



A study in contrasts: film posters for the independent film *Stand Clear of the Closing Doors* (2014) and the over-the-top Hollywood action/thriller *The Accountant* (2016), starring Ben Affleck as an autistic CPA and sometime assassin.



TV shows broadcast in the past 5 years	Feature films released in the past 5 years
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>The A Word</i> (BBC; 2016-present)</li> <li>• <i>Arthur</i> (PBS; Carl 2016-present)</li> <li>• <i>Atypical</i> (Netflix; 2017-present)</li> <li>• <i>The Big Bang Theory</i> (2007-present)</li> <li>• <i>The Bridge</i> (FX; 2013-2014)</li> <li>• <i>Chicago Med</i> (NBC; 2016-present)</li> <li>• <i>Dinosaur Train</i> (PBS; Dennis 2016-present)</li> <li>• <i>The Good Doctor</i> (ABC; 2017-present)</li> <li>• <i>Parenthood</i> (NBC; 2010-2015)</li> <li>• <i>Sesame Street</i> (PBS/HBO; Julia 2017-present)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>The Accountant</i> (2016; Action)</li> <li>• <i>Autism in Love</i> (2015; Documentary)</li> <li>• <i>A Boy Called Po</i> (2016; Drama/Fantasy)</li> <li>• <i>I Am Me</i> (2015; Drama)</li> <li>• <i>Jane Wants a Boyfriend</i> (2015; Rom-Com)</li> <li>• <i>Keep the Change</i> (2018; Rom-Com)</li> <li>• <i>Life, Animated</i> (2017; Documentary)</li> <li>• <i>Power Rangers</i> (2017; SciFi/Fantasy)</li> <li>• <i>Stand Clear of the Closing Doors</i> (2014; Drama)</li> <li>• <i>Wizard Mode</i> (2016; Documentary)</li> </ul>

We couldn't talk about **Autism and the Media** without highlighting AASCEND's own production, *Life on the Autism Spectrum* on Channel 26 in San Francisco and now in its 5<sup>th</sup> season! The show's producer, co-hosts, and correspondents are all on the spectrum. Catch up on 50 back episodes on YouTube! Search for AascendSF



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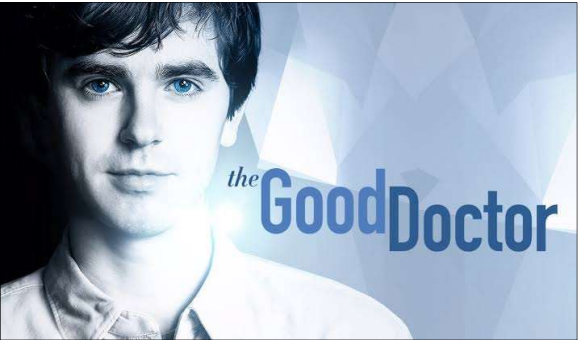


In the Spotlight: Autism and the Media – October 20, 2018

# Autism on Film & TV, 2013-2018



It's hard to conceive that the film *Rain Man* came out 30 years ago! In the early days of organizing around peer and family support and advocacy for people living on the spectrum, *Rain Man* was the starting point for any discussion on popular perceptions and misperceptions about autistic people. In the years since, a nascent sense of autistic identity among children and adults diagnosed in the 90s has come into fullness. And with them, their families and the wider culture have become more familiar with ASDs. Representations of autistic people have become more common, sophisticated, and nuanced, and yet still don't always quite ring true. For our **Autism and the Media** conference, we have been taking a deep look at how autism has been portrayed on TV and in the movies, and narrowed our focus to the past 5 years.



*The Good Doctor*, starring Freddie Highmore as Dr. Shaun Murphy, an autistic savant surgical resident at a fictional hospital in San Jose, CA premiered last year to critical acclaim. Like most of the programs and films listed here, it's had its share of detractors as well.

Also premiering last year was the groundbreaking, award-winning independent film *Keep the Change*, a romantic drama/comedy about a couple who meet in a peer support group for adults on the spectrum. Notably, all of the characters depicted in the film as autistic are on the spectrum in real life.

The most common format for TV shows about autistic people is melodrama about white, middle class families with sons on the spectrum. First in the US was *Parenthood*, set in Berkeley, about an older couple, their four children, and their families, including a grandchild named Max who has Asperger's syndrome. *Atypical* is more of a comedy, centered on 18-year-old Sam who is obsessed with Antarctica and losing his virginity. *The A Word* is a BBC series that follows a family whose 5-year-old son is diagnosed with autism.



