

On Writing While Neurodiverse

Alex Brianson

Reader, dearest, it may have escaped your notice that I haven't posted on my blog for a while. I'm not the centre of your world, things get frenetic, yadda yadda. Fair enough. But what you don't know is that there's been a reason for my absence. A really juicy unexpected plot twist of a reason, in Real Life. I'm kind of expert at these now, right? And I even had a hunch this particular one was on its way. But still it was a bit of a shocker.

Is your breath baited? Pulse rate increasing as the heat factor soars? (Alex points awarded to those who get the reference by the way.) Go on then. I'll do what we now apparently call a *reveal*, as verbs become nouns and nouns that exist get junked in our crazy po-mo language. I...am...neurodiverse.

You're probably still no wiser. Pipe down at the back. Bitch, there's only one smart Alec on this webpage, and it AIN'T YOU.

Neurodiversity is a newish and more positive term used to describe those of us whose brains don't function in the standard way, usually because we're on the autistic spectrum. It's also used for those with other conditions such as Down's Syndrome or Tourette's, and places the accent on difference rather than disability or disorder, aiming to help both those with the condition and those who are 'neurotypical' view variation in mental/cognitive capacity as something positive – or at least as something that enables we non-typicals to make particular contributions to society. Thomas Armstrong's book *The Power of Neurodiversity* (Da Capo Press, 2010) has been helping me to gen up a bit.

I was diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome a few weeks ago and have been trying to get my head round it. I'm still waiting for the full diagnostic report, NHS resources being what they are, so I'm still flying blind about the precise ways in which my Asperger's is manifested and what I can do about it. But on the whole diagnosis has been a helpful event that's generated several 'aha' moments, as characteristics, behaviours, problems, and thought processes that I have gradually become aware of over time and on the therapist's couch now make sense. Lots of ahas! Almost enough to be backing vocals to *Knowing Me, Knowing You*. But not quite. And not in four part harmony.

So what does this mean for me as a writer? On the one hand, it encourages me, because writing is one way in which I make sense of things. I can create worlds of my imagination that work in the way I want them to, and I control what my characters do (more or less.) It's pretty restful.

On the other hand, it brings into sharper focus matters that I've known I had to grapple with. I've always had to do what I call elevation to the abstract in order to understand people and their behaviour. Body language? Total mystery. Except really obvious things like tears or laughter. I freak when rules aren't followed. It just does not compute, and I don't know how to handle it. There are times in a conversation that I just do not know what to say because the seemingly obvious (to me) reply has caused offence in the past. When people don't do what they've said, or don't say what they mean, I get completely stumped. It is really easy to pull the wool over my eyes, because I expect people to do what they say even when experience tells me they won't. I just can't help it.

And I get overload really quickly. This is why I've had to take frequent periods of time off work, and could never understand why really hard work that others seemed to be able just to do could shove me into a tailspin if I did it for too long. Apparently Aspies (for such, I learn, is how the in-kids with the syndrome call ourselves) have brains that work incredibly fast, but much of that is spinning off into anxiety and/or seeing umpteen different variations of the choice of action before you and its consequences. It's exhausting.

So you can imagine this poses challenges to a writer. I could never have been a novelist before I was in my thirties. I just didn't understand enough about how people work to write about them. I tried, and it was awful.

I have to make a conscious effort to give my characters little signs that denote depth, or traits, or psychological states. Make my heroine have a tic that causes her eyelids to flutter when nervous? Sure. But to write it you have to know that's what the fluttering means, if you ever even noticed it in the first place. The first rule of writing fiction is 'show, don't tell'. For me that can be like learning a whole new language. But I'm getting there.

And there are good features of being an Aspie. One thing we're good at is compassion, which is ironic given our lack of empathy in other ways. We're good at loyalty. We tend to be clever. And we tend to be tenacious (when not shutting down because overload.) So, basically, think of us as big ol' Labradors and you kinda get the picture. Sadly, given what Mr Gravity is doing to the skin round my eye sockets I look more like a shar-pei

these days, but you know even that has a positive – it detracts from the whole new shade of purple Mr Insomnia’s been working out in the same space.

So I’m getting back in the saddle. Part two of novel two awaits planning and plotting this afternoon. And I may be visiting my newly-clarified world upon one of the protagonists. He doesn’t deserve it, but it will help explain why he has his central dilemma, so I reckon it’s Justified in the Name of Literature.

PS: If you’re still aiming for Alex points, look away now... If you want to check your answer, look below:

‘Pulse rate increasing as the heat factor soars’ is a line in *I Lost My Heart to a Starship Trooper* by Sarah Brightman and Hot Gossip. Bien sûr.

PPS: *Big Bang Theory* fans will be amused to know that the first book on Asperger’s I bought is published by Sheldon Press.