

Produced by and for people who have autism-spectrum conditions

# Asperger *United*

Edition **85** January 2016



# Asperger United

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*Asperger United* is a magazine run by and for adults with autism-spectrum conditions (although some parents subscribe on behalf of their under-sixteens). The magazine aims to put people who have the condition in touch with each other and to share information so that they can lead more independent lives.

Please note that *AU* receives over 200 letters each quarter so it is not possible to respond to every one, nor for every contribution to be printed. Discussions on editorial choices will not be entered into. *AU* protects the identity of contributors by not printing full names unless the writer asks for his or her full name to be used.

*Asperger United* is free. To subscribe you, we need your postal address. We ask for a contribution of £9 per year from overseas readers and £15 from professionals and institutions to cover postage costs. Please make cheques payable to the NAS. Organisations requiring multiple copies: no extra fee, please get in touch.

**Editor:** the Goth

**National Autistic Society production support:** the Publications Team

**NAS phone support:** the Supporter Care Team

*Asperger United* was founded in 1993 by Pamela Yates and Patricia Howlin, in association with the Maudsley Hospital, and Mark Bebbington and Judy Lynch of the National Autistic Society.

This was in response to a recognised dearth of services for people with Asperger syndrome and the potential for self help and networking as a means of support for this group.

The provisions for editor's and sub-editor's post was to develop a publication that was truly the voice of the people it was aimed at. This post also provided the possibility of work experience and responsibility and has benefited those who have held the position. These are Richard Exley, David Wright, Martin Coppola, Ian Reynolds, John Joyce and the current editor, the Goth (who does not wear black).

Pamela Yates provided support and advice to the editors until the publication was handed over to the National Autistic Society in 2000.

The name *Asperger United* was chosen by the group of original readers as the most "appropriate name" for the publication. This was suggested by Anna Kaczynski, formerly Cohen.

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**Please send all correspondence and subscription requests to:**

Email: [asp.utd@nas.org.uk](mailto:asp.utd@nas.org.uk)

*Asperger United*  
c/o The National Autistic Society  
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Tel: **0808 800 1050** (free from most landlines) or  
Tel: **020 7923 5779** (geographical charges apply)

All we need is your name and address and we will add you to the mailing list — free of charge.

Thank you to Graeme Lawson for producing the *AU* logo.

Please note that the views expressed in *Asperger United* are not necessarily those of the editor, the National Autistic Society or those involved in the publication of the magazine.

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*Asperger United* is available in **large print** on A3 sheets (double the size of this page). If you need large print, please let us know using the postal or email address above.

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Contributions for the next issue should reach *AU* by **15 February 2016**

**Welcome** to the January edition of *Asperger United*.

The subjects of women and gender have inspired many more of you to write in — I have had two bumper postbags. Wonderful.

With this magazine, some of you have received a flier about resubscribing to *Asperger United*. Please follow the instructions on the flier, using electronic means of communication if possible, to keep NAS costs down.

Please remember that you will get a flier next time if you do not reply: this will catch any that get lost in the post. (Only four or five magazines out of 11,000 go missing each quarter.)

If you do not reply, you will still get two more magazines — again, this will give those who are too stressed to reply immediately nine months to resubscribe, which I hope eases the burden on you.

Next quarter, a new group of you will also receive fliers, and this process will continue for a few years until everyone has received fliers, everyone who wants to has resubscribed, and then it starts all over again, to check you're still interested in subscribing, and not just letting the magazine come. I hope that makes sense.

I am looking forward to many more bulging postbags (including electronic postbags),

**the Editor**

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## the gender edition — the next-issue notice is on page 15

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## What is Nutter's syndrome?

by Lisa

The neurotypical world is a foreign country: they do things differently there.

Nutter's syndrome (NT) is named after Dr Alice Nutter of Pendle who described it in 1943 but whose work was neglected until the 1980s when it was publicised by Dr Leonora Bloomfield. NT is a lifelong disability caused by a difference in the "wiring" of the brain which results in sufferers taking a different view of the world to the Absolutely sane (AS). About 5% are affected, one in five having a serious handicap. It affects people in different ways and degrees. People with NT tend to be of low to average intelligence. They often suffer from attention deficit hypoactivity disorder (ADHD) and so lack the desire to make the most of what intellect they do have. Those afflicted understand the world and relate to other people differently and they deal with information and are affected by sensory input in ways which may seem strange. However, NT may be seen as part of a continuum, its sufferers ranging from those with serious lifelong handicap to those who seem normal. Indeed, practically everyone has some NT characteristics. Even the most AS person may have perfectly legible handwriting. It is the accumulation of NT symptoms which define it. However, NT is incurable and, apart from certain therapies which ameliorate its effects by teaching those afflicted how to fit in with society, it is untreatable.

Dr Nutter identified a group of children whose behaviour was characterised by an abnormal dependency on human company, a lack of sensory acuity, a tendency to unthinking conformity, excessive but often dishonest display of emotion, and a general lack of ability for independent thought. Many of them also exhibited a lack of affinity with other species, and even with their own species restrict their friendships to those of the same gender, age and outlook. A person with NT enjoys little of the rich diversity of relationships which AS people have.

The earliest indications that a child has NT are excessive need for eye contact, hugging and talking. Such a child may cry excessively or find it difficult to sleep without attention from others, yet be insensitive to the excessive sensory input which often prevents an AS child sleeping. Children with NT usually display a lack of responsiveness to sensory stimuli, such as noises or smells, which an AS would find intolerable.

In adulthood a person with NT will show an excessive desire for company, to the extent of becoming anxious if deprived of contact for any length of time. They suffer greatly from separation anxiety. If imprisoned, solitary confinement will be seen as a punishment rather than a reward. They often show great curiosity about the minor details of the lives of "celebrities" — people who have no direct connection to them. This they refer to as "gossip", an interest which is fostered by the publication of magazines devoted to this subject.

