

How to Name your Monster: *Neurodivergence and Mythical Hybrids*

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From Classics to Illustration



CORA BETH FRASER is an illustrator, award-winning teacher and Honorary Associate at The Open University. She teaches Classics to distance learners, supports autistic students, and can usually be found in a quiet corner with a sketchbook. In 2021 she co-founded Asterion, an organization set up to champion neurodiversity in Classics; and in 2022 she was awarded the Classical Association Prize for outreach. She blogs at <https://classicalstudies.support/>.

My Classics "journey" started in a little North-East mining town that just happened to have its own Roman Fort.

Growing up, the Romans were quite literally on my doorstep, and the Fort was my gateway to a lifelong interest. I never expected that Classics would bring me the life I have now – teaching, researching and illustrating the ancient world – or that through Classics I would find a place where I could belong as my authentic, disabled working-class self.

However, if you'd asked me where I wanted Classics to take me when I was young, I would have answered firmly, 'Nowhere'. I did not want to go on a journey, literally or figuratively. I was the kid who dodged school trips and avoided adventure of any kind, because even going to school every day was too much for me. I knew exactly what I needed: a safe and quiet little world of reading and learning, with cats in armchairs and old leather-bound books and fluffy blankets on cold mornings. I didn't want Classics to take me anywhere; I wanted to take Classics home with me and shut the door.

It wasn't until many years later that I was given a word that defined my needs: autism. I was, and had always been, autistic. I needed safety, routine and control in the same way that other people needed love and friendship. The world was a terrifying place for me, and I was drawn to its quiet book-lined corners.

Classics gave me all the quiet I needed, and more.

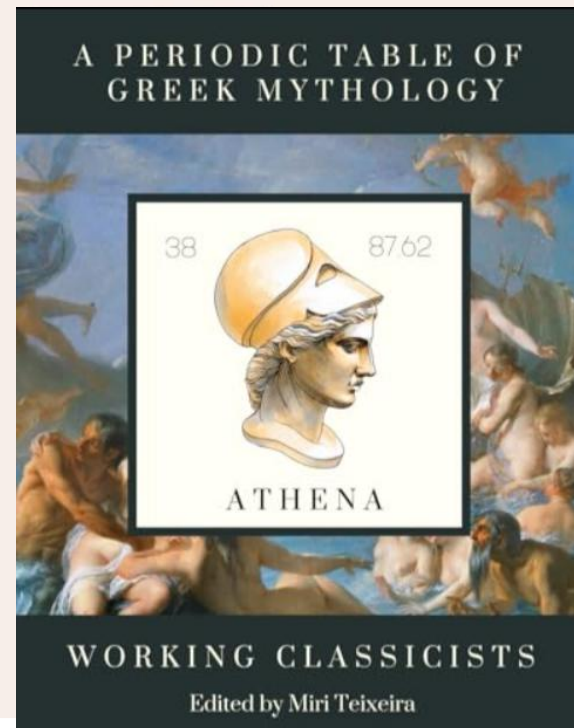
My PhD involved hardly any interaction with living people – although I did spend a lot of time in the company of Tacitus! Later I took a job teaching distance learners, by post and phone and then online, working from home with my slippers on. My home library gradually took over one room, then another, then started to creep up the stairs. There were cats too, stretched out in patches of sunlight, making equally snoring noises while I wrote. Lately I've been making even more of my dreams come true, by finally creating some of the illustrated Classics books that I always wanted to make.

Classics hasn't taken me anywhere, because I didn't want to go anywhere: I wanted to stay right where I was, and I still do. But if I could, I'd love to be able to take Classics into my autistic world, just for a visit.

Within the autistic community we talk a lot about how "Autistic" is a difficult thing to define, but it's so much a part of being or an

case of our
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inviting you
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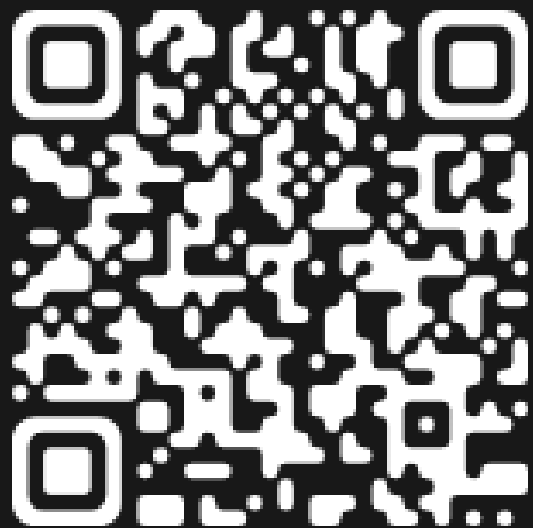


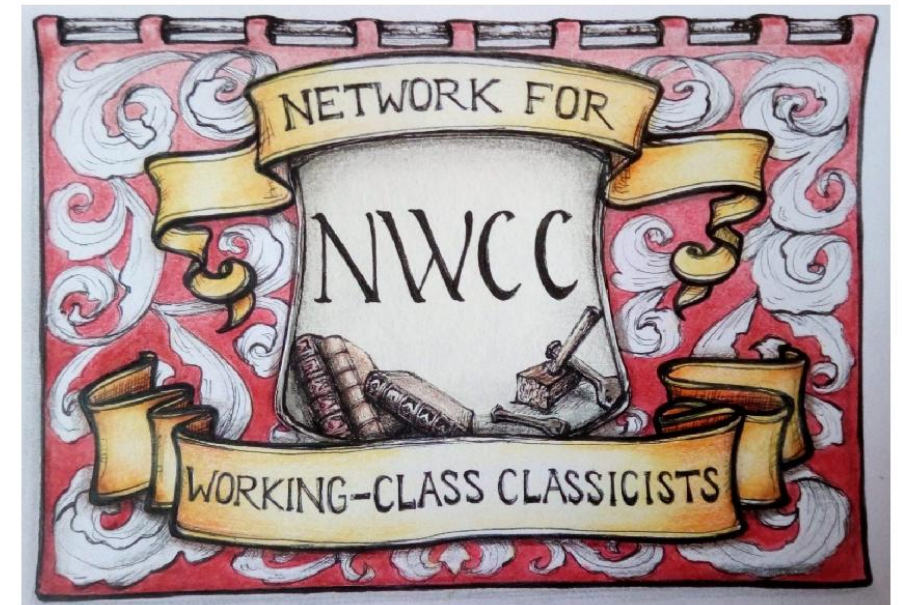
SING O MUSE!

