

REVIEWS

THE SPEED OF DARK. By ELIZABETH MOON. New York: Orbit Books, 2003. **REVIEW AVAILABLE ONLINE @ www.srvip.org**

Reviewed by Joel Boyce

THE SPEED OF DARK is a 2003 science fiction novel by American writer Elizabeth Moon. It won the Nebula Award for Best Novel, a prestigious juried prize for science fiction or fantasy works published in the previous calendar year. The main character in the novel, Lou Arrendale, is autistic and the story is told in the first-person from his perspective. The purpose of this analysis is to determine whether and to what degree the work positively and negatively images people with autism.

Coincidentally, the book was published just a few months prior to another popular and award-winning novel, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, by British writer Mark Haddon (Haddon, 2003). That novel was written as a mystery and featured a teenaged protagonist who might have been diagnosed on the autistic spectrum or with Asperger's [see Doody, J. (2006). Review of the book *The curious incident of the dog in the night-time* by Mark Haddon. *The SRV Journal*, 1(2), 60-62].

Though it received both popular and critical acclaim, Haddon also received criticism for openly opting not to research either of these cognitive exceptionalities and thereby contributing to a certain degree of public misunderstanding of what they are actually like (e.g., Olear, 2011). In interviews Haddon stated that his main character was based on two different real-life people, neither of whom was actually autistic (Gross, 2003). Moon, by contrast, raised a son with autism, who was in his late teens when she published her novel.

In *The Speed of Dark*, Lou Arrendale works in bioinformatics, looking for particular kinds of patterns in physical data, which ultimately correlate

with promising avenues for drug discovery. His entire section at the company is autistic, and they receive certain supports in their work environment: assigned parking, a small private gym, and a handful of other trivial considerations. Disability legislation aside, these are easily justified by the enormous value the section brings to the company, far greater than that of other departments and employees.

At the onset of the narrative, a new manager comes in to oversee Arrendale's section, and he is resentful and irritated by even the smallest accommodations these employees receive, making it his mission to dismantle them one-by-one, or else push the employees out of the company. When a new treatment becomes available, said to cure autism in adults, he pressures his employees to be part of the first human trials or else be laid off. Arrendale's coworkers each react differently, some seeing it as a cataclysm and others as an opportunity. Arrendale himself is conflicted, and wrestles with his choice for most of the book.

From an SRV perspective (Wolfensberger, 2013), two significant ways in which image enhancement might occur in this novel stand out. First, the first-person perspective is perfect for achieving interpersonal identification, allowing the reader to empathize and identify with autistic people through the protagonist and narrator.

Second, Wolfensberger's conservatism corollary, which states that the devaluation of a person can be mitigated or counteracted by high-value roles they hold (pp. 153-156), also figures heavily here, as the novel shows us Arrendale's whole life, allowing us to see a person who is autistic in a broader context, not only in the role of service-user or special-education student.

Arrendale's work and academic role as an expert

Arrendale's valued work role as a highly-skilled employee is given central prominence in the nov-

el. It is established from the beginning of the story that he is an exceptionally high-value employee, doing complex, creative work that is beyond the intellectual abilities of most of the general population. This high professional competency establishes that Arrendale and his colleagues are individuals with significant strengths, rather than being defined only by their limitations.

Though this is information that is image-enhancing through the conservatism corollary, several scenes showcasing Arrendale's strengths inspire interpersonal identification at the same time. For example, when he unintentionally shows up a detective with his mathematical ability, the detective then impresses Arrendale in turn with his intuitive and clear understanding of the role of motive in identifying suspects in a crime, allowing both individuals to be impressive and impressed in short order.

By placing her main character's struggles in close proximity in time and space with the struggles of those who are not autistic, Moon makes it easy for the reader to understand that any human being can be put in a situation that taxes her or his abilities, no matter how competent she or he may be in other ways. The groups have more in common than not.

Arrendale's working environment

All of the employees in Arrendale's section work in an environment designed for their use. Arrendale and his colleagues rarely interact with other employees in the company besides their manager, a man who is not autistic. The environment is designed to meet their needs and allow them to more easily maintain their high levels of productivity.

These include a refrigerator with individually-assigned Tupperware-style containers to protect employees from having to smell food belonging to other people, a small gym with a trampoline, and other devices to allow for repetitive physical motion, and in Arrendale's own office a small electric fan that he turns on in order to cause many spin spirals to rotate in the light as a transition ritual.

