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Book review of Steve Silberman: Neurotribes. The legacy of autism and how to think smarter about people who think differently.

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Book Review

Neurotribes. The legacy of autism and how to think smarter about people who think differently

Steve Silberman

Allen&Unwin, 2015

ISBN 978-1-76011-363-6

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 U.S. 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 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 18th century scientist Henry Cavendish '*the wizard of Clapham Common*' and Nobel-winning theoretical physicist Paul Dirac; chapter 6 on early 20th 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

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3 Autreat, a regular meeting organised by and for autistic people. All these autistic champions and
4 initiatives contributed to bringing about a better world for humanity, and progress to their peers in
5 the same 'neurotribe'. Silberman's intention is clear: he proves that being different can be good and
6 may lead to important contributions to humanity.
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9 Silberman does not forget about less famous autistic people either: the lives of autistic youth Leo
10 Rosa and Tyler Bell can be read about in chapter 2 and chapter 8, respectively. Their names and lives
11 become recurring themes throughout the book, and the author uses these (real) stories to illustrate
12 the lived realities of average families. It is the pitfall of the book that both examples are
13 representations of middle-class American families with a solid financial background. Autism has
14 many faces, especially if pricy therapies are unavailable for families, and it would have been good to
15 include this aspect when trying to find cases that seem to represent the 'typical'.
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19 On the other hand, Silberman's tendency to add rich data to portraits often gives unique colours.
20 This is the case about the lives of Leo Kanner and Hans Asperger. I felt we learned important things
21 about Hans Asperger (Chapter 3), and how he and his colleagues had to steer their lives under the
22 terror of the rising fascism in pre-World War Vienna. Was he saving children from the eugenics based
23 Nazi euthanasia programme? Or was he an opportunistic member of the Nazi party? Silberman
24 argues he was not, on the contrary: he helped children escape euthanasia, for example by speaking
25 up for 'promising cases'. The author also adds empathetic descriptions of Asperger's and his peers'
26 groundbreaking work at the *Heilpädagogische Station* ('therapeutic education unit') in the
27 *Kinderklinik* in Vienna. Here, Asperger's work, which saw autism as an '*autistic continuum*' becomes
28 the hero of Silberman's narrative. The statement Asperger made in his first public speech on autism
29 on October 1938 stands like an ideal parallel to neurodiversity: "*Not everything that steps out of the*
30 *line, and is thus 'abnormal', must necessarily be 'inferior'.*"
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35 In Chapter 4, we turn to learn about the book's other main character, Leo Kanner, whose life has
36 always been central to the history of autism. Silberman gives us a detailed story of his work and his
37 famous study published in the *Pediatrics* in 1944, founding the label *early infantile autism*. Silberman
38 presents Kanner's personality as very career-oriented, '*searching for spotlight*', and often employing
39 '*typically grandiose fashion*'. It is possible that Kanner was informed about Asperger's earlier work in
40 Vienna which influenced his own findings – a reference Kanner himself never made openly, although
41 Asperger had given lectures on autism 5 years prior to the 'discovery' that made Kanner
42 accomplished. Were Asperger's findings transferred to the USA by Jewish refugee Georg Frankl,
43 hence helping Kanner with his own study? Silberman implies: this is possible. He also highlights some
44 of Kanner's errors, for example that he misinterpreted his data and explained autism as '*rare enough*'
45 – a statement that would have an overwhelming effect on research for the following four decades.
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50 The revision of the history of autism is, of course, not an easy job: readers must be brought closer to
51 details that will convince them about the point the author tries to make. For example, Silberman's
52 decision to start the book with a lengthy description of a cruise where a group of software
53 developers travel together, displaying many of the traits of autism, works very well: it brings us close
54 to people we all know, computer geeks, IT-experts who help us in our everyday struggle with
55 technology. They appear to be belonging to the same neurotribe with autistic people, subject to the
56 book. It is also Silberman's great merit to employ a writing style that makes his book not only
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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.

For Peer Review