A GREEK MYTHOLOGY ZINE
ACROSS WINE DARK SEAS



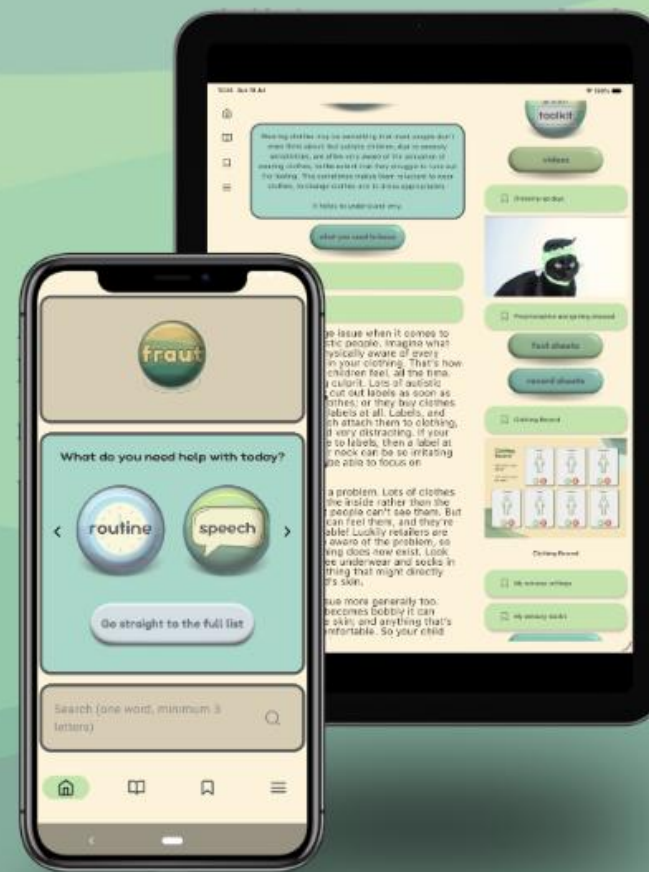
View on mobile







helping parents of autistic kids





Introducing the Relaxed Tutorial Project

Cora Beth Fraser



THE RELAXED TUTORIAL PROJECT

Cora Beth Fraser

Watch on 



THE RELAXED TUTORIAL PROJECT

OU research informs “Relaxed Tutorial” model in higher education sector

Open University (OU) researchers have developed a new “Relaxed Tutorial” model which offers a more accessible learning experience to neurodivergent students and students with anxiety.

The model has been developed from *The Relaxed Tutorial Project*, a two-year action research project, funded by FASSTEST, the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences’ centre for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning. The project ran on a Classical Studies module and involved over 200 Level 3 students.



The Relaxed Tutorial Project: distance learning and anxiety in Classical Studies



Fraser, Cora Beth; Yamagata, Naoko and Mac Mahon, Ardlie (2025). The Relaxed Tutorial Project: distance learning and anxiety in Classical Studies. *Journal of Classics Teaching*, 26(51) pp. 94–98. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S2058631024001004>

Abstract

‘Relaxed’ events are now common across the public Arts and Heritage sectors. Although designed with the needs of autistic children and their families in mind, they suit people with a range of access needs. Our project at The Open University asked: what would a ‘relaxed tutorial’ look like, and who might benefit from it? Across two years (2021–2023), tutors in the Department of Classical Studies at The Open University trialed a set of autism-friendly accessibility adjustments to live online tutorials for distance learners on a Roman History module. We found that relaxed tutorials were welcomed by students with anxiety disorders,



Open Learning: The Journal of Open, Distance and e-Learning



ISSN: 0268-0513 (Print) 1469-9958 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/copl20

The relaxed tutorial project: designing synchronous online tutorials for autistic students

Cora Beth Fraser, Naoko Yamagata & Ardlie Mac Mahon

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Asterion

Celebrating Neurodiversity in Classics



Three names

Monster

Minotaur

Autism

What is their function, and how dangerous are they?

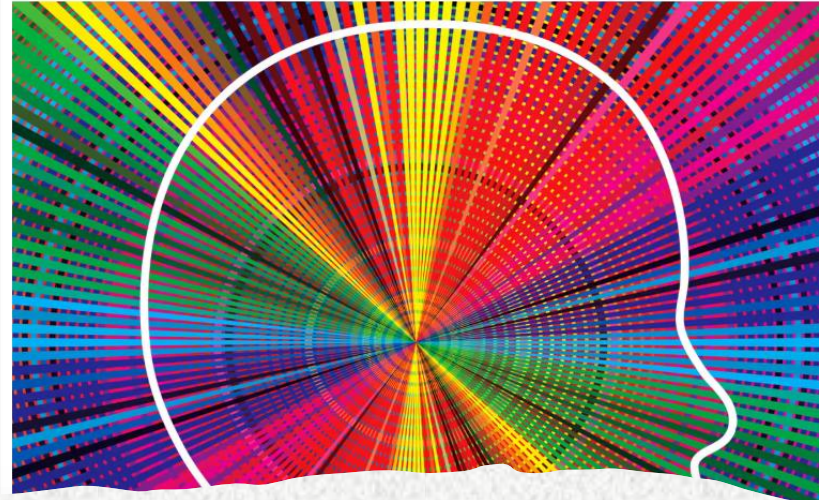
IN THE MAZE OF THE AUTISM
NARRATIVE IT'S EASY TO GET LOST



ASPERGER SYNDROME:
WHAT'S IN A NAME?

A new diagnosis of 'profound autism' is under consideration. Here's what parents need to know

Category describes people who have little or no language, an IQ of less than 50 and require 24-hour supervision



Claims that autism is an epidemic, that paracetamol (sold under the brand name Tylenol in the US) causes autism, and that autism can be 'treated' are **harmful to autistic people.**

The Danger of Names



Monsters and Monster-names

Monsters exist
in stories,
and monsters
are created by
stories.



Minos Makes a Monster

*“Di te summoveant, o nostri
infamia saeculi,*

*orbe suo, tellusque tibi
pontusque negetur.*

*Certe ego non patiar Iovis
incunabula, Creten,*

*qui meus est orbis, tantum
contingere monstrum.”*

“May the gods banish you, O
abomination of our time,

from their world, and may earth
and sea be denied to you!

Certainly I cannot allow so great
a monster to touch Crete,

The birthplace of Jove, which is
my world.”

Ovid, *Metamorphoses* Book 8 lines 97-100

Introduction

Chapter One: What Makes A Monster?

Chapter Two: Classical Monsters And Where To Find Them

Chapter Three: Monsters On Film In The Harryhausen Era

Chapter Four: Muscles and Imagination: The Modern Peplum and Beyond

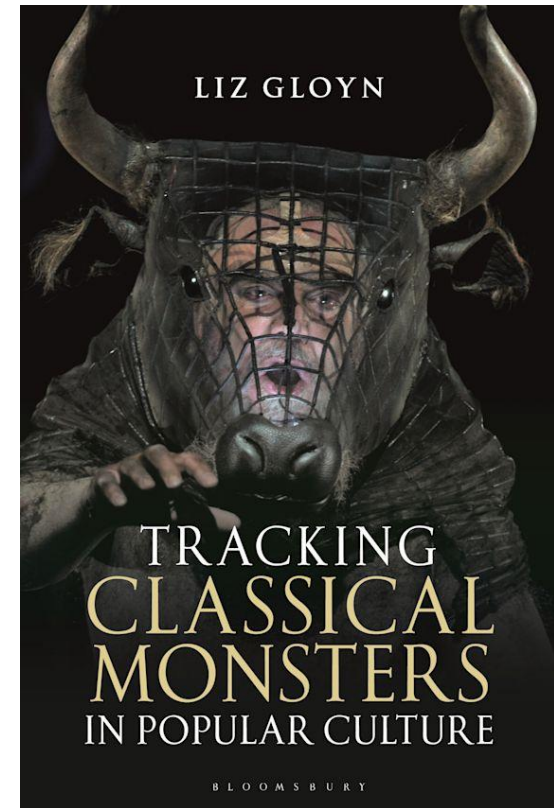
Chapter Five: Monsters and Mythologies in *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys*