Another characteristic of people suffering from NT is their excessive love of novelty. Instead of rationally doing the tried and tested, they easily become bored and try new types of food, new clothes and to visit new places at the risk of these being disagreeable. Yet paradoxically they tend to be conservative in their choice of entertainments such as books and films, sticking to genres which are familiar. Those with NT will deliberately wear uncomfortable clothes for the sake of their appearance. Similarly they lack the ability to devise the routines which the AS use to make life easier by eliminating the need to think about the minor details. Indeed, they seem to find pleasure in their lack of planning and need to have some form of variety in their lives to prevent them becoming bored.

People with NT show a strong herd instinct. They are unable to thrive in solitude. When



they gather together they will describe in great detail facets of their lives which are considered private by ordinary people. They will discuss at length their emotions and the intimate details of their lives. NTs are fastidious in personal hygiene, to such a degree that they suffer from dry skin or hair and need to replace their body's natural emollients with artificial ones. Despite their olfactory insensitivity they display excessive anxiety about their bodies' natural scent and try to disguise it with perfumes whose smells are usually thought repugnant. People with NT are often reluctant to think for themselves and rely heavily on the opinions of others. They will comply with illogical orders: if other NTs do something, then they do the same without considering whether it is appropriate, or will increase their happiness. People with NT often unwittingly use ambiguous language which may confuse, and typically resort to emotional dishonesty in order to avoid conflict. This can lead to misunderstandings particularly regarding the status of a relationship. For instance a man in conversation with an NT woman may be confused whether she is attracted to him or is merely being polite.

Sensory obtuseness is a strong indicator of NT. Not only will sufferers fail to avoid strong sensory stimuli, they will actively seek them out, finding great pleasure in loud noises, pungent, highly flavoured food, strong smells, bright colours and extreme textures, to the extent of further blunting their senses by, for example, listening to excessively loud music which is capable of causing damage to their hearing. They are capable of eating foods in an arbitrary order or in no order at all, either by flitting from one item on a plate to another in no logical order or by consuming the cheaper bulky items first and then being so full that they have no space for those with higher food value. Many NTs will deliberately indulge unnecessarily in dangerous activities, such as sky diving, in order to provoke an adrenalin rush to stimulate their sluggish sensitivities. Indeed, they find much pleasure in meaningless activity for its own sake, both as participant and spectator. For instance, many of them spend money in attending competitive

events, the results of which become irrelevant and forgotten in a short time.

Sufferers from NT lack the ability to concentrate for lengthy periods. Their interests are superficial and they are usually unwilling to devote sufficient attention to them to achieve any degree of understanding other than is absolutely necessary for them to fulfil the duties of their employment. They may achieve a basic level of expertise but rarely aspire to the detailed understanding which would allow them to find employment requiring knowledge of a subject. This is usually characterised by their inability to talk at length about a subject which is supposedly of interest to them. NTs have a propensity for rote learning and many can only repeat what they have been taught rather than showing any originality.

However, the lives of those with NT are not as bleak as may be expected. Given suitable behavioural training a child with NT may learn not just to play on its own but even to enjoy doing so. Their dependence on others for comfort and amusement may thus be greatly reduced. A child with NT will usually need to be taught to read. Their propensity to respond in an instinctive, spontaneous and emotional way rather than by a rational response can be lessened and redirected. The desire of NTs for human contact makes them ideally suited to work which requires a great deal of cooperation and they should be directed into work of this type. Care should be taken, however, to ensure that their fondness for conversation does not slow down their work or lead to a lack of attention. In particular, females will prefer to talk rather than to work. NTs are ideally suited to routine jobs which require little mental effort while their atavistic dexterity means that they excel at work which requires the skilful manipulation of small items, such as the construction of electrical items, food production and the like. However, their lack of compunction when it comes to timekeeping and taking sick leave means that they should be monitored in these matters. Given sufficient support and encouragement there is no reason why those with NT may not go on to lead independent lives which are of use to society.

## A pony in the bedroom

by **Susan Dunne**

Jessica Kingsley Publishers

ISBN: 978 1 84905 609 0

£12.99 / \$19.95

review by **the Goth**

My heart sinks a little when someone asks me to read another autobiography: there are an awfully large number of autism biographies on sale at the moment, and while there's nothing bad about most of them, they tend to follow the same pattern: my early life was hard, then adulthood was hard, then I found out I was autistic and now I want to tell everyone about it. Sometimes the hard part of the life was so hard that I struggle to keep reading, and this is what puts me off starting another one. I never know how upset the book is going to make me.

Superficially, Susan Dunne's book follows this pattern, and the hard part was very, very hard for me to read — it took me six months to get through the book even though it is well-written. It deals with violent assault by a man at work and the ensuing post-traumatic stress disorder. However, the book redeems itself by showing how important relationships are in life — in this case, relationships with dogs and horses, highlighting the difficulties people add to the whole friendship thing. This part of the book is truly beautiful and inspiring.

I can't honestly say I recommend this book, but if my warning hasn't put you off, it is worth reading.

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*This book is available from all good bookshops and through Amazon's charitable scheme at*

**[www.autism.org.uk/amazon](http://www.autism.org.uk/amazon)**

*and if you use this address instead of the usual Amazon one, the NAS gets a donation from Amazon.*

## Issue 84 — to be or not to be!

by **Tony**

Issue 84 covered a lot to do with identity and belonging. I've also been suffering from this problem — to belong or not to belong? To be childlike is to be yourself — an innocent explorer with no identity as opposed to a guilt-ridden being that has explored and hates itself for what it has done (a Dalek, who dislikes the unlike — that is a creature which identifies itself with its body and therefore is trapped within it).

We lie (limit ourselves) to fit in, not realising that this prison is what we end up identifying ourselves as — that is our bodies. As spirits we have no identity because we are composed of potential.

