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# Hollywood Finds Its Disorder Du Jour

By [CARYN JAMES](#)

AUTISM has become to disorders what Africa is to social issues, the celebrity cause du jour. “[Oprah](#),” “Larry King,” “The View” and MTV all devoted full hours to the subject in recent weeks, sometimes with appearances by the singer Toni Braxton (the mother of a boy with autism); the disorder is the focus of documentaries now making the festival circuit, like “Autism: The Musical.” Most intriguingly, it has turned up in a spate of dramas that take autism beyond “Rain Man.”

[Sigourney Weaver](#) snaps “I’m autistic” at [Alan Rickman](#) in the current “Snow Cake,” while in the past year [Josh Hartnett](#) and [Radha Mitchell](#) played an autistic couple in “Mozart and the Whale,” and [Hugh Laurie](#)’s character pretended to be autistic on “House.”

How did autism, one cause among many, gain such high new visibility? April is National Autism Awareness month, which merely explains the scheduling, not the sheer volume of projects about the subject. That proliferation is due to a mixture of celebrity clout, a huge increase in diagnoses, and the nature of the disorder itself. A condition that thwarts the ability to communicate and express emotions, autism seems ready-made for symbolic use.

The stereotypes of [Dustin Hoffman](#) obsessively counting “Ten minutes to Wapner” in “Rain Man” or a child banging his head against a wall offer limited views. What is called the autism spectrum also takes in far less drastic problems, including Asperger’s syndrome, which mars ordinary social interaction.

This broader definition is one reason autism suddenly seems to be everywhere. The disorder is now diagnosed in one of every 150 children, 10 times what it was in the 1980s, according to a study released in February by the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#). Along with that wider definition, doctors have been diagnosing autism

earlier and more frequently, said Dr. Melissa Nishawala, director of the Autism Spectrum Disorders Service at [New York University](#).

Those numbers have touched some influential campaigners who have called on show business friends for help. Bob Wright, the former chairman and chief executive of NBC Universal, and his wife, Suzanne, founded Autism Speaks in 2005 after learning that their grandson was autistic, and that advocacy group has become a potent force. On April 9, it held a fund-raiser at [Lincoln Center](#) crammed with current and former NBC stars, including [Jerry Seinfeld](#) and “Saturday Night Live” cast members.

Other families affected by autism have benefited from celebrity connections, too. Last fall, [Jon Stewart](#) was the host of “Night of Too Many Stars: An Overbooked Benefit for Autism Education” on Comedy Central, with comics including [Will Ferrell](#) and [Jack Black](#). The special evolved from a fund-raiser produced for years by Robert Smigel (the man behind Triumph the Insult Comic Dog), whose child has autism.

Given such strong feelings about the issue, the documentaries are surprisingly unsentimental. “Autism: The Musical” (which has its premiere Sunday at the [Tribeca Film Festival](#)) follows a group of children with autism who put on a show. Without narrative, the film reveals how differently the disorder affects the children and how uniformly it wears on their families. This work carries its celebrity connection lightly: the singer Stephen Stills makes a cameo appearance, but major figures include his son, Henry, who has autism, and his wife, Kristen (also one of the film’s executive producers).

Fiction can do what nonfiction rarely can, though, especially in the case of autism: leap inside someone else’s mind. That was the startling accomplishment of Mark Haddon’s best-selling 2003 novel, “The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time,” whose 15-year-old narrator displays many signs of autism without ever mentioning the word: he is extremely intelligent and facile with numbers, yet so emotionally blank he needs to have love defined for him, so literal-minded he must have jokes explained.

Depicting autism from the inside out may be more difficult on screen, but it is also true that films have rarely tried. Awareness of autism has seeped into the culture enough to make it a handy metaphor. But while the autistic savant of “Rain Man” seemed alien from most viewers, more recent characters are often just a shade beyond quirky, with emotional problems that are like anyone else’s, only more extreme. Focused intently on

the way “they” are like “us,” these films may not do much to increase understanding of autism at all.

Dramas about characters severely affected by autism are often really about the people surrounding them. In the poignant BBC America movie “After Thomas,” Keeley Hawes and Ben Miles play the parents of Kyle, a small boy with autism, whose fierce tantrums diminish and ability to communicate improves after he gets a puppy, named Thomas. The film is based on real people, and closely matches what documentaries reveal: the emotional toll a child with autism can take on a family and a marriage.