Chapter Six: Tripping the Telefantastic in *Xena: Warrior Princess* and *Doctor Who*

Chapter Seven: Thoroughly Modern Medusa

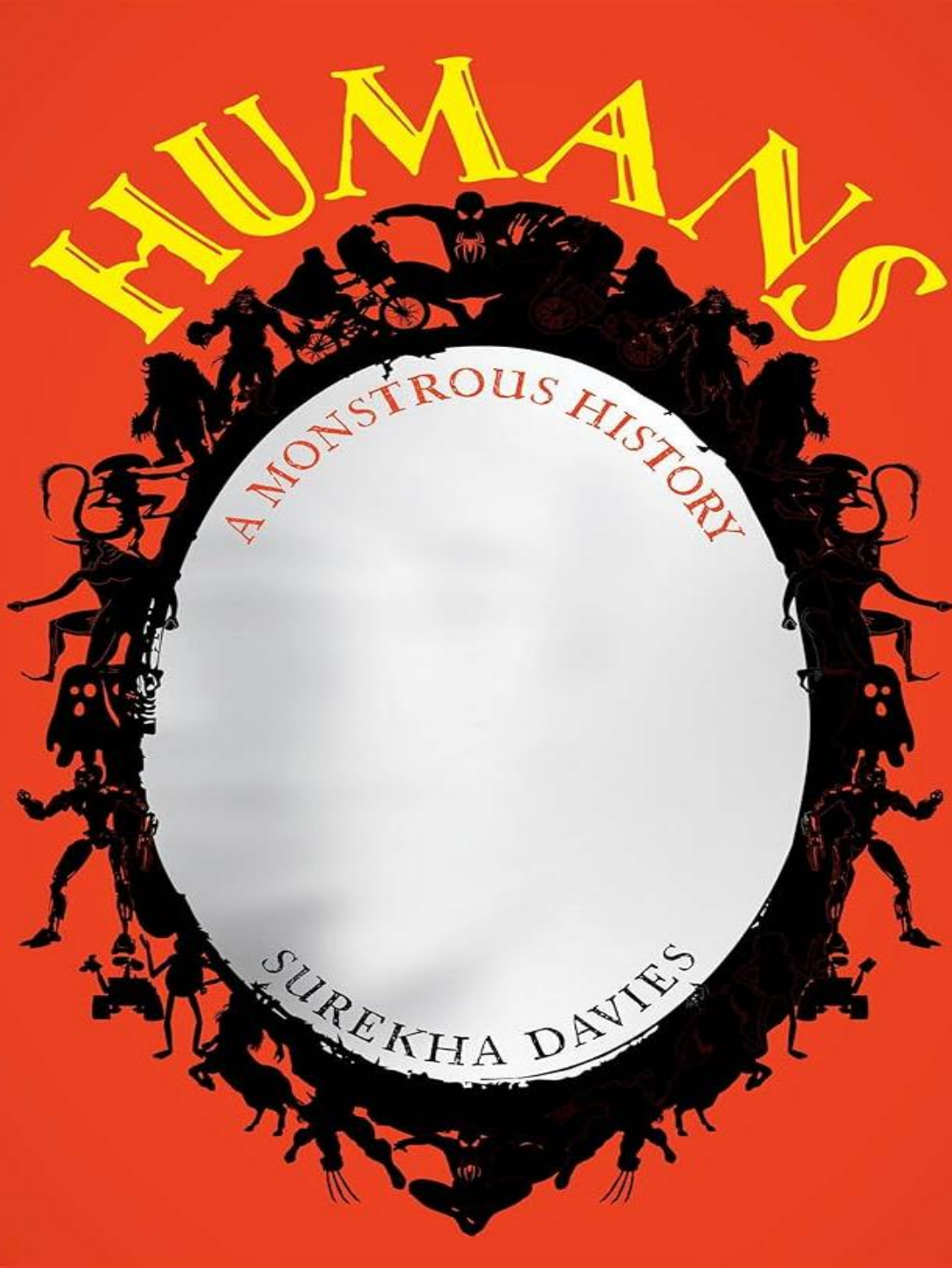
Chapter Eight: Lost In The Minotaur's Maze

Epilogue: The Sirens Still Sing





Monsters depend on your perspective



The limits of normal

“Monster” itself can be a term of classification – a brusque, dismissive shorthand for “something I don’t know what to do with”. But monster-making is also the act of making a value judgment, a form of name-calling with great power. Communities identify groups and individuals as monstrous, as transgressing the limits of normal bodies, beliefs, or behavior, to give their abstract fears and ideas a physical form and a potential solution. Assumptions about norms and monsters lie at the heart of how societies define and classify people.

Danny Dunn (2022),
'Accepting the
Monsters', *Autism in
Adulthood* 4.2

As a graduate student, I have completed 31 psychology courses thus far. I sit in a classroom, and I learn about human psychology. I learn that this practice of delineating humanity in exclusion is a foundational feature of how human minds heuristically process information. I also learn evermore lines that stand between myself and humanity.

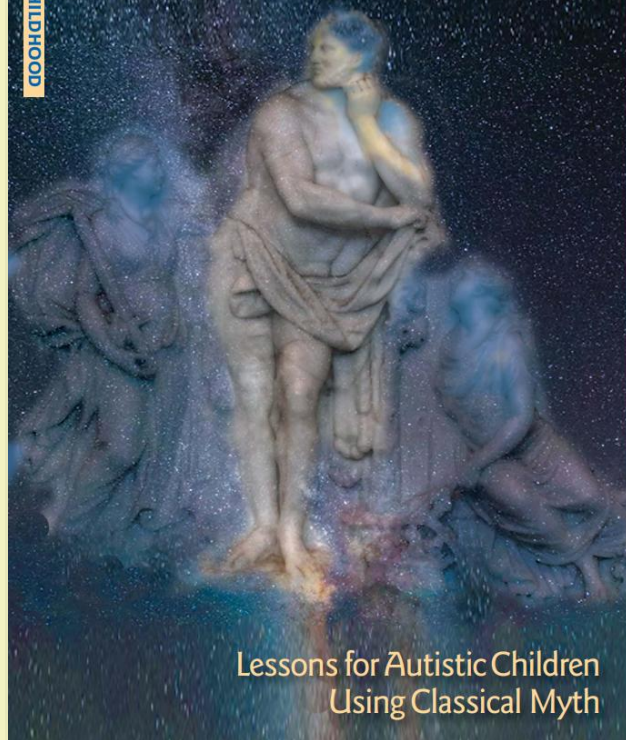
"We can all recognize these six basic facial expressions."

"Adult humans cannot differentiate phonemes that do not exist in their native language."

"Human beings are constantly processing huge amounts of information about the social world around them, and incorporating that into their behavior."