As minds we have choices of action. As bodies we have identity as men, women, old or young, black, white or yellow. Then there is our standing in society (who we are as opposed to who we want to be). Innocent attraction or guilty repulsion from what we see as threat to our identity (bodily form or public persona).

Our future self has no identity to hold on to, only our past self does and it is this that leads to a defence of who we consider ourselves to be. The spirit can only go forward and the mind can only go back as it needs to analyse what was created in the past (the physical). As someone said, "life can only be lived forwards but understood backwards."

This is the conundrum that faces us all, whether NTs or the autistic — honest exploration of the real or dishonest defence of the unreal.

# Pen pals

## Pen pal number 208

Dear *AU*,

I'm a 34-year-old lad with ASD, I have had a genetic test done and I have a faulty fourth-chromosome gene. I'm also gay and I can easily be stereotyped and I find this hard as well. When I was at a special-needs school I had the mickey taken due to having development delay in learning but I got a lot better at learning and I have got a lot better in communication as well. I've had one successful relationship and I hope to be in a relationship again. I do have difficulties in forming and sustaining positive friendships. I've decided to write this article to share with others like me who have this similar problem; I'm happy to hear from anyone who is gay and has the same experiences as me,

Alan.

## Pen pal number 209

Hi, my name is Nathan, I'm 21 years old and live with my mum and sister in Bristol. I was recently diagnosed with Asperger syndrome. My interests are: I like gardening; I like all sorts of arts and crafts. I like reading, movies and video games.

I consider myself to be friendly, genuine and honest.

I am a huge Lego fan and have been collecting this since I was six years old.

I would like to write to someone at a similar age to me for preference.

## How to place a pen-pal advert

- All you need to do is send your advert along with your name and address (and email address if you want) to *Asperger United*. You can use the Royal Mail or email. The next pen-pal number will be given to your advert when it arrives.
- Please note that *AU* does not print dating adverts, as it is unable to provide suitable support.
- Those under the age of sixteen must have parental permission before placing a pen-pal advertisement in *Asperger United*.

## How to reply to pen pals

- Please remember to let us know the name and number of the person whom your letter is for. (All pen pals are numbered by the editor, not the person who sends in the advert.)
- Please remember to put your address on your letter.
- To contact a pen pal, please send your letter to *Asperger United*, c/o The National Autistic Society, 393 City Road, London, EC1V 1NG, or email [asp.utd@nas.org.uk](mailto:asp.utd@nas.org.uk)
- We will pass your letter on to the person you wish to contact. However, we cannot guarantee the person will reply as that is entirely their decision.
- Please note that all pen-pal letters sent via *Asperger United* are opened before being passed on.

### **\*\*Important notice — please read\*\***

*Asperger United* is happy to publish pen-pal advertisements but we must stress that we are not a pen-pal or introduction organisation. We do not match people up and we cannot monitor letters (other than the first letter, that is sent via us) so please be cautious when releasing personal details in your letters. The National Autistic Society / *Asperger United* cannot intervene or be held responsible for any ensuing correspondence between letter-writers.

*Eighteen pen-pal adverts have been held over for publication in the next four issues, Editor.*

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## Pen pal number 210

Dear Sir or Madam,

I'm looking for a pen pal who is into Wicca, heavy metal, business, psychic stuff.

Yours faithfully,

JRC Ferguson

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## Pen pal number 211

**Hello, my name is Neil,** I am 54 years old and I live in Wirral; I was diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome when I was in my thirties.

I have a special interest in current affairs and enjoy discussing politics; I also enjoy watching *Star Trek* and westerns on the TV: my favourite person in *Star Trek* is Nichelle Nichols who played the part of Lieutenant Uhura.

Another interest of mine is researching my family name: recently I discovered I have Irish, Scottish and French ancestors; I have discovered I could be related to the footballers Geoff Hurst, Scholes and Rooney.

When I was diagnosed with ASC it was a shock, as previously I was unaware of my syndrome, it was a relief to put a name to my condition — I do question why it took so long for my diagnosis, as initially, when I was in boarding school, I was diagnosed with ADHD, which is untrue. I believe an earlier diagnosis would have helped as I was in the dark to understand my syndrome.

I would like to hear from other people with Asperger's syndrome and would like to hear about your interests too.

## Pen pal number 212

**My name is Becky.** I am 31 and I live in a home for people with Asperger's in Kent and I will be moving to a home like this in London very soon. My interests are lyric writing and story writing and I'd like to make friends with people with my interests, so if anyone wants to write to me about these subjects please contact me through *AU* magazine like normal and I look forward to hearing from you.

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## Pen pal number 213

**Hello, my name is Iain.** I am 15 years old, live in Lancashire and I have autism. Things I like are pool, music, TV, games and going shopping. I also have an interest in operating systems and I would like to design a game in the future. I want to find someone who has similar issues, age and interests as me. I go to mainstream school and I want to meet more people with autism.

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## Pen pal number 214

**Hello. My name is Natalie.** I am an autistic (in mild form) woman in her thirties living in the Medway, Kent, area with her parents.

I am a geeky pop-culture-type person who loves everything to do with comic books, sci-fi, TV, movies, going to the cinema and anything to do with Japanese pop culture.

I have been to some comic-book conventions, which are great.

I do have other interests and hobbies as well.

Don't mind who I correspond with, however, please no religious or pagan stuff as it's something I am not into.



## a letter in response to Joe

### Dear Editor

Re Joe's essay on the social graces. Joe says he'd welcome any comments and feedback on his essay. I hope he finds this useful.

It's St Valentine's Day and, unlike Bob, his "gooseberry" mate, Joe still hasn't got a girlfriend.

So Bob sets up a St-Valentine's-Day foursome scenario by getting Alice to come along.

At the meet-up Joe looks Alice over politely, as he might anything that's been selected for his appraisal.

But Alice is not happy about the situation (perhaps Bob tricked her). However, as a spectrummy girl she is awash with affective empathy. She doesn't blame Joe, she gives him the benefit of the doubt.

