

# Rocking, Twirling, Happy, Silent...

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## ***Best Boy***

by Eli Gottlieb

Liveright, 248 pp., \$24.95

## ***The Boy Who Went Away***

by Eli Gottlieb

Liveright, 233 pp., \$14.95 (paper)

We live in an age of autism awareness. Whether the rise in the number of cases of children on the autism spectrum is evidence of what has been called the largest pandemic of childhood illness in history, or is merely the result of better diagnostic procedures; whether environmental or dietary factors might contribute to the disease; whether it should even be considered a disease rather than a different way of being human—all these remain hotly debated questions. Less disputable is that it is a rare individual who does not know some family, his own or another's, that has been touched by the challenges brought by autism—"a neurodevelopmental disorder," according to one typically controversial definition, that is "characterized by impaired social interaction, verbal and non-verbal communication, and restricted and repetitive behavior."

Eli Gottlieb's first novel, *The Boy Who Went Away* (1997), was a justly praised story told from the

viewpoint of a resentful prepubescent teenager, Denny, whose autistic older brother receives the lion's share of his mother's attention, love, and concern. It was perhaps the definitive fictional treatment of how autism affects a family's dynamic, with particular emphasis on the so-called "normal" sibling who stands by, often feeling shortchanged. Not that we are inclined to pity Denny: Gottlieb reveals at length the boy's malice, petulance, and vengefulness bordering on criminality. The Graubart parents and their two boys are caught in a horrific power struggle until the autistic boy is finally institutionalized—sent away (hence the book's title)—leaving everyone with an ambivalent sense of defeat and relief.

Gottlieb followed up this successful debut with two novels, *Now You See Him* and *The Face Thief*, that fell roughly into the genre of psychological suspense thrillers. Now, eighteen years after the appearance of *The Boy Who Went Away*, he has returned to the subject matter of his first novel with another absorbing, well-written tale, *Best Boy*, this time in the voice of the autistic brother (here named Todd), who has been in an institution for decades and is now a fifty-four-year-old "village elder," or model patient. He has taken to heart his beloved late mother's injunctions to be "a Best Boy who was always perfectly behaved and always tried hard to do the very right thing." Obeying the rules and being good unfortunately leave him rather at the mercy of those less virtuous.

The threatening forces include his obnoxious brain-damaged roommate, Tommy, who is always baiting him; a sinister counselor named Mike Hinton who is hitting on the female patients; his self-absorbed younger brother Nate, whose



Donna Williams

*Donna Williams: The Outsider, 2009; from the first edition of Drawing Autism, a collection of work by artists with autism. It is edited by Jill Mullin and includes an introduction by Temple Grandin. A new edition was published in 2014.*

custodianship is not to be trusted; and a boisterous, disturbed girl, Martine, who has gouged out one of her eyes and keeps encouraging him to misbehave. Todd's way of dealing with these provocations is to keep doing the right thing, patiently, honestly, and sweetly. He is as purely good a character as we are likely to encounter in a contemporary novel, to the point of being almost a holy fool. If modern readers crave "mixed" characters, the tense balance of good and evil is struck here less within Todd than between Todd and a corrupt, indifferent world, which he must somehow navigate through the disadvantages of autism. Over the novel's course he becomes less robotically obedient, but no less honorable.

It is fascinating to compare the newly published novel with the first one, now reprinted to give readers the opportunity to read them in tandem. Though the characters' names have been changed, their personalities and circumstances are nearly identical. In both, the father is a heavy drinker, a physically abusive parent when not withdrawn, and an embittered Marxist. His teenage son Denny comments: "Marxism, it quickly became clear to me, was a philosophy that allowed you to be thoughtful and furious all day long." The mother is an amateur pianist, cultivated and obsessively doting on her autistic son, with the aim of remolding him into a productive, if severely limited, human being.