I sit in the classroom, a monster learning about human psychology. In the moments after another line is drawn, I wonder what put me on the side of monsters this time. Sometimes the cause is obvious. I do not recognize those facial expressions because I am autistic. Sometimes I wonder without resolution, as I cannot figure out why my ears can differentiate non-native phonemes. Regardless of the source, the result is the same. I am once more reminded that I am not a human being.

Susan Deacy

WHAT WOULD
HERCULES DO?Lessons for Autistic Children
Using Classical Myth

One day, according to the Ancient Greek author Xenophon, the hero Hercules “went out to a quiet place and sat, pondering”. This book explores what happened here and how and why it can resonate with autistic young people. The book presents a set of ten lessons, each dealing with an aspect of what happened when Hercules entered the quiet place, met two women (or goddesses, or personifications...) and was tasked to make a choice between two paths, literal and metaphorical. The lessons deal, too, with particular dimensions of autism, including: communicating, emotions, decision-making, sensory experiences, planning and interests. This pathbreaking book should be of particular interest to professionals and practitioners looking to utilize the appeal of mythology in their work with autistic children and academics in areas such as education, Classics and literature interested in the experiential application of their subject.

I not be the same person you started with”.³⁵ Instead of proposing Hercules as the slayer of the hardships of autism, or indeed as the slayer of autism *per se*, I am going to propose a different image of a beast-linked Hercules. It is one where he is like the monsters he encounters: he inhabits their world; he is monstrous himself. He comes in from the beyond; he disrupts, he subverts. He does not fit in; he operates outside ordinary categories and systems of classification. This is a Hercules who can provide an image for being autistic. It is a Her-



Is 'monster' still a social category even if we take the name away?

The words are
not innocent.
They never were.

AFTER RAYMOND WILLIAMS

Abandonment · Acceptance — Additional Appropriation / Assessment Asylum
Behaviour · Bewild · Best interests — Brave Budget · Burden · Capable Care
Care · Challenging — ~~Challenging~~ Charity / ~~Children~~ · Comfort care Community
Compliance · Complex — ~~Confusion~~ Confined · Cost · Gentle Care · ~~Deference~~
Defence — Delay Dependency / **Diagnosis** · Dignity Disorder · End of life
Equality — Euthanasia Exclusion — ~~Expense~~ · Failure to thrive Family — ~~Feeling~~
~~Feeling~~ · Feeding — Fighter Funding · Grief · ~~Handicapped~~ Helpless · High
functioning · Home — ~~Hope lines~~ / Impairment · Inclusion Incompatible with life
Informal · Innocent — Inspiration Institution · Intervention · ~~Inevitable~~ ~~Normal~~
Life-limiting · Looked after — ~~Maintenance~~ Management / Mercy · Miracle
Modernism · ~~Moment~~ · Need · Neurodiverse Normal · ~~Overcoming~~ · Pain
Palliative · Pathway · ~~Pity~~ — Plan Profound · Provision · **QUALY** Reasonable
Resilience · Respite — ~~Restraint Rights~~ / Safeguarding · Segregation Severe
Short life · Sorry — ~~Special~~ / Suffering · Threshold Tragedy · ~~Unsettled~~
Tribunal — Vulnerable Welfare / Wheelchair wheel · Withdrawal Young carer

KEYWORDS

A Vocabulary of Child Disability

Equality · Euthanasia Exclusion — ~~Expense~~ · Failure to thrive Family — ~~Feeling~~
~~Feeling~~ · Feeding — Fighter Funding · Grief · ~~Handicapped~~ Helpless · High
functioning · Home — ~~Hope lines~~ / Impairment · Inclusion Incompatible with life
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Tribunal — Vulnerable Welfare / Wheelchair wheel · Withdrawal Young carer

DAN McEVROY

AFTER RAYMOND WILLIAMS

Abandonment — Acceptance — Additional Appropriation / Assessment / Asylum
Behaviour / Benefit / Best interests — Brave Budget / Burden / Capable Care
Care / Challenging — ~~Challenging~~ Charity / ~~Children~~ / Comfort care / Community
Compliance / Complex — Condition Confined / Cost / ~~Example~~ Care / ~~Believe~~ise
Defeat — Delay / Dependency / **Diagnosis** / Dignity Disorder / End of life
Equality — **Euthanasia** / Exclusion — ~~Failure~~ — Failure to thrive / Family — ~~Health~~
~~Home~~ / Funding — Fighter / Funding / Gift / ~~Helpless~~ / Helpless / High
Inclusion / Home — Hope / ~~Home~~ / Impairment / Inclusion / Incompatible with life
Infant / Innocent — Inspiration / **Institution** / Intervention / ~~Insane~~ / ~~Insane~~
Life-limiting / Looked after — ~~Maintain~~ / Management / Mercy / Miracle
Misdiagnosis / ~~Misdiagnosis~~ / Need / Neurodiverse / Normal / Overcoming / Pain
Palliative / ~~Pain~~ / Plan / ~~Profound~~ / Provision / QALY / Reasonable /

KEYWORDS

A Vocabulary of Child Disability

Equality — **Euthanasia** / Exclusion — ~~Failure~~ — Failure to thrive / Family — ~~Health~~
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Palliative / ~~Pain~~ / Plan / ~~Profound~~ / Provision / QALY / Reasonable /
Resilience / Respite — **Restraint** / Rights / Safeguarding / Segregation / Severe
Short life / Sorry — ~~Special~~ / Special / Suffering / Threshold / Tragedy / Transition
Tribunal — Vulnerable / Welfare / ~~Where~~ / ~~How~~ / ~~What~~ / Withdrawal / Young carer