But their subsequent exchanges have her fearing he's too presumptuous and egocentric.

Her attempt to extricate herself thoughtfully has her offering to help Joe avoid the awkward embarrassment of a picnic with a couple — this time not just as a gooseberry, but as a dumped gooseberry, to boot — by offering to intervene on his behalf.

But Joe proves Alice was right to suspect him of being too egocentric (a short-sighted pre-occupation with one's own desired outcomes and feelings) and presumptuous (a fixed preconception that other people's experience and expectation of events fall in line with one's own).

Such persons, uncomprehending, can lash out quite viciously on pain of disappointment, as Joe did.

On Alice's rejection of him, Joe had to make up a story and create a situation for him to punish Alice for her incomprehensible (to him) lack of compliance. Even going so far as to entertain himself with the misogynistic notion that Alice rejected him for not having behaved toward her

in a crude-enough manner (and we all know what Joe means by that).

Belle and John: there's this girl called Belle: she has a very active social life and lots of friends.

John finds Belle physically attractive.

They agree to meet at a pub.

John supposes this means Belle finds him equally physically attractive.

Belle, however, makes it quite clear that she doesn't regard this pub meet-up as a date, and she's invited lots of people along and plans to sell beauty products at the event.

The clueless John is confused. Belle's attempt to include John and his friend with her quip about them being ambassadors of the products is received by John as being a heinous and foul lie.

What's behind John's peculiar outrage (or at least Joe-the-author's interpretation of things) is the egocentric presumption that Belle should want to focus her social life on hunting down possible consensual sex partners and exclusive twosomes of that sort. Why? Because he does. Not just him, of course. Most men are like this. Most women aren't. It's not an AS thing.

Open your eyes and have a look at what's going on in the world.

Men can be stupid.

Men can be dangerous.

Men and boys may be hard-wired to seek out sexual relationships with attractive females but it doesn't follow that they qualify. Or that women and girls are in any way responsible for how males feel about that sort of thing.

Your feelings belong to yourself and are not caused by other people.

A

## letters to the Editor

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**Dear Sir or Madam**

In your last copy of *Asperger United* somebody called Richard wrote a poem called *If I didn't have* about life with Asperger's.

Now I don't mind people using it, but it is a poem that I wrote, not him, and he didn't credit me. I wrote it in January 2001, just over seven months after I was diagnosed.

I hope you can correct this in the next edition of *Asperger United* or tell Richard that if he is to use it again, he must credit my name at the bottom.

Yours faithfully

**Kevin Phillips**

*Please, everyone, if you use someone else's work, credit them — just give their name, and name where the piece appeared (book, website, or whatever), Editor.*

**Dear Goth**

I was very disappointed after reading Eleni's letter recounting that NAS is not doing enough helping those like ourselves on the spectrum.

Eleni made some good points that the NAS should account for peoples needs. For example, social and housing to name but two important issues that the NAS should be addressing.

Most important of all. Some time ago, I too wrote a report to them on at least seventeen issues needing to be addressed.

Since reading Eleni's letter, I have written a "stiff" letter telling them that addressing concerns on employment and Government policies alone is not good enough.

Meanwhile, it appears that our needs are "falling on deaf ears" and that more must be done so that the next generation will sustain a better life.

If us Neuro-Diverse are to remain happy, then it is the NAS's job to address members' concerns as an alternative to dithering around on employment and Government policies.

**Michael**

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**Dear Goth,**

we are surrounded by people who say we must love everyone, and telling each one that we love them: it's everywhere we are bombarded with this so-called love.

I've been married for eighteen years and my marriage has not been consummated. I have no empathy and no emotion. This so-called love is getting to me: why should we have it rammed down our throats? It's all false anyway. I know having Asperger syndrome makes us different, but all this lovie-dovie stuff makes me cringe.

Thank you for a great and helpful read.

Yours,

**John**

**Hiya everyone,**

I created the front cover artwork to celebrate my experience of Autscope 2015, I had lots of magical moments that I'll always treasure. Thank you so much to everyone who organised and attended Autscope this year.

You can see more of my art on my blog, [autisticinnerspace.wordpress.com](http://autisticinnerspace.wordpress.com)

You can also watch my YouTube videos on my CuriosityRocks channel and for all the Doctor Who fans I have a channel called Whoventures.

Lots of love and tigger hugs.

From

**Helen**

## three letters in response to Tom

**Dear Editor,**

I was interested to read in Edition 84 Tom's letter, *Empathy*, in which he clarifies — helpfully in my opinion — various implications for people with autism. He casts a distinction between “emotional empathy” and “cognitive empathy”: the former is the ability to recognise what others are feeling and respond accordingly; the latter is the ability to comprehend why a person feels in a certain way. Autistics have both forms of empathy but have difficulties with the cognitive variety as a result of “information overload”.

My GP diagnosed me with Asperger's syndrome relatively late in life when I had chronic anxiety and depression for little apparent reason. Since then, an increasing understanding of autism has helped me to devise strategies to forestall or counteract the negative thinking.

I have, from childhood, found relationships a driver of stress which I now attribute to autism. Social and other events that are supposed to be enjoyable have generated a sense of terror and left me inordinately tired when I have finally managed to escape. Now that I am retired, I avoid such assemblies whenever I can although more intimate gatherings are generally manageable and, on occasion, even enjoyable.

I have at times been accused of a lack of empathy and felt the judgements were harsh. Once I have understood a situation, I believe that I can empathise as well as any neurotypical. The problem has been cottoning on to the circumstances, especially when a lot has been going on.

Tom's analysis provides a useful illustration of the predicaments that he, I and presumably many other autistics experience in daily life. Trying to impart such complexities to others, however, remains a serious challenge and one which I generally duck to avoid further overload!

