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Forward From Nowhere

An autistic woman resumes her tale of trying to make sense of life.

SOMEBODY SOMEWHERE

Breaking Free From the World of Autism.
By Donna Williams.
238 pp. New York: Times Books/ Random House. $23.

By Deborah Tannen

WHEN I received Donna Williams's book "Somebody Somewhere," my first reaction was: "She's already told her story. What more is there to say?" "Nobody Nowhere" was a fascinating memoir of growing up with a viciously abusive mother and a brother who tormented her. That book ended with her awakening at 25, when she discovered a name for what had isolated her — autism. How could she match that extraordinary achievement?

But I knew after the first few pages of "Somebody Somewhere" that she had matched it. By illuminating her own unique autistic perceptions, she allows us to understand our own perceptions as never before.

As Oliver Sacks has said, medicine can provide invaluable insight into chemical and biological aspects of illness, but only patients can tell us what their diseases are really like. Donna Williams tells us that in her experience autism is not a lack of awareness of one's environment but a heightened awareness of it. The autistic individual's withdrawal into a world of her own is typically a desperate attempt to create a bubble of peace amid the sensory onslaught.

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Finishing the first book, a reader might assume that once she recognized her autism and emerged from her private world, Ms. Williams's battles were over. Her new book shows how foolish that assumption would be. "Somebody Somewhere" chronicles the four years after the writing of "Nobody Nowhere," including a description of how she found the courage to undertake publicity tours in Australia, Europe and the United States. Most of all, it shows how she learned to confront the world as herself.

We all construct our conversations from bits we have gathered from the talk around us. Ms. Williams, too, participated in conversations by replaying scripts she had heard. But, as she explains, non-autistic people use these bits to reflect real feelings, genuine emotions — at least in principle. To the autistic who is unaware of real feelings (for whom, in fact, emotions feel like death), the memorized bits are all there is.

Ms. Williams's ways of coping with conversations are not unlike the strategies we all use: "If I couldn't hear with meaning, I could always comment on the things around me or create my own topic. If I couldn't make social chitchat, I could always talk shop, flick through books, act busy and appear super-conscientious."

The ability to mirror others allowed Ms. Williams to move in a world where nothing made sense and people could not suspect how their quotidian behavior assaulted her. She explains: "There are two ways to be a nobody nowhere. One is to be frozen and unable to do anything spontaneously for yourself. The other is to be able to do anything, based on stored mirrored repertoires without any personal self-awareness." The complete shutdown and the "high-functioning" role playing were two sides of the same coin: her "self" was nowhere to be found.

To Donna Williams, the "high functioning" that had allowed her to live independently from the age of 15 was not her own doing but the work of two imaginary personas she calls her "characters," Carol and Willie.

Willie was a speed reader who accumulated facts to impress people. Carol cocked her head, filled the air with social chatter and, above all, smiled. Willie was strong, feared nothing, and was always in control. "As Carol," Ms. Williams writes, "I never had to understand anything that happened. I just had to look good." Willie was indifferent, detached: the only emotion he could feel was anger. Carol had a "cheery, living facade" but could not stand up for herself.

Ms. Williams remarks that Willie learned his "I'm-so-rugged toughie image . . . from boys in secondary school" and that Carol, whose gestures and speech were modeled on a little girl Ms. Williams encountered once as a child, learned her lines from sitcoms. Ms. Williams does not seem to think of them as male and female principles, but they are in fact caricatures of stereotypic behavior.

Because in her autism she was dissociated from herself, Ms. Williams was able to pick up and imitate both male and female behaviors and speech, demonstrating, at least in her case, that sex-linked or "gendered" patterns of behavior are not inherent but are learned by watching others.

When "Somebody Somewhere" opens, Ms. Williams is 25 years old and living in London. She has given up her characters but not yet learned how to function in the world without them: "Willie wasn't there to help me understand, depersonalize, and deny. Carol wasn't there to make me laugh and pretend nothing mattered." There is as yet no direct link between feeling and expression. Returning to Australia, she enrolls in an elementary-school teaching certification program, and she rents an apartment on a farm owned by a couple who become her surrogate family. From them, and from a therapist specializing in autism, she gradually learns to live in "the world" as her own self, and not a series of performances.

The lessons are extraordinary as they show the complexity of our own daily sense-making. When Ms. Williams writes that her manuscript would "live" in a tea chest in London, for her this was not a metaphor. She had to learn that objects did not have feelings as humans do — and that humans have feelings in a way that objects don't. She stands paralyzed before a tiny closet because she cannot bear what she "would have to inflict upon" her clothes by squeezing them in. She apologizes to them as she hangs them up. Realizing that objects are not aware of her existence, are not really "company," leaves her terribly alone.

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When she could no longer just replay memorized scripts, she had to learn to hear "with meaning," and learn that language is not a weapon with which to attack or a shield to hide behind, but a means of communication.

Small talk was the hardest: "I knew the meanings of the words they used. I could even make meaning of many of their sentences. I could have tried to make a match with some information I had linked to key words they used. But I didn't understand the significance." I suspect the reason is that the significance of small talk is not in the meaning of the words but in the desire of the speakers to be connected to one another — a desire Ms. Williams did not have. Just the opposite, she writes. "I was allergic to words like 'we,' 'us' or 'together' — words depicting closeness" because "closeness made earthquakes go off inside of me and compelled me to run." Only at the end, in a special friendship (which she calls a "specialship") with an autistic man named Ian, does she discover that "'together' was not a dirty word and 'we' did not mean 'you plus my body minus me.'"

Prodigiously talented, Donna Williams paints, composes, sings, plays piano and guitar, and writes. And oh, can she write. The windows through which she allows us to view her experience are metaphor ("I was like an appliance during a power surge"), perfectly rendered details and wonderful, surprising phrasings. One of my favorites is: "I sprang into order."

The memoir ends with the greatest loss and the greatest gain. The loss: Ian forces her to accept that her reflection in the mirror is not another person who can keep her company. The gain: Ian is. □

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