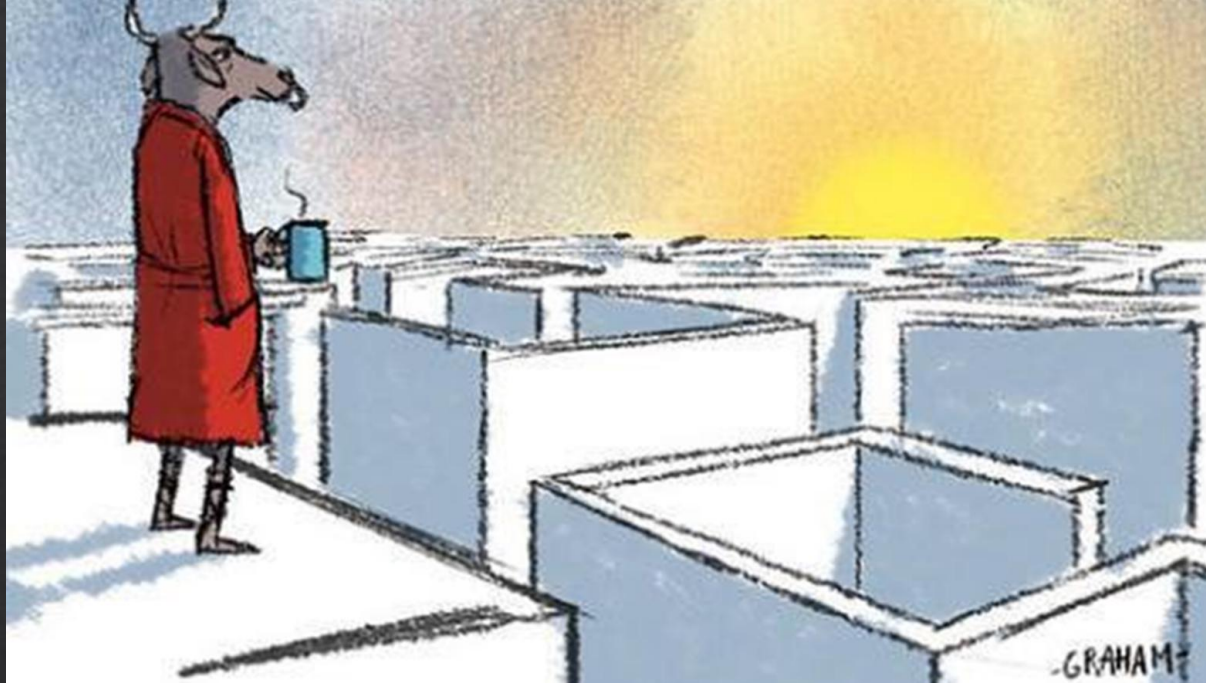
DAN McEVY

KEYWORD: MONSTER

“When a newspaper profiles a child as ‘inspirational’, the child’s body is being read for a meaning - courage, resilience, the power of the human spirit - that serves the reader’s needs. When a charity poster uses a photograph of a disabled child to solicit donations, the child is displayed: a *monstrum* shown to the public not to warn of divine anger but to demonstrate the scale of the problem and the necessity of the response.”

“ The word **monster** names the oldest framework we have for looking at disabled children, and the hardest to dismantle, because it does not require anyone to use the word itself. Its structure is so deep in the culture that it operates without vocabulary. The child is shown. The child is read. The meaning is extracted. The child remains. ”

Dan McEvoy



Seeing the invisible framework

Let's look at an example...



float









PIXAR



“Why can’t you just be normal?”



Why cant you just be normal?



Screams



A TERRIFYING NEW VISION IN HORROR AWAITS

Come Play

HE'S
GOOD AT
TAKING
FRIENDS

AMBLIN PARTNERS AND RELIANCE ENTERTAINMENT PRESENT A PICTURE COMPANY PRODUCTION "COME PLAY" GILLIAN JACOBS JOHN GALLAGHER JR. ALZHY ROBERTSON WINSLOW FEGLEY
DIRECTED BY RORI BERGMAN PRODUCED BY ROQUE BAÑOS EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS MARCIA SCOTT GREGORY PLOTKIN AND DAVID J. BOMBA PRODUCED BY MAXIME ALEXANDRE AND ALAN BLONDQUIST
WRITTEN BY ANDREW RONA AND ALEX WEINMAN DIRECTED BY JACOB CHASE
PG-13 PARENTS STRONGLY CAUTIONED
FOCUS



‘Groundbreaking. To read it is to see the world more clearly’—**Steve Silberman**, author of *NeuroTribes*

‘Bold - a new radical approach to neurodiversity that is explicitly anti-capitalist’—**Beatrice Adler-Bolton**, co-author of *Health Communism*



Empire of Normality



Neurodiversity
and Capitalism

**Robert
Chapman**





for Alex

Thank you for making me a better dad.
Dedicated with love and understanding
to all families with children deemed different.

Lessons for a baby monster

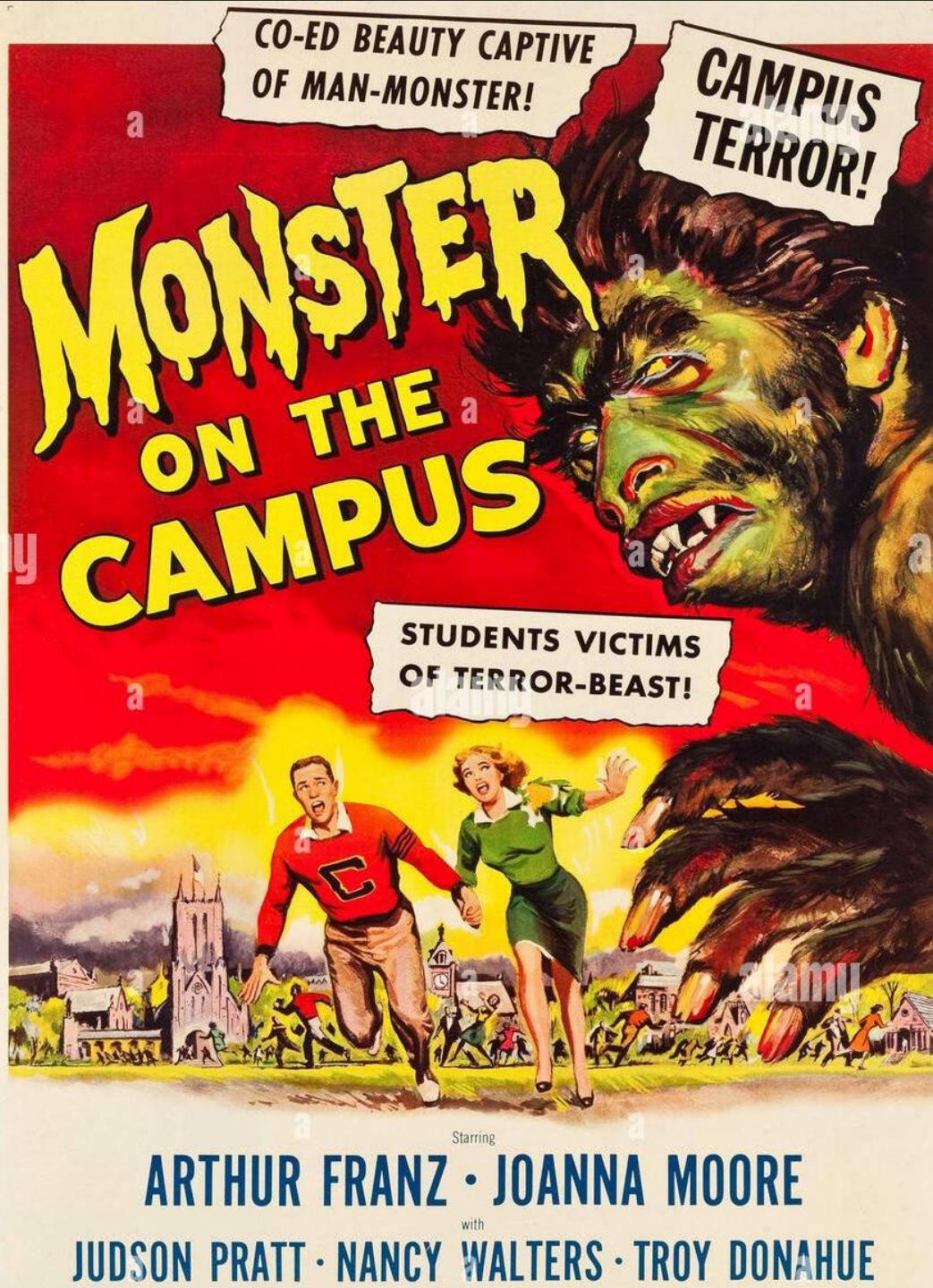
- It's safer to be normal.
- Parents will lock you away if you're not normal.
- Being unique is bad.
- You are a burden to your family.
- You are a danger to other children.
- You will be stared at, because of your distance from 'normal'.
- People will always ask, 'Why can't you just be normal?'