Yours sincerely

**Tony**

**Dear Goth,**

I don't know if Tom (letter, p. 10, Edition 84) is “extreme” but he is certainly not unique. With a couple of unimportant changes I could have written his letter myself. Perhaps it is the more outgoing people who tend to write contributions to *AU*?

When I stopped having therapy a few years ago I was nervous about how I'd cope but found I had no difficulty at all. We're all different but Tom may find that he can manage equally well.

**Joe**

PS. You can publish this, forward it to Tom or, of course, ignore it entirely :-)

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**Dear Tom**

Thank you for clarifying the different types of empathy. I am a self-diagnosed Aspie, trying to support my diagnosed seven-year-old daughter. I struggle to advocate for her successfully because I only learned of the condition five years ago and, despite extensive research, I can't claim to understand it fully myself. I know what I have struggled with in my life and I can see that she struggles the same, but I can't see my way to always know how to help, as I just don't understand it well enough. I feel a fraud referring to myself as an Aspie as I just can't see sometimes how what I know of it fits my personality, but this article totally resonates with me — I do recognise others' emotions, more so than others do I feel, but it takes me a while to process what is going on around me, and by the time I've processed it the conversation has moved on (and often the speaker has moved on having found me unresponsive!).

So thank you for adding this little piece to my puzzle, I hope to use it to help my daughter know better who she is, and who I am.

**Jayne**

## Bending gender/s in speculative fiction

by Walki

**Gender-bender** is an informal term used to refer to a person who actively transgresses, or bends, expected gender roles. Gender-bending is sometimes a form of social activism undertaken in response to assumptions or over-generalisations about genders. Some gender-benders identify with the gender assigned to them at birth, but challenge the norms of that gender, feeling that the gender assigned to them at their birth is an inaccurate description of themselves; some are transsexual and desire to change their physical sex through hormone therapy or sex-reassignment surgery; others were born intersexual. (Wikipedia)

**SpecFic** (speculative fiction) is an umbrella term that covers science-fiction, fantasy, horror or dark fiction, and just plain weird fiction. (Elyse Draper)

In fiction the term gender-bender may refer not only to characters modelled after real-life gender-benders, but also characters who undergo changes in their physical sex — magically or otherwise. A work of art which challenges gender roles or features gender-bending or transgender characters may itself be referred to as “gender-bender”. (Wikipedia)

As a child I read every Famous Five book (Enid Blyton). My favourite character was George the tomboy, who refused to be called Georgina and was always pleased to be mistaken for a boy.

As a teenager I read a lot of science-fiction. I especially remember a short story — maybe written by Joanna Russ — where a female secret agent went undercover on a male-dominated planet, passing as a man. Written at the first person, it was a critical and sarcastic description of a culture dominated by inflated male egos.

As an adult I read many literary genres, favouring wimin writers featuring strong female characters or lesbians. Quite a few of the stories used gender-bending in various ways.

A play especially sticks to my mind, *The singular life of Albert Nobbs*, written by Simone Benmussa, based on a novella by George Moore. Albert Nobbs was a woman passing as a man and working as such (19th century, Dublin).

Other works that left a sizeable impact on my mind would be *In the darkness, hunting* by Janrae Frank, and *I am Morte* by Elyse Draper.

In *In the darkness, hunting*, the main character, Chimquar, is from a country where genders are equal. Chimquar, known as Tomyris in the country she left behind, is a warrior in exile. Among the people she chose to live with, she hides her gender and passes as a man in order to be free of her actions. This secret could be her demise if discovered. With Chimquar the Lionhawk, Janrae Frank created a character who, Jessica Amanda Salmonson reckons, could have made these tales ground-breaking (as were the intergender characterisations in Ursula K. LeGuin’s *Left hand of darkness*) in the late Seventies, if the lottery known as fame had struck in its author’s favour.

In *I am Morte*, published in 2009, a short story written in the first person, Elyse Draper presents us with Death, and Death being the narrator, no gender is applied. Death is an entity, who follows a specific light/soul through many lifetimes. This light is of male gender in some lives and of female gender in other lives. The genders are totally irrelevant to Death. By not applying any gender to Death, the author leaves it to the readers’ perception/choice/filter to either sway for a definite option, or enjoy the genderlessness altogether. (Yes, in French, “dead” is morte or



mort. It just happened that the name Mort was already taken. It would have been confusing). Pratchett chose to apply a male gender to Death, even so the character is just a skeleton wearing a cloak, in his Discworld books. Gaiman, in the Sandman library, pictures Death as a Goth young woman, wiser than her youthful appearance would let on. While the character Desire is fluid of gender and of appearance.

In *The left hand of darkness*, people are generally genderless. In the mating season they temporarily develop male or female genitalia.

In *The lunatic fringe* (by Alison Moon), werewolves are genderless in werewolf form, and can choose to be male or female when taking human shape.

What is gender identity? Is it biological or is it psychological?

It was once considered taboo, and even illegal, in western society for women to wear clothing traditionally associated with men. The idea of men wearing skirts is still not accepted. One could say that each person has two genders: the gender the person identified with, and the gender people project onto this person.

If gender identity is the person's perception of their own gender regardless of

society or people's projections, if gender identity refers to one's internal sense of being male/female/both/neither, is gender a necessity?

The revised edition of the *Compact Oxford English Dictionary* (2008) tells us that "The words gender and sex both have the sense "the state of being male or female", but they are used in different ways: sex usually refers to biological differences, while gender tends to refer to cultural or social ones."

So, in western society gender is generally stereotyped, functional, role-orientated, imposed, connected to the visual, and projected. While it can be all that in SpecFic, it can also be fluid, free, diverse, irrelevant, invisible, and non-existent.

Does SpecFic encourage a re-definition of gender/s? Is gender-bending an attempt to escape from gender binary? And what is gender-bending?

