

involvement, we need to be ready to be humble, flexible, and change where necessary.

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Fern Brady, *Strong Female Character* (London: Brazen, 2023), pp. 288, ISBN 978-1914240447. £16.99

‘You can’t be autistic,’ a psychiatrist told Fern Brady when she was 16 years old. ‘You’re making eye contact. And you have a boyfriend. So, no, you don’t fit the criteria’ (p. 16).

It was only many years later when Brady, who was finally diagnosed with autism in 2021 at the age of 34, started looking into the research herself that she discovered ‘the criteria’ was based on work done in the 1930s by psychiatrist Hans Asperger into autistic young males: ‘Funnily enough,’ she writes, ‘none of them had boyfriends because they were eight-year-old boys in pre-war Vienna’ (p. 16).

This sort of bleakly funny punchline is a hallmark of *Strong Female Character*, Brady’s debut memoir. A successful stand-up comedian whose TV appearances include *Have I Got News For You*, *Taskmaster*, and *Live at the Apollo*, Brady is that rare thing: a high profile openly autistic woman with a platform, and a strong story to tell.

And boy does she tell it. Brady pulls no punches whether she’s dissecting her ‘terrible Catholic childhood’ (from the blurb) in West Lothian, or describing herself thumping the walls of her flat in an attempt to cope with her feelings. Her prose is stark, straightforward and at times hilarious, as her painfully honest account of her struggle to receive a diagnosis takes her from behind the doors of a Scottish psychiatric unit to the London stage, via the University of Edinburgh, a brief spell as a stripper and a period of homelessness.

Strong Female Character has clearly struck a nerve. Published in February of this year it swiftly made the *Sunday Times* bestseller list and the top ten of audiobooks on Audible (Brady reads the book herself), and

will be released in the US in June. Its popularity is perhaps indicative of a world where the voices of autistic women have tended to go unheard.

Born in Bathgate in 1986, Brady knew from a young age that there was something different about her. Her parents, with whom she has a difficult relationship, often mocked her for saying ‘I don’t know what you mean’ (p. 42), when she was genuinely confused by the world around her. When she scratched at her skin in an attempt to self-soothe when overwhelmed, her mother berated her for ‘clawing’ at herself (p. 51).

Brady mentions her Catholic upbringing only in negative terms – one grandmother was a ‘horror show’ because ‘she used Catholicism as a stick to beat people with’ (p. 56) – and at times Brady paints a picture of a West Lothian so backwards in attitudes and littered with alcoholics and ‘stupid’ people that it sounds like a 1970s pastiche. There are references to anti-abortion literature at church, a description of Scottish sectarianism as ‘comically parochial’ (p. 163), and a mention of the fact that, by the time she makes it to university, she is an atheist.

At 15, thoroughly miserable and struggling to cope with the sensory overload of her school environment, she was given a diagnosis of OCD and depression, and eventually spent time in a teenage psychiatric unit after a GP wrote in her notes to a consultant: ‘Says she’s always been strange’ (p. 14). Brady is at her best when she describes the world as seen through autistic eyes, at times reflecting back at the reader how the neurotypical landscape appears to those who are neurodivergent. Extremely intelligent and with a particular aptitude for languages, she was accepted by Edinburgh University to study Persian and Arabic at the age of 17. ‘At no point did anyone think to ask why I, with no prior interest in visiting or reading about the Middle East, had opted to study Arabic and Persian’, she writes. ‘I didn’t want to visit any of these places; I just wanted to see if I could learn all the new verb drills’ (p. 16).

Brady is unflinching in describing her own shortcomings – she often misses jokes and social cues, and relates one toe-curling incident where she met her manager for a drink and demanded to know what their meeting was about, only to be gently told it was merely a social occasion – but she also stands back to assess how her own experience as an autistic person sits within the wider autistic community.

Describing her time working in a strip club to support herself at university, Brady questions why so many autistic women end up working in the sex industry. After a deeply unpleasant altercation when she attacked

a woman at a party with a bottle, an incident which landed her in court, Brady goes on to discuss the high numbers of individuals who only have their autism diagnosed when they end up in the criminal justice system. Her own lived experience then, becomes a conduit for the neurotypical to understand how autistic people navigate a world that is often confusing, frightening and overwhelming.

Brady's class, or at least her perception of it, coming from a working-class town in West Lothian, also comes under the microscope: 'In freshers' week I was in a queue with another Scottish girl and this posh English girl said: "Ugh! What's that smell?" Her friend looked directly at us and said: "It smells like commoners"' (p. 146). But Brady herself is not above a bit of stereotyping – all the 'posh' girls she met at university seemed to have blonde hair and an interest in ponies – while her descriptions of people's physical and mental attributes ('fat', 'stupid', 'fishwife', 'used to be pretty') can be brutal.

Brady is now 36, and despite everything positive that has come with her diagnosis, she still experiences 'meltdowns': 'I'll always have a sensory system that is wired differently', she writes. 'The flipside is that music lights up every nerve in my body like a Christmas tree and I have a finely tuned ability to detect phoniness and hypocrisy where others fail to see it' (p. 284).

Strong Female Character will make for interesting if uncomfortable reading for those working in education: it illuminates the struggles autistic children and teenagers experience navigating an education system that frequently fails them. For everyone else in the neurotypical world, it is a timely insight into the realities of life as an autistic woman in twenty-first century Scotland: 'All I can do is keep talking about it. And hope you'll then go and make things feel better for the next autistic or misfit girl you meet' (p. 286).

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