanna. This incident seems inaccurate because it contradicts other scenes in the movie where Raymond screams when Charlie tries to hug him. These inconsistencies are added for entertainment value. According to the International

Movie Database, *Rain Man* made over \$350,000,000 in the box office; it also went on to win many Academy Awards, including Best Picture. Although Temple Grandin also earned critical attention, this made-for-TV movie had a much smaller audience and was more educational. Additionally, Temple Grandin serves as an inspiration for other mentally handicapped individuals; *Rain Man* does not. In this Hollywood movie, it is Charlie, not Raymond, who "transforms" as he learns to value kinship over material wealth.

As movies and books featuring autistic individuals become more readily available, the stigma associated with mental disorders will lessen. Even though the directors of Temple Grandin and *Rain Man* take creative liberties to create drama and increase viewership, these movies increase social awareness. Ultimately, *Thinking in Pictures* is an inspirational and informative story that best illuminates the public of people who differ from the norm. Hopefully, the burgeoning research on autism will elucidate the cause of this perplexing disorder.

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