I believe that SpecFic evolves along with reality. What once could have been considered gender-bending might not be so now. However, with so many diverse minds with such diverse imaginations, genders can still be bent in many ways. If literature is an escape from reality, what is it about genders that readers and writers, consciously and unconsciously, attempt to escape? Gender is a limitation for some. Others might be

curious. I like to bend genders in my fiction work because I see it as the best way to open people's minds to different options. As a reader, I like to read instances of gender-bending because it gives me temporary amnesia from the so-called real world; it makes me feel better about myself; it strengthens me in my beliefs and in my identity.

What is gender-bending in SpecFic? Lesbianism once was. A woman passing for a man (or a man passing for a woman) still is somehow. A man living more than a century and transforming into a woman in the middle of it. Wimin wielding swords as best as their male counterparts. A being, who can be male or female according to whom it is sleeping with. An appearance so fluid that gender cannot be identified.

Maybe it is the ultimate freedom, when and where you can be whoever and whatever you want to be, without anyone attempting to impose their projection onto you. Because isn't it what we would all want, but cannot get, in this so-called real world. Maybe, ultimately, it is about power, when full equality is still a dream.

Maybe gender-bending in SpecFic is just a tiny thorn in the side of a patriarchal society based on two genders where men are still on top of the food chain. Something allowed/tolerated to keep some of the masses at bay.

**Dear Goth,**

I am an Aspie and proud. I write this hoping I can get some insight from *AU* readers. Since my diagnosis at the age of 10 (I was diagnosed with ADHD and autism) I have found it tremendously hard in certain situations.

One major situation that was hard was when my mum and dad separated when I was 5 or 6 years old: it was difficult only seeing my dad once every weekend. It was a lot harder when the contact between me and my dad ended when I was about 9 or 10. It was hard growing up in a female-dominated household, with my mum and five sisters. I often wondered whether their split was my fault. If I did something to contribute in some way of the split.

I often feel like a recluse and often segregated myself because I am unable to judge a situation with potential friends, unable to make correct decisions, coming across as not being sensitive, but feel that personally I am too sensitive, and this reflects on what I say and do around people.

Even before my diagnosis I found it hard to make friends or be social with anyone in the playground or the classroom, and would often demand to work on my own rather than in a pair, simply because I felt that I wasn't liked. I was often called a "teacher's pet" and was ridiculed because I preferred and craved adult friendship, someone older. I found it easier talking to someone older.

Although I was called a teacher's pet, I deliberately began to misbehave at school to try and prove to class mates that I wasn't a teacher's pet, but in fact I was "cool". Despite the uproar, my academic progress was not affected. Although I moved from mainstream school to a residential school, I still came out with nine GCSEs. Is this a normal trait for an Aspie?

Later on, after my diagnosis, it was often said about me by some authorities (teachers, doctors) that I would attempt to build overbearing relationships with females. Maybe this is part of

being an AS sufferer? Maybe this is because of the distrust I have in men? Or was it because of the lack of relationship with my mother? Was I looking for that mother figure? I don't know!

As a result of this I was overly cautious about relationships developing with females and subsequently, because I couldn't and wouldn't interact with men or trust them, it would result in me distancing myself from everyone.

Since my diagnosis I've had little help with my autism, whether professional or not. This has left me with many questions about my autism.

However, in *AU*, I have gained some insight into other readers' dilemmas and what they've faced, but I can't help feeling I need more. I am totally unaware of what's available in my local area to support AS sufferers. I don't know if there is anything like the Autsim Rights Group or BAASG in Birmingham and would appreciate any help from any *AU* reader.

I've had it pointed out by many people that I am very tactile and I am wondering if this is part of my autism or if it is a common trait. My tactileness is not anything sexual, and nor do I want it to be perceived in this way. This has, however, led me into difficult situations where, because of my tactileness, it has given people to impression that I want more than a friendship, but it's not the case: for me it's a simple sign of affection. This leads to another dilemma of then trying to tell people I don't want anything sexual to happen, but trying to do it in a sensitive way, in order not to hurt their feelings. Has any other reader faced this kind of problem? If so, how did they overcome this? Are there any *AU* readers that can relate to the past I've had, the troubles I've faced?

I welcome any *AU* readers that would like to get in touch and I look forward to seeing any replies in further editions of *AU*.

Thanks,

**Matthew Price**

## Asperger's: not a fault but a variant

by Rose

With students adapting to university life, with new routines, new surroundings and new people, it can prove a difficult and nerve-racking experience for both student and parent alike. Now imagine waking up to a world you could not understand, where adapting to new routines and surroundings was hard. Where vocal instructions are interpreted differently to their intention. A world where people are unpredictable and applying newly learnt social rules is just one of our everyday challenges. This is what it is to have Aspergers Syndrome.

There are people who don't understand the condition, why we see the world the way that we do and what it means to have it: lots of people see it as a fault. That is not the way that some Asperger's students see it. They see it as a superpower, a passion towards a subject which can intensify as well as expand their learning and research further. Those are the ones who are more likely to succeed in their chosen course, leading them onto a career path of their own, and with that will come academic confidence in their own abilities.

It is trial and error, a way of finding creative personal solutions to overcome the everyday challenges that they face, with a determination to discover personal potential. A way to keep the Asperger's intact, to embrace it and what it can offer them, to be their own person. To merely scratch the surface as there's so much more to them than just the Asperger's.

It is a positive difference, to work with it and not against it in order to become resilient, and as it says in *The curious incident of the dog in the night-time*, "Once you have done this, you can do anything." It is a worry to make friends, to fit in. However, at some point you will learn, as it says in *X-men first class*, "if you use half your concentration to pretend to be normal then you are only half paying attention to whatever else you are doing." Worrying about making friends and relationships will only take over the focus of other things, it will happen naturally.

With more research about Asperger's syndrome coming to light, more people with the condition are starting to realise that it isn't a curse to bear, but an opportunity. The opportunity to grow with their own skills the Asperger's gives them that presents to them an advantage.