Lessons FLOAT doesn't teach

- Unusual strengths will be celebrated.
- People will meet you with interest and curiosity.
- Your family will always put you first.
- People will like you even if you're different.





Monster Framework

Shown

Read

Interpreted



Autistic woman wrongly locked up in mental health hospital for 45 years

Returning to the site of the hospital - which cannot be named to help protect Kasibba's identity - Dr Staite pointed out a hole in the fence. It had been cut out, she said, so Kasibba could watch people walking by from the outside space of the locked annex where she was held.

It is thought Kasibba, who is now in her 50s, was trafficked from Sierra Leone before the age of five. She lived in a children's home for a while, but that placement broke down and, by the age of seven, she was moved into the long-stay hospital.

Dr Staite said that staff had described Kasibba as "dangerous" and an "eye-gouger".

She discovered a single incident in the records which appeared to have led to these accusations of violence. Decades earlier, when Kasibba was 19 and before she was placed in long-term segregation, a fire alarm had gone off and the locked ward was being evacuated.

Kasibba was distressed and, in the confusion, she was approached by another patient. She scratched her, causing a cut to the other patient's eye.

"That was how the incident was talked about ever since, 'she's an eye gouger and she caused so much harm to this other person'," said Dr Staite. But "it just didn't ring true", she said, that a middle-aged woman with a learning disability who had lived in the hospital for decades could be that dangerous.



Minotaurs and Monster-names

Mīnos



Μίνως

taurus



ταῦρος

Mīnōtaurus



Μινώταυρος





Asterion

Celebrating Neurodiversity in Classics



A child who
becomes a
monster

A danger to
other people's
children

Given a name
reflecting
control

Only partly
human

Used for profit

Family burden

Unique

Frightening

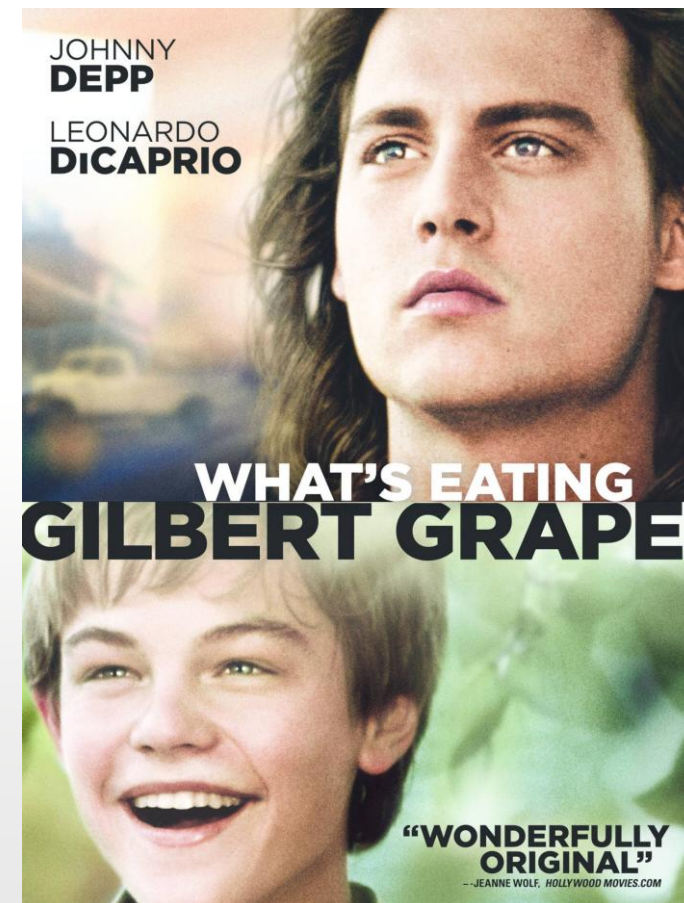
Non-speaking

Confined in a
special prison

Separated
from peers

The subject of
stories told
about him







But I'm not normal,
I'm a minotaur.