Brandon Polansky and Samantha Elisofon in *Keep the Change*



18-year-old Sam on *Atypical*



5-year-old Joe on *The A Word*



13-year-old Max on *Parenthood*

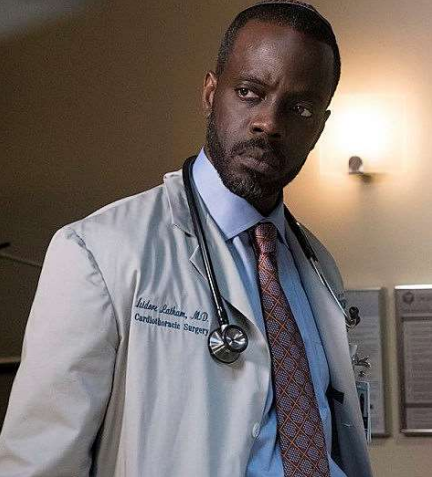


Diversity on the Spectrum

Representations of people of color living on the spectrum have been practically nonexistent, but that is beginning to change. The ensemble cast of *Chicago Med*, a hospital drama on NBC, includes the character of Dr. Isidore Latham, an African American, Orthodox Jewish, attending surgeon with Asperger’s syndrome who has difficulty reading and reacting to the emotions of coworkers and patients.

In the latest *Power Rangers* film, the character of Blue Ranger Billy Cranston arranges pencils in a row on his desk, has exceptional tech skills, an eidetic memory, dislikes hugs, and discloses to his friend that he’s “on the spectrum... *it’s a diagnosis.*” In previous versions, the character of Billy/Blue Ranger was played by white actors and was not on the spectrum. Though Billy’s autism is hardly mentioned in the film, it’s worth considering the impact of having an autistic character of color in the popular teen superhero franchise.

*Stand Clear of the Closing Doors* (2014) is a lyrical film that follows Ricky Garcia, an autistic 13-year-old, on an 11-day odyssey through the New York subway system and his mother’s fears and struggles during his absence. Ricky, his sister, and their mother are from Mexico and undocumented, which makes turning to the police for help more complicated. The film is in Spanish and English with subtitles.



Ato Essandoh as Dr. Isidore Latham on *Chicago Med* (NBC), and R. J. Cyler as the Blue Ranger in *The Power Rangers* (2017)

#ActuallyAutistic Actors Playing Autistic Roles

Two of the films listed here – *Keep the Change* (2018) and *Stand Clear of the Closing Doors* (2014) – are notable in that the autistic characters are portrayed by actors on the spectrum in real life.



in neuroscience in real life, is popularly perceived as an effective representation of autism in women.

Female Characters on the Spectrum

On *The Bridge* (FX; 2013-2014), the character of Detective Sonya Cross has “undiagnosed Asperger’s”. Alex Plank, the creator of the online autism community Wrong Planet, was a technical advisor to actor Diane Kruger who played Cross. Other representations of women and girls on the spectrum in film and TV include Julia, a Muppet introduced on *Sesame Street* in 2017, and lead actors in two NYC-based romantic comedies, *Jane Wants a Boyfriend* (2015) and *Keep the Change* (2018). The character of Dr. Amy Farrah Fowler on *The Big Bang Theory*, played by Mayim Bialik who has a PhD

Autism in Children’s Programming

PBS has three very different characters on the spectrum on some of its most popular programs for young children. The animated *Arthur* (ages 4-8) features Carl, a rabbit boy with Asperger’s who loves trains and drawing, and becomes anxious at changes in routine and new situations. *Sesame Street* (ages 2+) introduced a Muppet named Julia, who has autism, in 2017. Julia is nonverbal, flaps her arms when excited, covers her ears when overstimulated, and does not make eye contact. Dennis Deinocheirus on *Dinosaur Train* (ages 3+) is very literal, hyperfocused, socially awkward, and likes to memorize and recite facts. These depictions of various spectrum behaviors help children learn to be patient with and appreciate classmates with autism.



Carl the Rabbit on *Arthur*; Julia, a Muppet on *Sesame Street*; and Dennis, a deinocheirus on *Dinosaur Train*

The Big Bang Theory

For the past 12 years, *The Big Bang Theory* has been one of the most watched shows on TV. Centered on a small group of nerdy scientists/academics, the character of theoretical physicist Dr. Sheldon Cooper stands out from the rest. He has a genius IQ but an exasperating lack of social awareness or understanding of sarcasm and humor, paired with extreme obsessive-compulsive behaviors. More than just averse to hugging, Sheldon was also shown as asexual for many seasons, even well into his relationship with girlfriend-now-wife, neurobiologist Dr. Amy Farrah Fowler, also considered to be on the spectrum. The show’s creators have explicitly stated that Sheldon is not on the spectrum but Jim Parsons, who plays him, says that he is. More important than claims either way, Sheldon and Amy are overwhelmingly presented as exhibiting many traits shared by people on the spectrum, and many in our community accept the characters as fellow autistics.

A script can specifically say a character is autistic but hardly mention it as in *The Power Rangers*, or deny it as with *The Big Bang Theory*, but we are still talking about fictional characters written and acted for the most part by neurotypicals. *The Big Bang Theory* raises the question of how valid it is to diagnose fictional characters, such as Sherlock Holmes, or historical figures like Alan Turing, portrayed as autistic by Benedict Cumberbatch in *The Imitation Game*. As *Will & Grace* made mainstream society more familiar and comfortable with gay people, *The Big Bang Theory* has done the same for people on the autism spectrum – intentionally or not. Even while Sheldon’s behaviors and personality are the butt of most of the jokes on the show, *The Big Bang Theory* has made people with autistic behaviors familiar and deserving of acceptance and respect.