## Gender discrimination

by James

I am writing about gender, as this is mentioned as a possible theme in issue 84. I am an autistic male who wears shorts most of the time because I get uncomfortable when my legs are covered.

Most people don't have a problem with this even if I might look a bit odd (I feel pretty normal though). What gets to me when people have a problem is when females can always wear short skirts or dresses. I have heard about males wearing skirts or dresses if they can't wear shorts and it has made me more in favour (I was never in favour before this). I have seen films where men pretend to be women, eg. *Mrs Doubtfire*, and it has inspired me to want to do it.

I hope I have written enough as I am not very good at writing letters.

If sufficient material is sent in, the theme for April will be **acceptance**. This could be others' acceptance of autism or your acceptance, or what society needs to do. Vote with your contributions: the more submissions on a subject sent in (from different people), the more likely that that subject will be the theme. Writing on any subject is still welcome, as are ideas for new themes, fillers (for putting in small spaces like this) and artwork. Remember, if you want to see different content in AU, the best way to change it is to send something in!

## The Confederation of Âûtia

by Joseph

I've always been curious about the idea of an autonomous autistic community. I've always felt that a lot of the problems people on the spectrum face are because of the way society is structured, rather than an innate defect. I and many others have felt like foreigners in our own country and fish out of water in NT society, and have felt that a lot of our so-called disabilities melt away when together. This provides a comforting contrast to the increasingly bleak situation for many people on the spectrum: acceptance by wider society looks like it will not happen soon.

I had these thoughts in mind when I read about an unusual border situation on the bank of river Danube, between Serbia and Croatia. Serbia believes the border should have followed one route, and Croatia the other. The result of this is five patches of land with a total area of three square miles that both Serbia and Croatia claims do not belong to them. No country claims them, making them “terra nullius” — land belonging to no one.

I spoke about the idea on autistic forums. Many people were hostile to the idea, but gradually I built up a small group of people who were interested including Francois, from Belgium. We found a Croatian woman, Mirna, and although she was sceptical, she did help us with translation and local knowledge. We designed a flag, discussed fundraising and basic infrastructure, and decided to call the state The Confederation of Âûtia. I had a flag created, and we pencilled in a date to visit and claim the territory for ourselves. In April, Francois and I headed out to Croatia with the flag.

Two days before we arrived, this terra nullius had been claimed by a Czech libertarian politician. He christened it Liberland, and wanted it to become a Libertarian utopia with no taxes. I thought at the time it was good luck for him, but in hindsight, it was good luck for us.

Francois and I decided to visit the territory anyway. We took a bus, and started on the five-mile hike to the territory. However, because of Liberland, there were many police about. We were stopped, but allowed to continue. As we walked up the dirt road, police drove up and down in their cars keeping a watchful eye on us.

We stayed for an hour in the terra nullius, which is swampy forest with a few abandoned houses, then headed back to our guesthouse. Three days later, the Croatian authorities closed that area off to the public, and fined anyone who “trespassed” there. Liberland (who had set up camp on the Serbian side of the river) sent many activists there anyway to provoke the authorities, who responded with ever harder penalties.

Liberland attracted a huge amount of media attention in the early days, but this faded. The “President” is still positive the idea will work, but the project is losing money and members fast and the Croatian authorities aren't relenting in allowing people to access the area.

Francois and I went over to Zagreb (the Croatian capital) to meet up with Mirna. The three of us wandered around the city centre talking about random subjects and getting stared at by locals. This was a real highlight of a trip. Three Aspies, one English, one Belgian and one Croatian, bumbling around in a strange world. Each of us said that we hadn't felt so alone in such a long time. I left feeling an even greater sense of solidarity than before.

Our attempt at founding an autistic state was a failure, but I don't regret doing it at all. To make any progress in life you need to tilt at a few windmills. I'd rather people on the spectrum try to pursue their dreams than force themselves to conform to a society that on the most part, will never accept us anyway.



## ARGH! The menopause

by **Kabie**

Autism Rights Group Highland (ARGH) are hoping to publish our first book, it will be edited and produced in partnership with Debbie Allan (an autistic person from Glasgow). The subject will be the menopause, this is a subject that there is currently very little written about from an autistic perspective.

We are looking for pieces of writing by adults who identify as autistic (with or without diagnosis) who are willing to write about their own experiences of menopause, either from the perspective of having been through, currently going through or looking to the future and how they feel about that stage of life.

We would like up to 1,500 words (about three typed pages) on this subject.

Each chapter of the book will be written by a different autistic person about their experiences.

There will also be contribution from a medical professional to provide medical fact.

There is a limited amount of space so it might not be possible to accept all submissions — those that are accepted might be edited, the edited version would then be discussed with the contributor and only published if/when it was agreed on.

Could you email

**kb@arghighland.co.uk**

if you would like to contribute, and also send your contribution there before 31 January 2016. Do feel free to forward this to anyone else you think might be interested in contributing.

Contributions will be printed crediting the original author, either with their own name or pseudonym, as they prefer.

Suggestions for questions to think about in your writing, you do not have to answer all or any of these questions. You may choose to answer these or to write about anything else in relation to your personal experiences:

Did you feel supported through menopause, if so what was it helpful, who were you supported by?

What do you think medical professionals, support staff or family members need to consider when supporting an autistic person through menopause?

Did you find ways of coping with symptoms of menopause that you feel others would benefit from — if so please share them.

Had you thought about menopause before you went through it yourself? If so was it as you imagined, was it better than you imagined, or was it worse?

The book will also contain a question-and-answer section, the answers being provided by either other autistic people or a medical professional. (This section will be medical fact and discussion, it is not meant provide medical advice to individual readers. In matters of health you should always consult a medical professional such as your own GP, no book can act as a substitute for this).