Yet it also follows a pattern typical in fiction films: the happy ending comes when characters with autism make an emotional connection. In “After Thomas,” the mother desperately wants her son to say “I love you”; the father impatiently yells, “He doesn’t know what love is, how can he love you?” And in the film’s final scene, the boy says, “Kyle loves his mum.” (The movie had its premiere last week, and will be replayed on BBC America on Saturday at 1 p.m.)

“House” explored several facets of the subject in an episode from last season about a boy so affected by autism that he cannot speak and points to pictures to relay what he wants for lunch.

Characteristically tough-minded, House (Mr. Laurie) speaks of the emotional cost, saying that this child “is nothing a parent wants.”

Most revealingly, he persuades his friend Dr. Wilson ([Robert Sean Leonard](#)) to try to convince their boss, Dr. Cuddy (Lisa Edelstein), that House — cranky, antisocial, emotionally detached — might have Asperger’s. Cuddy sees through this: “House doesn’t have Asperger’s,” she says. “The diagnosis is much simpler — he’s a jerk!” But the ruse points out how easily the line between “us” and “them” vanishes in dramas.

And even in this least mawkish of series, there is an emotional payoff. As the autistic boy leaves the hospital, he gives House his Game Boy, showing how strong a connection they have made after all.

Autism as a metaphor for the difficulty of human connections is especially prevalent in films about people who are considered highly functioning, like Ms. Weaver’s character, Linda, in “Snow Cake” (which opened Friday). When her grown daughter hitches a ride

with Alex (Mr. Rickman) and dies in a car crash that is not his fault, he stays with Linda through the funeral. The script, which gives Alex a parallel tragedy in his past, is too neat, but this small film is redeemed by Ms. Weaver's performance.

Linda has difficulty making eye contact, becomes upset when the precise order of her house is changed even a bit and loves sparkly objects. Ms. Weaver makes her more than a collection of autistic mannerisms, though, eloquently portraying a woman who understands that her daughter has died, yet seems not to register it emotionally.

Still, the film can't resist turning Linda into a symbol of unfiltered emotional honesty. Alex tells her, "You are the only person I have ever met I don't have to explain or even justify myself to." They are two damaged people who find each other.

That is also the story in "Mozart and the Whale." The film, which went straight to DVD, is extremely ambitious as it assumes the perspectives of two people with Asperger's who fall in love. It is also disappointing in its failure to allow viewers to understand them from inside.

Donald (Mr. Hartnett) is facile with numbers but more comfortable with his pet parrots than with other people. Isabelle (Ms. Mitchell) wears offbeat clothes, has a shrieking laugh and could pass for simply eccentric, until she hears clanging noises and has a shrieking meltdown.

Flatly directed by the Norwegian Petter Naess, the film was written by Ron Bass, also the screenwriter of "Rain Man." His DVD commentary makes the point that Donald and Isabelle are like any of us in their fraught relationship. When Isabelle says she doesn't know whether they are together for two days or 20 years, Donald jokingly tells her that's "something about us that's normal."

Unintentionally, though, they remain alien figures, defined by their oddness. She dresses as Mozart and he dresses as a whale for a Halloween party, which comes across as forced quirkiness, even though it happens to be true. The film is based on the lives of Jerry and Mary Newport, who went on to write a memoir, "Mozart and the Whale: An Asperger's Love Story" (published in January by Touchstone). Told in alternating his and hers narratives, their real story is even more complicated than the film's, and more immediate. The book (written with Johnny Dodd) makes them so particular that it highlights the inadequacy of using autism as a metaphor.

Yet even while enhancing the realization that we are each individuals, not emblems, the book follows the familiar pattern of autism dramas. “Love truly does conquer all,” Mary Newport writes at the close of the memoir, although she quickly adds that it doesn’t cure autism.

The book also hints that celebrity attention is fleeting. The Newports were on “60 Minutes” and even had a meeting with [Steven Spielberg](#) and [Robin Williams](#), who were interested in making a film of their lives; that was in 1996, a decade before “Mozart and the Whale” finally turned up.