One of the strongest differences between the books is the treatment of the mother character. In *The Boy Who Went Away* (where she is called Harta), her emphasis on staying positive is relentlessly ridiculed by the narrator. "I hated Harta in her reflex optimistic mode. Didn't everyone see just how bogus her sunniness was?" Elsewhere he speaks disparagingly of "the happy cartoon Graubarts, hand-colored by Harta." Denny has in fact come to the conclusion, à la Holden Caulfield, that all adults are "such obvious frauds." But it is his mother whom he particularly mistrusts:

Harta now added something called positive reinforcement therapy.... Apparently, the idea was to keep my brother so happy all the time that he wouldn't have the time to recall the fundamental fact: He was nuts.

It is because Denny considers all adults frauds that he becomes a spy, snooping on his parents, listening in on their phone conversations. In the process, he discovers that his mother is having an affair with one of his autistic brother's doctors, which really sets him off. Surveillance and detective work are recurrent themes in both books. Because people wear false faces, spying becomes a necessity. In Denny's case, he is trying to pierce the lie of his family's attempts to put a happy spin on their situation. In *Best Boy*, the main character is confronted with the steeper challenge of parsing the jargon of his therapeutic community, and differentiating between the caregivers who have his best interests at heart and those who are merely going through the motions. Todd's loathsome roommate, Tommy, also fancies himself a detective, amassing a dossier on Todd's faults. I suppose Gottlieb identifies with the act of surveillance as well, since all novelists are spies of a sort.

In sharp contrast to the earlier novel, *Best Boy*'s deceased mother is remembered as an angelic presence who had instilled in her autistic son the strength to endure. Her little homilies, such as "the love between people and especially between mothers and their children doesn't end, ever," have found a permanent place in her autistic son's psyche. Even her tendency to sexualize her role as a mother, so criticized in the first novel, is seen in the second book as enlightening and progressive, as when she brings girly magazines to Todd in the group home so that he can more easily masturbate. This different treatment of the mother character is symptomatic of a change in tone, from the earlier novel's more sardonic, *Underground Man* perspective to the warmer, more accepting one of the latter. By replacing a teenage boy narrator with a middle-aged autistic man, and perhaps by aging himself, Gottlieb has turned to a more forgiving, more balanced tone.

*Best Boy* is dedicated to Joshua Gottlieb, the author's autistic sibling. In an essay for *The Wall Street Journal* entitled "Giving a Voice to Autism" a few years ago, Gottlieb wrote:

My first novel...described, with fair autobiographical fidelity, my growing up with an autistic brother. I'm currently writing a novel told entirely from that autistic brother's point of view, and I find myself continually shoved up against a paradox: How do you make interesting a world which is by definition pathologically self-enclosed? How does the tool kit of the novel, with its venerable elements of dialogue, landscape and plotting, persuasively present the first-person experience of someone who is overstimulated by the input of life and yet lacks the cognitive means to process and communicate it?

Gottlieb mentions as precedents the Benjy section of William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* and Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog at Night Time*. (He might have equally cited Jonathon Lethem's Tourette's syndrome narrator in *Motherless Brooklyn*). He is perfectly right in saying that such narrators are rare in American fiction, and with good reason: they require a risky level of presumption and resourcefulness. His own experimental solutions have been various and astute. Having made "a crucial adjustment away from the 'literary' prose which is my default mode," he has shied away from abstraction and interiority, substituting somatic sensation for psychological analysis.

The narrator is likely as not to tell us how something bad or scary made him feel in his stomach, or to fixate on a thick specificity of physical detail that pulls him away from what people are saying to him and plunges him into the forest of minutiae that is, for him, the present. Entering a mall, for instance:

The air-conditioning roared a moment and we were inside. The ceilings went up very high. The air smelled of sugar and salted plastic. Girls were everywhere. They popped their gum like pistol shots or talked into their phones and screamed with laughter. Babies yelled. Microphoned voices spoke loudly from the ceiling.