ARGH and other book project members would like to thank Caroline Hearst of AutAngel and Autism Matters for her advice on this project,

**www.autangel.co.uk**

To read more about ARGH:

**www.arghighland.co.uk**

## An essay on being alone and single with Asperger's

by David

Dear all, I was diagnosed late in life Asperger's. I am 28 and was diagnosed nine years ago. It is only this year that I have begun to receive any help from the autistic society. I did not know about the help until my mum found out for me. I have always been obsessed with finding love, settling down with a wife. I have an image of the perfect lady and met ladies many times I have fallen for who meet this image, but they never want to go out with me! Tried dating sites, put ads in the local newspaper, but no success, as I always end up getting conned or don't want to know when they find out about my Asperger's. In my 28 years I have had short-term love and two short engagements. The first lady was definitely my type of woman. We both loved Disney fairy tales and watching soaps. She was very beautiful and she smoked heavily. I have always thought a lady looks beautiful that way. We always went to cosplay as Gaston and Belle from *Beauty and the beast*, or as the Prince and Snow White. Sadly, this lady cheated on me and broke off our engagement. I had another girlfriend since but she conned money from me.

Since, I have been very lonely. I dread Christmas the most as I get very lonely and my beloved cat has just passed away. We don't have any local Asperger's groups where I live. If we did I would certainly get involved. I am not, repeat not, doing a dating ad here as I know that it is not allowed in the magazine. I would love to know if any other readers have found true love or know any trustable and safe places, maybe on line, to find love and get my happily ever after. Well, maybe.

## In praise of Emma

Just a short line to praise Emma's article, *A blaze of gold*, in the Oct 2015 issue of *Asperger United*.

I share her sentiments and it's always nice to read an article one identifies with.

Julian

Forty-something Asperger's person\*

Glad to be different and even "gladder" [there's some dodgy grammar] that her children have the support I never did.

\*Clever, emotionally intelligent, top DIY-er, photographer, transvestite, mechanic (there's a contrast!) and much much more!

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Hi Goth,

*AU* every day, please, quarterly isn't enough! Also, I'd like my copies to be hand-gilded and delivered in person, please. The customer's always right . . . ;)

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Yours, in hope,

Richard



## The rules of *Asperger United*

(contact information for AU is on page 2 and again on page 20)

- 1) *Asperger United* is funded by the NAS and readers' donations, and is independent of the NAS. Although it is called "*Asperger United*" it aims to be for the whole of the (reading) autism spectrum. That is, the concerns and joys of any subscriber on the spectrum can be printed, not just Asperger's.
- 2) *Asperger United* is free and is quarterly, published in January, April, July and October. If you do not receive a copy when you expect to, please contact AU.
- 3) Pieces that appear in *Asperger United* are credited using the author's first name only, unless the author requests something different. This is done to protect your privacy.
- 4) *Asperger United* administers the copyright of everything that appears and it does this on behalf of the authors.
- 5) *Asperger United* does not use your contact details for anything other than administering AU. Your details are not passed on to NAS Marketing, NAS Fundraising or any other organisation without your written permission. Please consider getting involved with the NAS campaigns and events.
- 6) If you move house, please inform *Asperger United* and include your old address as well as your new address.
- 7) Even if you've paid for the Royal Mail forwarding service (or another forwarding service if you live outside Great Britain and Northern Ireland), you still need to inform *Asperger United* that you have moved address.
- 8) If you phone and leave a message on the machine, please speak slowly and clearly and spell uncommon words, as the line isn't very clear. Please give any phone number you leave twice for the same reason. Remember to give your postal address so that we can find your record.
- 9) You do not have to be a member of the NAS to subscribe to *Asperger United*.
- 10) The current edition of *Asperger United* is available at **[www.autism.org.uk/aspergerunited](http://www.autism.org.uk/aspergerunited)** You need to scroll down to the middle of the page, where there is a link to the PDF.
- 11) You can sign up for an email notifying you whenever a new edition of *Asperger United* is posted on the webpage above. Email **[asp.utd@nas.org.uk](mailto:asp.utd@nas.org.uk)** asking for the notification by email and please include your full name, postcode and let us know whether you want the paper edition too.
- 12) If you want to unsubscribe from the paper version, inform *Asperger United* and include your postal address. Or to unsubscribe from the email notification, include your email address.
- 13) If you want to resubscribe (or subscribe for the first time) inform *Asperger United* and include your postal address (for the paper version) or email address (for the email notification).
- 14) Book reviews are the most popular thing in *Asperger United*, please consider submitting one. They can be about any book, not just books about autism. Also, they do not have to be short (the Goth keeps most of his reviews short to leave more space for other writers). If you do not want your review to appear in the NAS section of the Amazon website, please make this clear.
- 15) Although each issue is themed, submissions on any subject are welcome. Only some of the letters and articles in each issue will follow the theme. All submissions may be edited, especially for privacy, libel, and for fitting the space available.

## AutismCon 2 is coming to a meeting house soon!

Saturday, 5 March, at The Light, Euston

by **Leo Capella**

By the time you read this it'll be just under a year since the first AutismCon: *Festival of the mind* was held at the Conway Hall in London and preparations are underway for the next one which will be on 5 March at the Light in Euston.

We've got a bigger, more accessible, venue, and sessions are arranged in groups, or "streams", for people to follow throughout the convention. However the aim is still the same: to raise money for the National Autistic Society in a way that focuses on who people on the spectrum are, and their interests.

We want to be unique and unconventional and our line-up will include events like a discussion on autism and sexuality, (hopefully!) gardening tips from Alan Gardner, and a relaxed, unguided session for people to create their own art.

Please keep your eyes on the NAS website and social media for further updates as we'll be building up to AutismCon over the next two months. For more information and to book tickets please visit

**[www.rsvpbook.com/autismcon16](http://www.rsvpbook.com/autismcon16)**

or email **[Elly.Badcock@nas.org.uk](mailto:Elly.Badcock@nas.org.uk)**

or call Elly on **0207 923 5716**

or write to:

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