Each of these aids is valuable, but they are also somewhat child-like. Trampolines, spin-spirals, and bouncy- and rocking chairs are typically seen in play areas, day-cares and classrooms for children, not adult gyms or office areas. However, through Arrendale, the author questions whether such judgements are really fair.

For example, the section manager enjoys the convenience and predictability of assigned parking, yet criticizes his employees with autism for appreciating the same benefit. The absurdity of this, coupled with the effective interpersonal identification achieved through the first-person narrative, calls into question some of the negative associations of disability supports, by re-framing them in terms of the unique supports all people use to one degree or another.

Meanwhile, other image-enhancing facts are mentioned without particular emphasis: Arrendale and his colleagues' neat and professional dress, gainful employment in a major corporation, upper-middle class incomes, and their high productivity as reported in internal company documents being a few examples.

Arrendale's other environments

Arrendale lives independently in an apartment building with other employed, middle-class people. He appears to be the only person in the building who is autistic, and his neighbours are not necessarily aware of his being autistic. He uses common areas like the laundry room and interacts with at least two of his neighbours on a regular basis in a friendly and informal way.

Arrendale also participates in a fencing group that meets one night a week. The group is led by an older married couple experienced in fencing, and is hosted in their backyard. Arrendale is the only fencer in the group who is autistic. The group happens to include several academics employed by the local university, but other fencers have a range of occupations, and their discussion is primarily focused on the sport of fencing rather than their day jobs or personal relationships.

Both Arrendale's living environment and his fencing group positively image him. He is able to live and spend time with people who are not autistic, showing he not only has some social competencies, but that he is a desirable and valued friend. Throughout the book, Arrendale becomes closer and closer with other members of the fencing group, and is shown to be accepted and respected by most of them.

On the whole, Arrendale's many high-value roles, as a mathematical and scientific genius, athlete, friend, neighbour, employee and others, overshadow the lower value roles he holds. By any standard, this is a very successful, capable person, whose strengths are more notable than his weaknesses.

Social interactions in public and in mixed company

Arrendale is certainly a victim of simple prejudice often enough, but there are also several scenes in the novel wherein he struggles with situations that a person who is non-autistic would be more adept at handling. In one scene he accompanies a friend to pick up someone at the airport. When he has to pass through security on the way to arrivals, Arrendale becomes flustered and is unable to speak. The more he struggles to articulate his answers to the security officer's questions, the more irritated and aggressive the security officer becomes.

Yet we have a word for this experience only because it is such a universal one. We've all been flustered. Moon is making the important point that a person with a disability often deals with bigotry as well as special challenges stemming from the disability itself. But these challenges are not always so far removed from the experience of the general population, and she encourages her readers to imagine themselves in those shoes.

Arrendale also has several increasingly dangerous encounters throughout the novel with an acquaintance who becomes an enemy, then a stalker, and eventually a would-be murderer. This man targets him because he feels unsuccessful by com-

parison, and can't countenance being upstaged by a person with a disability. He suggests, in fact, that Arrendale has no right to, for example, receive romantic attention from a normal woman, or be more popular than he is.

Arrendale rightfully asks why he's needed to see a psychiatrist for years just because he is labelled as autistic, but this other man, violent and difficult and selfish, has been recklessly free to emotionally damage the people around him without the impediment of a medical diagnosis.

Nevertheless, Arrendale leaps to his attacker's defense. This man will receive an official label as a deranged criminal and will undergo personality adjustments via a neural implant, and Arrendale would not wish that on anybody: neither the implant nor the label. It's a strong condemnation, not of accurate diagnosis and appropriate treatment, but of the use of labels for the purpose of assigning and enforcing stereotypes, from someone who has lived under one all his life.

Autism imaged as a disease to be cured

Through her protagonist, Moon frequently alludes to the question of whether autism should be treated as a medical condition or as another way of being human. This serves the theme of interpersonal identification: are the differences between people with and without autism really so fundamental and clear, or are the similarities greater than the differences?

Arrendale received early educational intervention. Lessons on reading faces, the patience of computer learning, and alternate learning styles all gave him the opportunity for greater learning in the social realm to which his brain was less readily inclined.

Is this just part of good inclusive education, giving each unique pupil what they need, or more akin to a medical intervention for a chronic disease? Moon treats it as good education. But she contrasts it with what's known as the "medical-model view of learning disabilities" (Brisenden, 1986), espoused by Arrendale's psychiatrist.

