

FUNNY, YOU DON'T LOOK AUTISTIC

A COMEDIAN'S GUIDE TO LIFE ON THE SPECTRUM

MICHAEL McCREARY



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For Matthew

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Introduction

Hello! I'm Michael and I do stand-up comedy about being on the autism spectrum. Those two things don't sound like they should go together, but comedy's all about breaking the ice on topics that people are too scared to talk about.

I was diagnosed with autism at the age of five. I wasn't diagnosed as a comedian until much later, though I always loved to perform and make people laugh. When I started doing stand-up in my teens, I realized that I could use comedy to help demystify autism and break down stereotypes. Being autistic has its challenges, sure, but it's not all PSAs of empty swings blowing in the wind set to Sarah McLachlan music. There's plenty to laugh about, too.

People responded to what I was doing, and soon I went from performing in schools and church basements to bigger venues: universities, comedy clubs, conference centers, and even Toronto's famous Massey Hall. I toured Canada from coast to coast and was interviewed on national radio and TV. It was clear that the world had an appetite for autism-based humor.

Maybe you know someone with autism. In fact, you probably do, even if you don't know it. It might be a friend, someone in your family, or the kid who sits behind you in class who can't stop jiggling his leg (probably him). Maybe you're curious about what autism is, or you're seeking a deeper understanding so you can better support the people in your life.

Or maybe you're somewhere on the autism spectrum yourself. If so, congratulations! You are part of the 1.5 percent. Take solace in knowing you're not alone.

Either way, if you're looking for a comprehensive and detailed examination of autism and its myriad workings in the brain, this book you're holding is *definitely* not it. Put it down and pick up something that wasn't written by a comedian.

This is also not a book about some universal experience of "being autistic." Everyone with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is different, and I believe I can speak for all of us when I say that I shouldn't speak at all.

What you will find here is my own story of navigating life, school, friendship, love, and amateur theater as a person who happens to have ASD. Along the way, I hope to provide some insight based on my own experiences, and conversations with other people, into what being autistic is about. And if you ever figure me out, I want an explanation.

Whether you're on the spectrum or not, I hope that you'll be able to relate to my struggles and triumphs,* and that we can laugh together at all the quirks and awkward moments that come with being human.

I met a woman recently and happened to mention that I am autistic. She responded, “That’s ridiculous, you’re doing great!”

I don’t believe the terms are mutually exclusive.

Now is probably a good time to talk about how people with ASD like to refer to themselves. Some autistic people prefer person-first language: “a person with autism.” Others prefer to put the identity first: “autistic person.” I believe that people on both sides want to emphasize the value and worth of the individual. No matter what the person’s point of view, it’s important to respect their choice of terms.

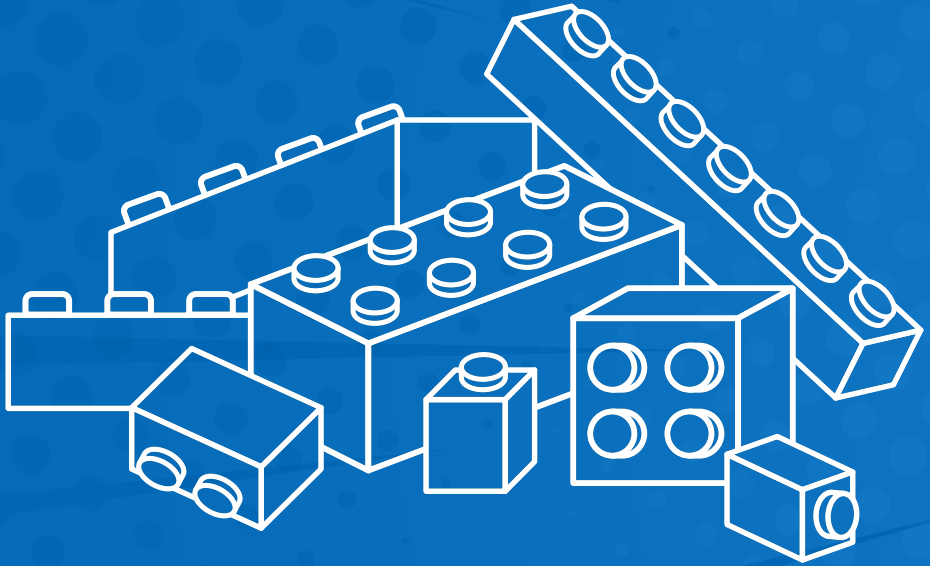
Personally, it doesn’t matter to me if someone says I’m autistic or that I have autism. They both mean the same thing in my eyes, and I use both terms. My choice at any point depends on what makes the sentence flow better and provides the clearest meaning. Over the course of this book, I’ll be using these terms interchangeably.

So, remember, if you’ve met one person with autism (or autistic person), I hope it’s Dan Aykroyd. He’s a Ghostbuster!