The novelist also provides his autistic narrator with a gift for visual metaphor. "I hadn't noticed before how the clouds were suspended in the sky like fruit in Jell-O." Or on a darker note, he sees his parents "lying in coffins while they turned gradually into giant cigars from the process called *decomposition*." Animals remind him of people, and vice versa:

People look like animals. A woman can seem like a cat walking on its hind legs and men in business suits can have fangs and the cold eyes of something that kills for a living. Human voices are also filled with the sounds of animals coming up into them from below. Mike was a coyote.

Mike is a new counselor, a shady character whom Todd mistrusts, rightly so, with his autistic's sharp instinct, though everyone else tells him he is being silly. Claiming to be an ex-Iraq war veteran who won several medals in combat, Mike finds the therapeutic community a convenient place to lie low. (Gottlieb, a master of dialogue that captures colloquial speech, is especially good at conveying Mike's deceptive aw-shucks insincerity.) When Todd runs away from the Payton LivingCenter, lighting out for the territory, Mike stalks him, threatening and cajoling. This part of the novel turns scarily melodramatic, innocence pursued by the diabolical, as in *The Night of the Hunter*.

If in the first novel, *The Boy Who Went Away*, the autistic brother was rendered as a fairly one-dimensional character with a set of tics and obsessed with certain topics and engaging in self-destructive behaviors when afflicted with "volts" (charges of electric anger), the autistic narrator in *Best Boy* is much more fully characterized. Not only does his voice carry the entire novel; he has a raft of idiosyncratic traits. He reads the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, which he calls Mr. B, searching for more insight into autism (meanwhile educating the reader about the condition); he surfs the Internet, which he calls Mr. C, for other answers. He listens to soothing music like Herb Alpert, the Beach Boys, and Engelbert Humperdinck. He loves to eat. He prefers to hang out in bathrooms and corners because of their clarity and definition. He has a longing for transcendence, for trains that will suddenly take off and fly into the air.

Beyond exhibiting these traits, Todd describes his autistic responses from inside, with an exactitude that contrasts sharply with the way others perceive him. Here is one of the most powerful passages from the earlier novel, in which Denny is watching his autistic brother and his mother having a fight:

He was doing what he so often did when she screamed (which was why she so rarely did it): attack himself. The soft ripping sounds of flesh being fanged, the grunts and pants as he tore holes in his hand—these noises were as familiar to me as the Mozart operas of tiny clear voices flowing with what seemed permanent hysteria from the cloth-of-gold speakers in the living room.



Francesco Guidicini/Camera Press/Redux  
Eli Gottlieb, London, 2008

The mother, in response, belted her autistic son bloody, after which she cradled him in her arms, assuring him that “you’re the most precious thing in the world to me, darling, don’t you know that?” Denny, the spectator, “looked down, giggling uncontrollably. An erection was straining the cloth of my trousers.”

In this scene, autistic behavior is absorbed by the “normal” brother as an obscenely exciting spectacle. Contrast that with the way the autistic narrator in *Best Boy* describes the onrush of an attack:

I went into my room feeling the nerve-strings yanking on the bones of my face and in my neck and shoulders and down my sides. I tried to remember what the staff named Chuck said about hating but it didn’t help. Standing in the very center of my room I opened my mouth and gradually felt the electric pulling of my body come over me. My fists clenched and my face drew back until it was in the shape of a scream. My right arm rose without my control and my hand went into my mouth. My teeth bit down on the special spot that was rubbery from biting and tasted reassuringly like me. The volts were filling the room in my head. They were bulging against the windows of that room. I was biting down just a little bit less than breaking the skin. If I broke the skin and the volts came then I would see the white again and from the forgetting middle of that white I would kick at things until a Dr. Strong was called. But the windows held as the volts banged against them. For a long time I stood there with my hand in my mouth, rocking forward and back, biting the hatred in my body till it hurt, but not too much.

What is extraordinary about this passage is the measure of detached self-observation beneath the unrestraint. In the same way, Todd gives insider accounts of his rocking and twirling behaviors, and his reluctance to make eye contact while loving tight hugs. From Todd’s perspective, his actions follow logically from a compelling motivation that is not available to the nonautistic.

