



Final word from ...



Why is there a need for more own-voice neurodivergent representation in KidLit?

By Louise Gooding

I am a neurodivergent person.

But what does that actually mean?

It means that my brain is wired a little differently, my cognitive function varies from the norm. There are many different types of neurodivergent; ADHD, Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD), dyslexia, Tourette's, dyscalculia, dyspraxia.

A non neurodivergent person is known as neurotypical.

The broader term of 'neurodiversity' covers both neurodivergent and neurotypical.

Now I've given you that brief lesson, we'll go back to why I am here.

As a kid, I hadn't yet been diagnosed with having ADHD (I only received my diagnosis in adulthood), I was annoying, loud, in your face, over friendly, over enthusiastic and apparently just 'too much'.

I was also the sort of person that would drop anything and everything at a seconds notice to help another, and extremely creative and imaginative.

Teacher's would say; "Louise would be a great student if only she would just concentrate. She has the intelligence, she has the abilities but...." - there was always a but.

It's an awful place for a kid to be, to think they are an 'oddball' or the 'weirdo'.

To know that while you may be seen as a lot of fun, making friends was hard; people still judged you and were wary of your behaviour.

There were no role models. I didn't know where to go to find people like me. And if I did find a character I could relate to, it was always the negative and least favourable characteristics of my behaviour that were being highlighted, so we all could have a good laugh.

Even as an adult, I face this challenge.

I was recently told that someone, who after reading the Horrid Henry books, had assumed the character had ADHD so had chosen to use these books to discuss ADHD with their kids.

Now, whilst the Horrid Henry books can be a lot of fun, a mischievous young lad full of trouble, why do we assume he has ADHD and why do we assume this is a correct representation?

Where is the fairness in that, and how, upon hearing things like this, would a child with ADHD feel?

Henry is horrid, and so I must be too.

If we want books to discuss topics such as neurodiversity, disability and diversity as a whole, don't we want these stories to truly reflect the lives and stories of those who live every day with these experiences, issues and knowledge?

There are many great authors who are writing amazing stories about their neurodivergent experience but neurodiversity can be a bit of a challenge. There is no one experience, there is no guidebook for how a neurodivergent person is, or how they behave. And this is where the dangers of including negative tropes, when writing a neurodivergent character, come in. It's easy to highlight and/or be able to recognise the most obvious neurodivergent behaviours, but that, in my opinion, is lazy.

A lot of neurodivergent people use masking to hide behaviours that are 'less socially acceptable', it is especially common within females.

This makes it extremely difficult to notice when someone is maybe struggling.

The exterior character may be one representation of a person, albeit maybe a little quirky, and the interior person, a hot mess.

This is something addressed, and delicately acknowledged by own voice authors who understand the ins and outs, the big things and little things, which affect the every day lives of a neurodivergent person.

Recently, author Elle McNicoll, a neurodivergent writer herself, gave us *A Kind Of Spark*. It's brilliantly written and avoids the harmful and repetitive stereotypes which can often appear in stories that feature autistic characters.

By using her own voice and experiences she was able to create a character who was convincing and real, and hopefully highly relatable to other readers on the autistic spectrum without causing any harm.

This is what we need.

Not just to be able to find characters that look like us, or act like us.

But realistic characters who ultimately give kids the chance to see themselves in positive roles, to be told they are great and awesome as they are.

Avoiding any negative tropes and stereotypes which could have a lasting effect on the mental health of children who may already be battling with low self esteem.

Does that mean I am calling for neurotypical authors to stop writing our stories? Absolutely not. But please, do intensive research.

If you are writing a story that features a neurodivergent person, your research should be handled with a lot of care and attention, as with all stories that feature diverse characters.

Talk to people, get to know the neurodivergent community, and consider a sensitivity read. Groups like Inclusive Minds are a great source of help when it comes to checking whether or not your work is a fair representation of the group you are writing for and about. <https://www.inclusiveminds.com>

If you feel you would like some more information on where to start including neurodivergent characters in your your stories, a friend of mine, Halli Gomez is offering a SCBWI workshop on The How and Why of Writing Neurodiverse Characters: https://britishisles.scbwi.org/events/central-east-the-how-and-why-of-writing-neurodivergent-characters/?fbclid=IwAR0fU5QyISIA4uU4pIOMDMKoZNCrV-7fIGe8xV2h_63xQ_eWuDotvBiUOR0

Louise Gooding is an English author living in Switzerland represented by Chloe Seager of Madeleine Milburn Agency

Her debut book, Just Like Me, will be published by Studio Press, March 2021. A collection of forty stories, about neurodiverse and disabled individuals from around the world. Each who have defied other people's expectations and challenged stereotypes! From Scientists to Gymnasts, TV Personalities to Business men and women.

Avaiable to preorder from all book sellers.

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Louise is also one of the founding members of The Disabled Creatives Universe, a mentor program to help lift disabled and neurodivergent voices in the publishing industry.

For more information on this program please head to @disabledmentors on Twitter.

<http://disabledcreativesuniverse.weebly.com>