This doctor is so fixated on her perception of Arrendale's disability, every part of his personality, every interest and quirk, is seen as a symptom. In one example of the double-standard, Arrendale reflects that "if she notices that I'm moving my head back and forth she makes a note in my record. It is called stereotypy when I do it and relaxing her neck when she does it" (Moon, 2003, p. 3).

Wolfensberger (2013) makes note of this phenomenon, wherein a person considered to be normal is allowed the luxury of quirks and individuality, but "if a mentally retarded man had one or more of these devalued characteristics . . . [we would conclude] these are 'just what one would expect'," thus confirming the stereotype (p. 153).

The major focal point for this theme of inclusion versus singling out via label is in the science fictional notion of an autism cure. A cure implies a disease, and Moon addresses this head-on, in discussions Arrendale has with his friends and co-workers who are also autistic, and with his friends in the fencing group. Almost every major character weighs in, some roundly rejecting the implication and others assuming it.

In the novel *Flowers for Algernon* (Keyes, 1969), the main character, Charlie, decides to undergo an experimental procedure to boost his intelligence. Charlie, using the terminology of the time, is diagnosed as a moron on the basis of a written IQ test. It's not clear, initially, why Charlie is so dead-set on becoming smarter, and doctors question whether he can reasonably be expected to give informed consent. But he does, and the new Charlie, a genius, is in many ways an entirely different person.

Moon's Lou Arrendale, on the other hand, has a fairly good grasp of the dilemma he is facing. He understands that, assuming complete success, he will certainly lose much even as he might gain. You can't change and simultaneously stay the same.

In the end, he decides to undergo the trial. The ending is bittersweet. The new Lou Arrendale is able to pursue a lifelong dream, and in the book's

closing scene looks down from orbit at a slowly spinning Earth. But the old Lou Arrendale is a static memory inside the new man's mind. His old friends mourn what is essentially the death of a loved one. The reader, too, is likely to feel ambivalent, at best, about the loss (if my own reaction and those of friends on whom I pushed the book is any indication).

This concluding scene, built up to throughout the entire novel, does much to dismantle dehumanizing ideas about people with autism. Moon does such an effective job of achieving interpersonal identification between the reader and protagonist that by the penultimate scene, he is by far the most relatable character in the novel. It would be difficult for any reader to get this far in the text without personally identifying with Arrendale, his hopes and dreams, his personal struggles, the love and curiosity and goodness in his heart—and identifying enough to mourn his passing.

The idea that autism is a disease, perhaps akin to cancer or malaria, that might hypothetically be cleared out while leaving the person whole and intact, is demolished. The way Arrendale perceives the world and processes information is one more ingredient in a unique personality, and in ceasing to be autistic, he loses at least as much as he gains.

Moon does much here in the presentation of the fictional autism cure and, critically, its costs, to undermine the medical-model perspective on learning disabilities. The alternative perspective she offers is that of a person with autism being at just another point on the never-ending spectrum of ways of thinking, feeling, and being human. More importantly, while making this philosophical argument throughout the novel, Moon allows a person without autism to step into the shoes of a person on the autistic spectrum, to everyone's benefit.

Conclusion

While the story is fictional, the authenticity of the autistic experiences described in this book is owed to the fact of Moon's experience raising her own

son with autism, as well as her heavy involvement in various groups for people with autism and their friends and families.

Arrendale may not always understand people's motivations or feelings, but this does not mean he does not care. He may have difficulty expressing what he is feeling and thinking sometimes, but this does not mean he doesn't have feelings. This is a man with a rich, interior life, full of curiosity, love and hope. Readers are likely to value this and, consequently, to be more aware of what exists beneath the surface of people on the autistic spectrum in their own lives.

Readers are made to understand the constant obstacle course of social expectations Arrendale has to manoeuvre via his running internal commentary. As narrator, he tells the reader that people with autism do not stubbornly refuse to fit in, rather it is society that sometimes refuses to accept a different way of doing things. Through him, Moon cogently explains why disability supports are not special treatment (implying unfairness), but equitable treatment: because they enable a person to be part of and contribute to society, as we all strive to be.

Beyond simply getting by, Arrendale is shown to be exceptionally talented and productive in his work life, and brilliant when learning new things. But what the novel ultimately argues is that being autistic does not preclude success, and further that being "normal" is no guarantee of success. Each individual has their own unique combination of strengths and weaknesses.