Cheers,

Michael

*A note to my non-autistic readers: As you embark on this journey through my ASD mind, there’s a high likelihood that you’ll find at least some of my experiences relatable. Should this occur to you, take a deep breath and put down the BuzzFeed quiz—it doesn’t mean you’re autistic. People with ASD aren’t aliens, and we have many of the same thoughts and feelings as anyone else; the difference is in the intensity of those feelings and the degree to which they affect our functioning. Remember that only a professional can properly diagnose someone with ASD.



PART 1

PORTRAIT
of the
ASPIE
AS A YOUNG MAN

Growing up is tough for anyone.

But when you've been diagnosed with autism, it's an extra challenge. You have to deal with the negative perceptions and misunderstandings other people have about you, all at an age when you probably can't even spell "autism" yet. This means you need to figure out your own strengths and weaknesses and how you're going to use them. That part took me a bit of trial and error to get right.

Our saga begins with an insufferable, catchphrase-spouting toddler straight out of a network sitcom and continues into the evolution of a hardened, vengeful preteen straight out of a gritty cable drama. (There's a happy ending, I promise.) You'll also meet my family—itself a microcosm of the variety of thought patterns and behaviors that characterize the autism spectrum.

But first, one of the most formative experiences in a young autistic person's life: getting a diagnosis.

Chapter 1

OBLIGATORY ORIGIN STORY

Maybe it was the socks.

When I was a kid, I hated wearing them. I would be out walking with my folks and suddenly, I'd scream, "THERE'S A LUMP AND A CLUMP IN MY SHOE!"

They'd take off the shoe, assuming I had gotten a pebble or something stuck inside, but nothing was there. It was just the stitching on the inside of the sock that had wedged itself underneath my toes and was driving me nuts.

I couldn't wear short-sleeved shirts, either. The change in temperature from my upper arm—covered in fabric and warm—to my forearm—completely exposed and cold—felt too great. The sensory difference threw me off, and I'd have a meltdown if someone tried to put one on me.

Or maybe it was the fact that I didn't talk until I was nearly three. Then, when I finally did, I spoke exclusively in movie

quotes. I was obsessed with movies from a young age and didn't discriminate in my tastes: I'd quote everything from *Casablanca* to *The Country Bears*. I didn't really understand the words I was saying—I just liked the way they sounded. So, in the McCreary home, it was a bit like living in an episode of *Full House*. I'd always be ready with a punchline:

DAD: Miiiiiiii-chael, who put a kickball through the window?

ME: Round up the usual suspects!

(Cue theme song, executive producer credits; fade to black.)

Whatever it was that led my parents to think, "Something's up with this kid," I'm grateful. Because most kids, frankly, are weird. Their instinct when they see a decrepit cardboard box is to run inside it and say, "It's a rocket ship!" That's pretty weird, but society's fairly accepting of a moderate level of weirdness in kids. So I must have been exceptionally strange in my behavior to raise alarms.

That being said, my folks had good reason to be concerned. My younger brother, Matthew, had just been diagnosed as autistic. Even though he and I were very different in our behavior from early on, my mom and dad had to wonder, "Could this be what's going on with Michael, too?"

And that was how I ended up in a psychologist's office at age five. My folks hoped this would give them answers, but for the time being, it only seemed to raise more questions about me.

Here was the plan: My folks were going to take me to a psychologist in the city who specialized in child behavior. The doctor would ask me some questions, then he would ask them some questions, and we would all answer them politely. The doctor would then give me a diagnosis that would explain all of my problems, and my folks and I could then move on with our lives. Simple. Only it didn't turn out that way. If I'm being honest, it went more like a scene out of the horror movie *The Omen*.

Everything seemed normal when we arrived at the doctor's office. My folks were characteristically nervous about me, but I was well-behaved. We hadn't spent more than ninety seconds out in the lobby when the receptionist corralled me and my folks into a tiny, beige room. She told us, "The doctor will be with you in five minutes," and left.

That was just enough time for me to hop off the chair, rip the curtains off the wall, and completely ransack the room as my parents sat in stunned horror.

When the doctor opened the door, I was sitting in the middle of the chaos, smiling and twiddling my thumbs. All I needed was a cat to stroke, and my Bond-villain aesthetic would have been complete.

Even at the time, I don't think I understood why I did this. Acting out in that way wasn't typical for me. Maybe I felt like I was being ignored, and it was a cry for attention. Whatever the reason, the doctor had made his diagnosis:

"Well, he's a tricky one."



For people with autism, just getting a diagnosis can be the biggest struggle. Once you have it, a whole world of possible treatments and coping strategies opens up. But until you have it, you're in the dark. And that's where my parents were with me.

Autism Defined

The DSM-5 sounds kind of like a spy organization or a multilane highway. It's actually a book called the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, created by the American Psychiatric Association. In 2013 they put out the fifth edition, hence the name DSM-5. Basically, it's the go-to book for doctors and mental-health professionals in North America. The DSM-5 defines autism as a "triad of impairments" that presents challenges in three areas:

1. Social interaction
2. Communication
3. Repetitive behaviors

Over the years, there have been a lot of different terms used to define people on the spectrum, including pervasive developmental disorder, high-functioning autism, and Asperger's syndrome. As of 2013, there are no distinctions. You either have autism or you don't, and an autistic person is said to have autism spectrum disorder (ASD).