On the one hand, Gottlieb is asserting that autistic people’s minds are unique, and he tries bravely to will his imagination into that supersensitive mental space. On the other hand, by giving these extreme acting-out states a plausible explanation, he is suggesting that the autistic person is not so different from everyone else: in a technologically advanced world of sensory overload, we may all be slightly autistic. The narrator even makes this claim explicit at one point, saying:

But the spectrum is so wide that actually almost anyone can be on it. If you’re a *picky eater* or *like being solitary* you could be on the spectrum. If you have a *natural gift for music* you might be on it. If you have a *good memory for detail* or a *flair for drawing* you could be on it. Isaac Newton was *the greatest logical-scientific mind that ever lived* and he was on it. People on it don’t have to take meds.... They can pose for pictures and act in the movies. They are Steve Jobs, Albert Einstein, Lewis Carroll, Andy Warhol. They are sharing elevators with you and cooking your food. Maybe they’re even marrying you.

It may be comforting for those dealing with the condition to think that we are all somewhat autistic; but is this true? Does Gottlieb believe it to be true (I somehow doubt it), or is this only his character’s rationalization? By attempting to go so far inside the consciousness of an autistic person, Gottlieb has gambled on the universality of such suffering. At times the gamble pays off, and the reader is convinced that he has been granted access to a privileged world. At other times, the sweet-natured protagonist of *Best Boy* seems a wish fulfillment on the part of the author, and perhaps the culture at large, who need positive autistic heroes, even at the risk of the novel turning into an oversimplified, didactic fairy tale. In trying to highlight the plight of an aging autistic population, Gottlieb may be leaning overboard to get us to sympathize with Todd.

Fortunately, he keeps the sentimentality mostly in check and resists a redemptive ending. It turns out that the narrator cannot go and find happiness in normal society. Prodded by the sexy, batty girl, Martine, to stop taking his medicine, he discovers “nightmare people in my head. It had been ten days since I’d taken Risperdal and suddenly I wanted it again. I wanted the roof it made.”

The other reason he cannot leave the group home is that the world outside is so nasty. *Best Boy* comes to a climax in two remarkable scenes in which the autistic protagonist is made to observe the hostility and harshness of so-called normals. In the first, Martine brings him along as an escort with her parents, who are making their annual visit to the therapeutic center and take the pair out to a nearby restaurant. A horrific back-biting dialogue ensues, leading the



mother to polish off several glasses of wine. “‘My parents,’ said Martine with a smile, ‘pretend it’s fun to argue but they really do hate each other.’” In the second scene, Todd goes to his brother Nate’s house and witnesses a quarrel between the weasel-like Nate and his wife Beth. (In both novels, Gottlieb seems to take a grim pleasure in making his surrogate younger-brother character less than admirable.) After such a rancid display of familial discord, the pure-of-heart Todd returns to the therapeutic facility, where presumably he will live out his days. His longing for transcendence persists, but now it will take the form of waiting for death, when he hopes to join his parents.

Each novel, besides being affecting and realistic, is something of a first-person tour de force. In *The Boy Who Went Away*, the author succeeds in telling the story through the viewpoint of a teenage boy, using a sophisticated complexity of language, vocabulary, and syntax that someone that age would be unlikely to possess—but it works. In *Best Boy*, he gives us a believable account of an autistic person’s consciousness, while shaping him into a rounded, attractive character. If these highly accomplished works of fiction still seem a little small, it is partly because the author has set himself such dauntingly circumscribed perspectives. Together, however, they take us further into the world of autism than American fiction has gone before.

Part of the poignancy of *The Boy Who Went Away*, which is set in the 1960s, is that at the time so little was known about autism, and the thinking about it was not only crude but filled with crackpot panaceas. Part of what makes *Best Boy* so poignant is that while we now know much more about autism, it is still largely a mystery, we are still in the dark, though we have a plethora of clinical labels that keep changing. In the meantime, we can certainly benefit from nuanced, compassionate close-ups of the kind Eli Gottlieb has constructed here.

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