On the whole, Moon does an excellent job giving readers an authentic sense of the challenges of autism while presenting a positive and realistic picture of people who are autistic. The result is empathetic, enlightening and image-enhancing.

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International
Social Role Valorization
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The International SRV Association is writing to ask you for your support for our first annual membership drive. We are the only international association committed to providing information and up-to-date resources for SRV, as well as opportunities for networking and communication about SRV. We need the assistance and partnership from all of you who are committed to learning, using, teaching, studying and researching Social Role Valorization. Our 100% voluntary efforts involve developing and updating a website to honor the work of Dr. Wolf Wolfensberger; and promoting SRV by sharing a variety of resources. You can see our first effort at creating a common space for people interested in SRV at www.socialrolevalorization.com

ISRVA operates under the informal leadership of Guy Caruso, Jo Massarelli, John Armstrong, Joe Osburn, Raymond Lemay and Betsy Neuville. We are currently housed within Keystone Institute, located at 3700 Vartan Way, Harrisburg, PA. 17101 US. We can be reached at info@socialrolevalorization.com.

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VALUING LIVES: WOLF WOLFENSBERGER AND THE PRINCIPLE OF NORMALIZATION. By JERRY SMITH (Director). 57 minutes, 2016. **REVIEW AVAILABLE ONLINE @ www.srvip.org**

Reviewed by Carrie Mallon

DR. WOLF WOLFENSBERGER is one of the most influential thinkers in the history of contemporary disability theory. Amongst his accomplishments are his work on the principle of Normalization and Social Role Valorization, and their subsequent impact on the growth and development of person-centred planning models, as well as Citizen Advocacy. Not only was he a prolific writer, he was a captivating and powerful speaker and educator. In the documentary film *Valuing Lives*, David Braddock asserts that, “he helped people feel it at the same time as they got it intellectually.” Creating a documentary highlighting this important history of disability and the life work of this very memorable man could not have been easy, yet this film captures the essence and the spark that helped to bring Wolfensberger’s ideas to life in the hearts and minds of so many of his students.

The film opens with a socially devalued woman describing her various living situations through the years, indicating how it has improved as it has more closely followed the principle of Normalization and also Social Role Valorization. The examples of devalued people whose lives have been improved are relevant to the theme of the movie, which presents a number of examples of people whose lives have been improved by the Normalization movement and by gaining valued social roles in their lifetime. Examples of photographs from Burton Blatt’s *Christmas in Purgatory* and from other personal collections are also used throughout the movie. In some of these images, typical devalued roles and wounding experiences are highlighted to illustrate the depth of devaluation and the abuse that was suffered by many devalued people. The film also includes a variety

of interviews with friends, family and colleagues of Dr. Wolf Wolfensberger. Many of these interviews were used as research for the film and are included in the documentary, with extended versions available on the website <http://rtc.umn.edu/valuinglives/>.

This documentary is appropriate for people of all ages, and is particularly relevant to those working in human services, though other audiences are highly likely to also appreciate the film.

Valuing Lives provides a lot of information about the impact of the Normalization movement in the human service world in Canada and the United States, as well as information about Wolfensberger’s life and teaching. The film highlighted some of the eventual distortions of the Normalization movement, particularly over-simplifications of the ideas, as well as the institutional mindset which was brought into so many smaller group residences. *Valuing Lives* also discusses Wolfensberger’s ultimate decision to distance himself from this movement that he had contributed to so heavily. As Allen Bergman is quoted as saying in the film, “Every good idea has within it the seeds of perversion.”

Wolfensberger reformulated the concept of Normalization with a focus on developing valued social roles, and the impact of these roles on access to the good things in life. Dr. Wolfensberger speaks of the move to Social Role Valorization, saying that the “advantage to that term was that nobody knew what it meant.”

This powerful film is a great illustration of just how influential Dr. Wolfensberger continues to be in the social services sector. As a student of Social Role Valorization, a human service worker, and the parent of children with disabilities, I would strongly recommend seeing this film. I believe that its application is far reaching, and is an important and insightful resource. It did an excellent job of portraying Dr. Wolfensberger’s fire and passion for helping those who are devalued, and his ability to ignite that fire and passion in others. The documentary makes it clear that the legacy

that he left to students and faithful colleagues is being carried forward.

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