Today, society has a firmer understanding of how autism can present itself in a multitude of ways, but back in 2001, there was still a very rigid framework for what would count as “autistic behavior.” Because I wasn’t meeting the conventional criteria, it was hard for doctors to recognize what was going on with me. My folks had to keep up the search for someone who could give us some answers.

For people with autism, just getting a diagnosis can be the biggest struggle.

My second try at getting assessed has gone down in infamy as the Lego Incident. This one: not my fault.

In my many years of visiting psychiatric offices, I’ve noticed that they all look pretty much the same: beige walls, beige carpet. But the second doctor’s office looked more like a Salvador Dalí painting. There was no melting clock, but something seemed a bit off about the room. It confused and upset me. I was also on edge because this time around, the receptionist had insisted I go in to see the doctor alone, reassuring my parents with the phrase: “Don’t worry, she’s great with kids.” Which, at the time, I should have read as code for: “She eats children.”

The one solace in that situation was that in the center of the room there was a giant pile of Lego. It was the new *Attack of the Clones*-themed Lego, too. I finally built up the courage to approach the mound when a voice shattered the silence: “You can’t play with it yet!”

The doctor—henceforth referred to as the Lego Lady—emerged from the shadows with a proposition. “If you can answer every single one of my questions, you can play with the Lego.”

Now, here was my problem: at age five, I didn’t really get the meaning behind words. Not just specific words; all words. When I spoke in movie quotes, I didn’t necessarily know what I was saying; I just liked the way it sounded. So when someone said to me, “Answer a question,” I thought that meant I could give literally any answer.

We launched into the Q&A. She asked me the first question, and I crowed at her like Peter Pan. She asked me the second question, and I clucked like a chicken. I thought I was doing great. Things continued on this way, with my “answers” having absolutely nothing to do with what she asked me.

Finally, I finished the test, which took much longer than it needed to. I’d been thinking about the Lego the whole time and I couldn’t wait any longer.

I said, “Do I get to play with the Lego now?”

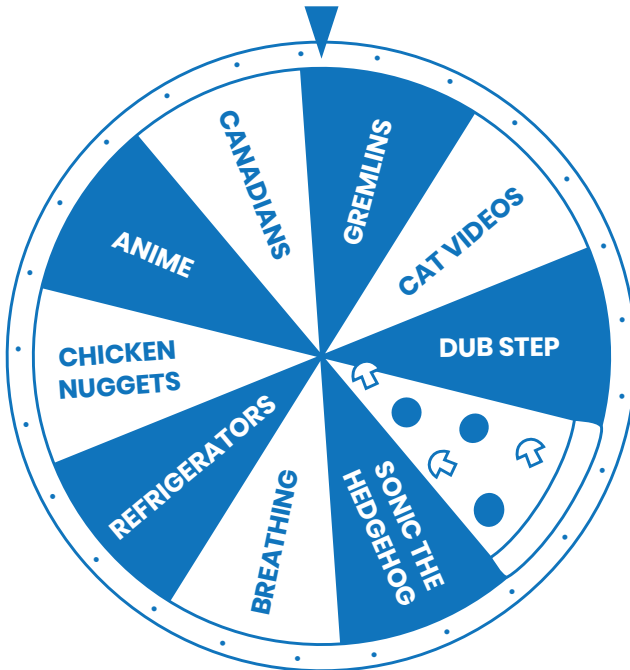
She bellowed, “No! You took too long!”

I was devastated. I had *failed* my neurological assessment. I didn’t think it was possible to do that!

What Causes Autism?

There's a lot of speculation as to what causes autism. Much of it is pretty silly and baseless. The truth is, we don't know the exact causes of autism, though research points to a mix of genetic and environmental factors. Personally, I don't care so much about the cause; the fact is, people with ASD are here, and a more interesting question to me is what we can do to support them.

THIS WEEK'S CAUSE OF AUTISM



We moved on to the third psychologist, whom I'll call Dr. S. I think I'd learned some things from my two earlier experiences. I'd learned to be compliant. And I'd learned that sometimes adults just hate kids. This time around, for obvious reasons, my parents insisted they come along.

This doctor was different, though. He was less clinical and never interjected. In fact, he was more than willing to listen to what I had to say, even if all I had to say was a weird clucking sound. If the Lego Lady was Anjelica Huston from *The Witches*, Dr. S. was more like Richard Attenborough from the original *Jurassic Park*. Half an hour flew by, and then he came back with a diagnosis: autism spectrum disorder.

My diagnosis was a life-changing moment—for my folks. As for me, well, I was five years old. I just wanted to get out of there and rent *Walking with Dinosaurs* from the library, not listen to this doctor who was saying things I couldn't really comprehend. In hindsight, I wish I had been more grateful. That diagnosis would end up helping me more than I could've imagined. It was going to help me navigate school, and understand myself, and eventually figure out my place in the world.

So it was a life-changing moment for me, too—I just didn't realize it yet.