Minotaur Framework

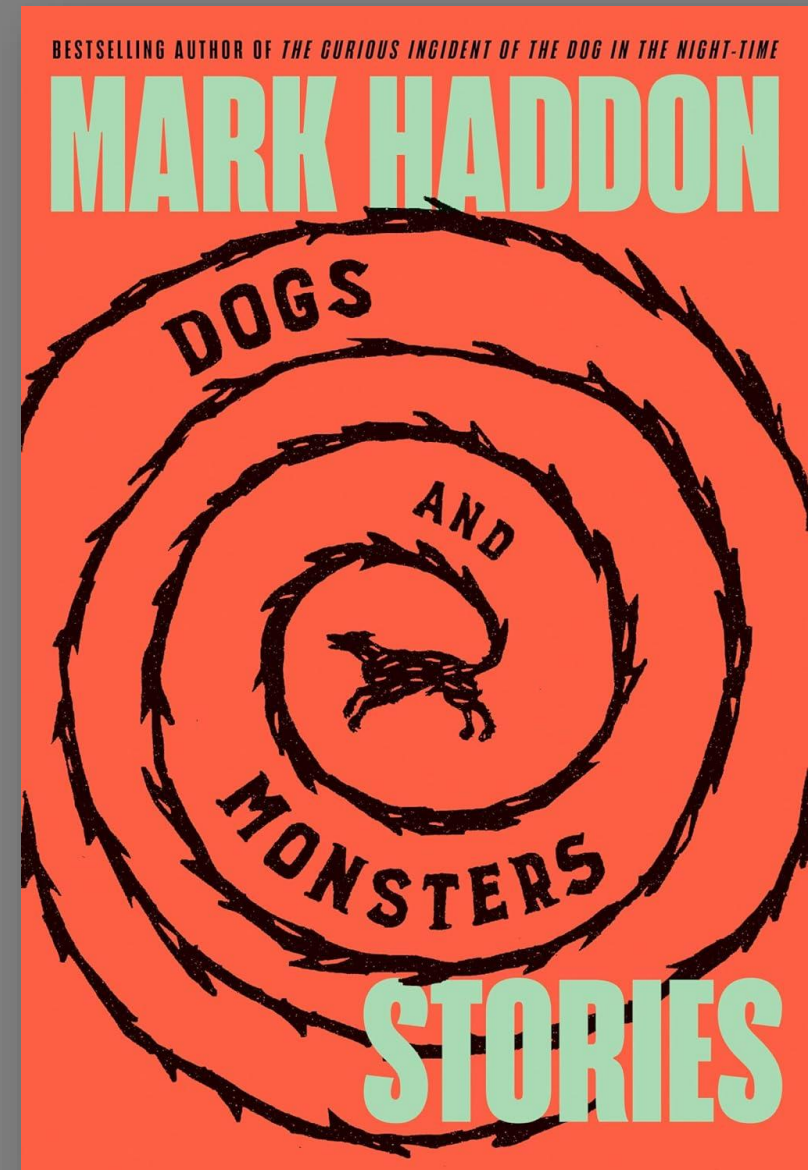
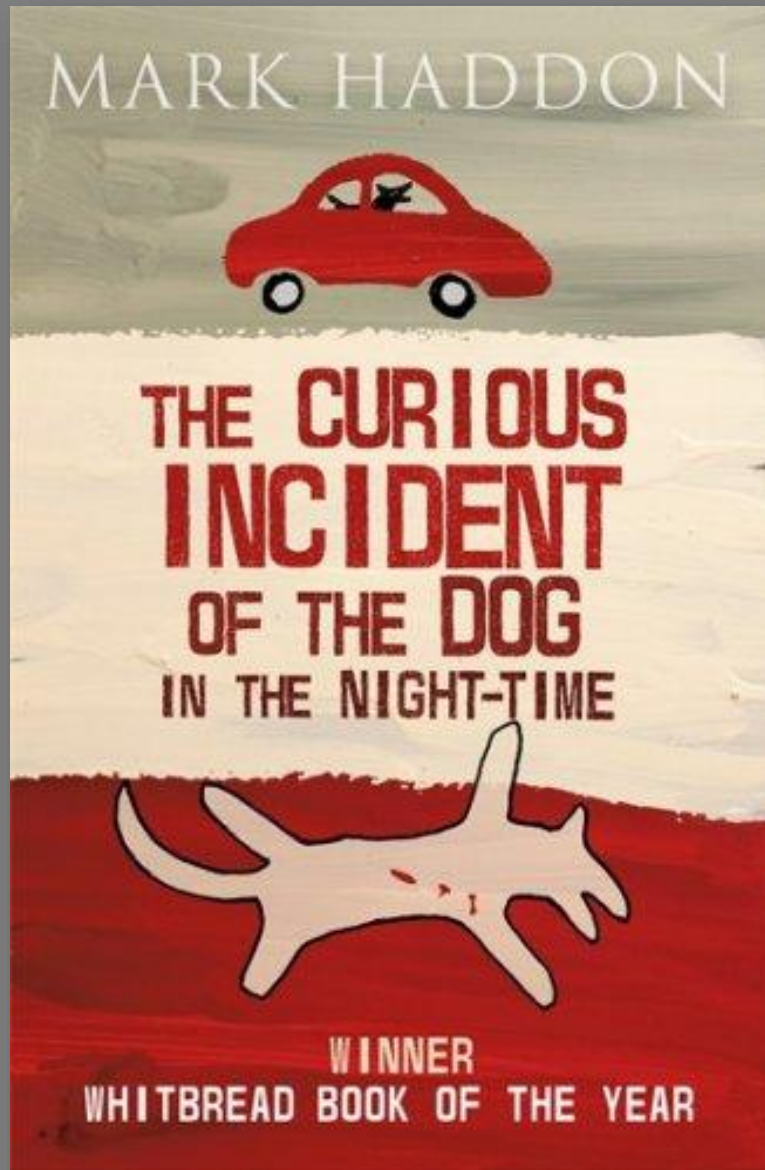
Shown

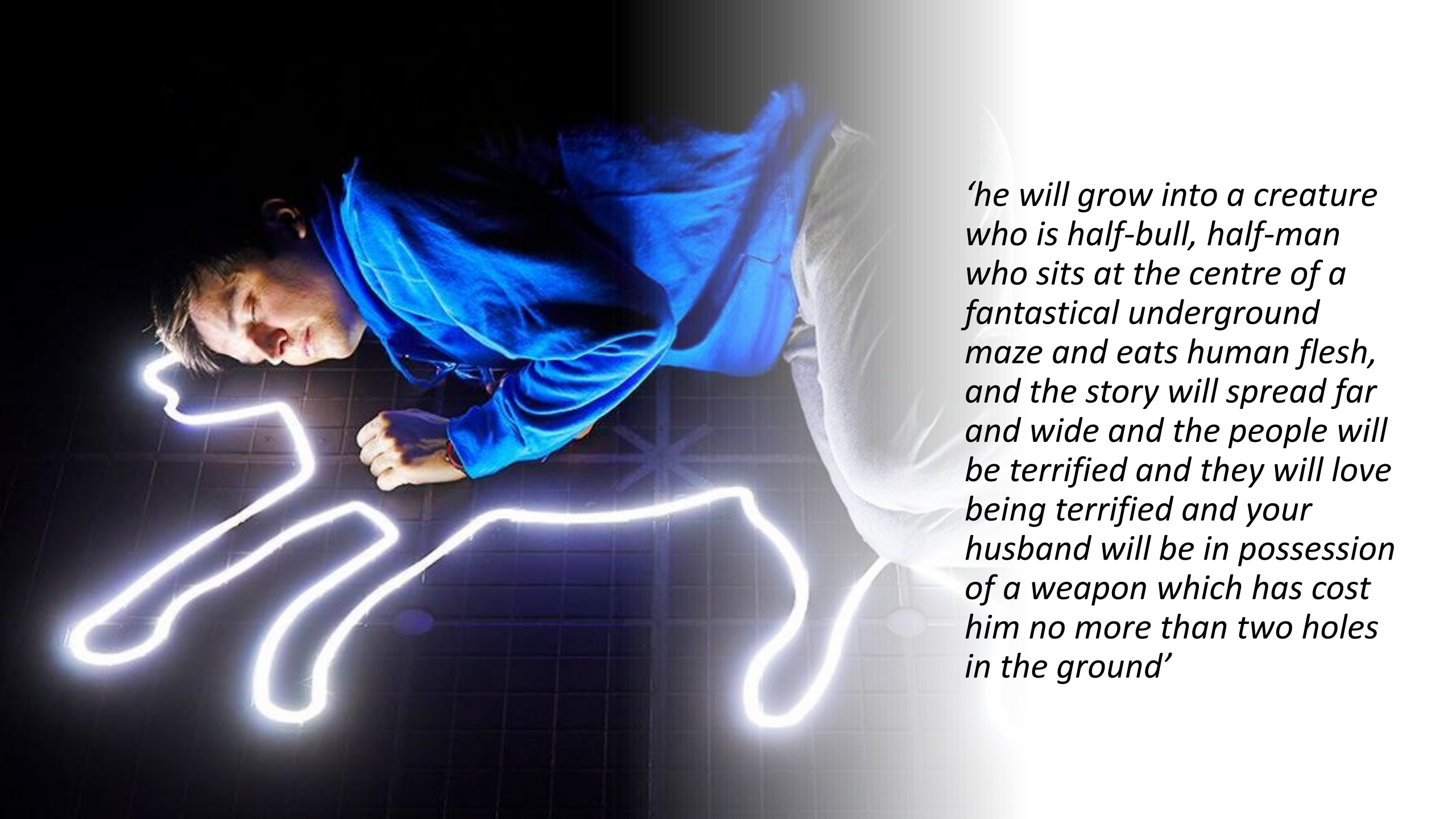
Read

Interpreted

Named

Used





'he will grow into a creature who is half-bull, half-man who sits at the centre of a fantastical underground maze and eats human flesh, and the story will spread far and wide and the people will be terrified and they will love being terrified and your husband will be in possession of a weapon which has cost him no more than two holes in the ground'



But what happens when the Minotaur talks back?

THE VOICE OF THE MINOTAUR

The defendant has the floor.

Silence.

Does the defendant have anything to say in his own defense, or does he prefer to remain silent?

The Minotaur's voice has not been preserved anywhere in all of recorded antiquity. He doesn't speak, others speak for him. There where everything animate and inanimate refuses to shut up, where the voices of gods and mere mortals, of wood nymphs and heroes, of crafty Odysseuses and naïve Cyclops are constantly swarming, where even the despised Centaurs have the right to speak, only one remains silent. The Minotaur. No voice, no sound, no whimper or threat, nothing anywhere.

The Physics of Sorrow, Georgi Gospodinov





MODERN
CLASSICS

Jorge Luis Borges Labyrinths





The House of Asterion

Besides, one afternoon I did step into the street; if I returned before night, I did so because of the fear that the faces of the common people inspired in me, faces as discolored and flat as the palm of one's hand. The sun had already set, but the helpless crying of a child and the rude supplications of the faithful told me I had been recognized. The people prayed, fled, prostrated themselves; some climbed onto the stylobate of the Temple of the Axes, others gathered stones. One of them, I believe, hid himself beneath the sea. Not for nothing was my mother a queen; I cannot be confused with the populace, though my modesty might so desire. The fact is that that I am unique.

Charlotte Amelia Poe
(2024), *Conversations
with Monsters: On
mortality, creativity,
and neurodivergent
survival*, Jessica
Kingsley Publishers.

I think a lot about monsters, about how they are shaped, how they growl with sharp tooth and claw, and how they are feared rather than afraid. It is difficult to love a monster, and as I look in the mirror, my faceblindness offering me newness at every glance, I see a certain kind of monster, and I wonder who first applied the label, and when it started to fit so well. Was it the children who yelled slurs across the playground, was it the adults who misconstrued and misunderstood until I started to twist and change and my eyes flashed and became slightly more inhuman? Does the inhumane make the inhuman? Did my trauma make me into something new, and if so, does that make me evil, or does it make me a survivor? Are all monsters just trying to survive, in their way...?

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Uta Frith: why I no longer think autism is a spectrum



Autism spectrum now so inclusive it is meaningless, says expert

Dame Uta Frith warns term has
become so accommodating it is
'close to collapse'



Subscribe now &
save!

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for 12 months

Why Uta Frith is wrong about girls and autism

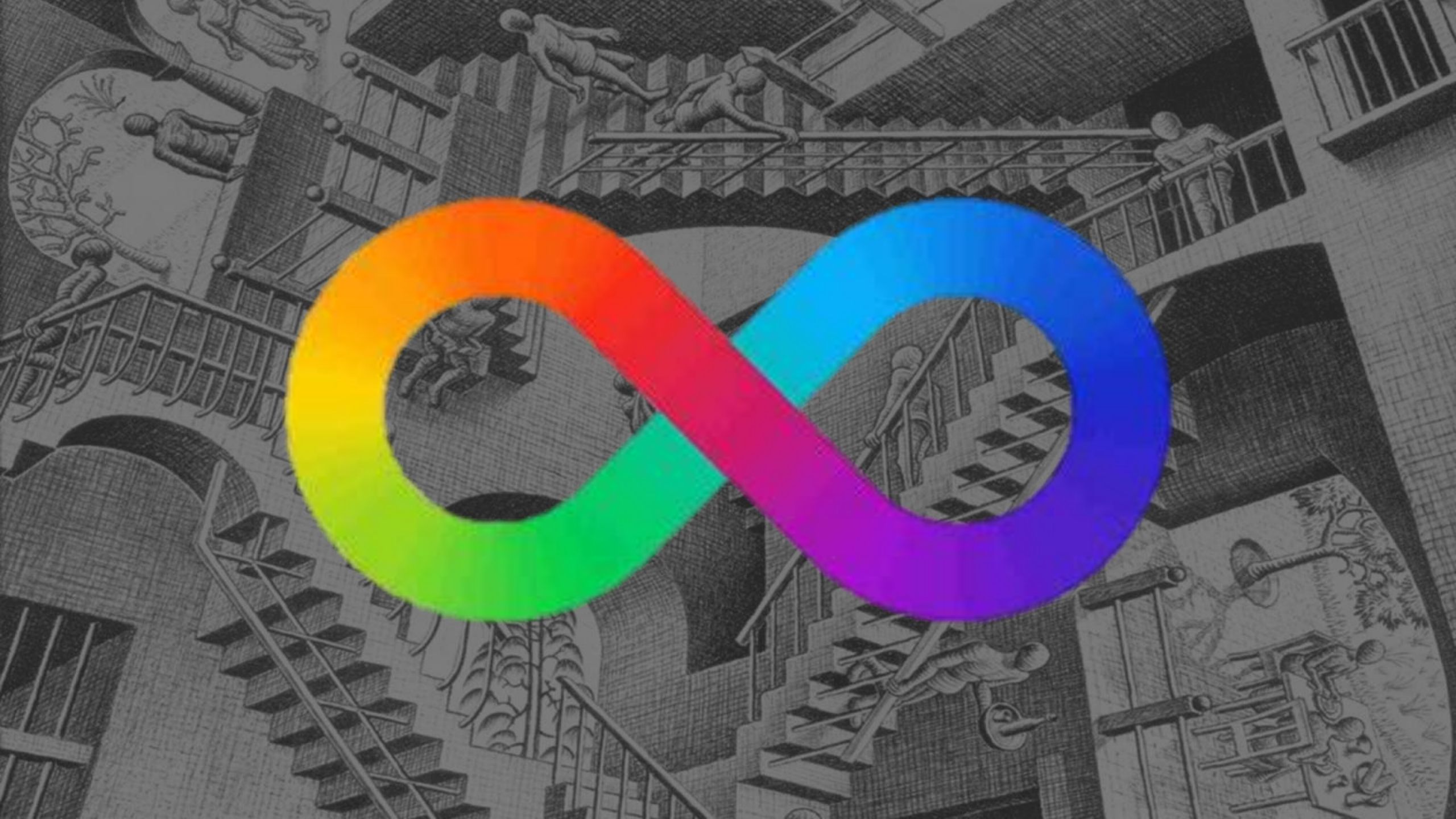
Don't dismiss the female
presentation in the rethinking of
the autistic spectrum, argues Dr
Sue Franklin



The Minotaur has escaped

Looping

How are diagnostic categories maintained when there is no objective biomarker? There is reason to think that ASD has escaped the clinic and entered the public sphere of influence. It is no longer left solely to expert clinicians to define autism. What autistic people write in their autobiographies or portray on social media influences what appears in textbooks and in diagnostic instruments. This creates a looping cycle, as proposed by the philosopher Ian Hacking. He argued that looping occurs when a classification provides individuals with a new way of being a person, that is, a new way to experience themselves and live in society (Hacking, [2009](#)).





People used to call me a monster, and for a long time I believed them. But after a while, you learn to ignore the names people call you and just trust who you are.