

[*NeuroTribes: The Legacy of Autism and the Future of Neurodiversity*](#) by Steve Silberman, Penguin Random House, New York, 2015, 543 pages, ISBN 978-1-58333-467-6.

My daughter Jeanette gave me this book when I last visited her in May, thinking I would enjoy it. She was right – *NeuroTribes* is fascinating. The author sets out to provide a comprehensive view of autism as we understand it today and does it well. Silberman begins with his introduction to the title subject through a Geek Cruise he sailed in 2000. The personalities of the hundred or so developers he interacted with on the cruise led him to research and write this book.

Silberman provides a short biography of the discoverer of hydrogen, Henry Cavendish, who showed all the symptoms of an autistic person: inattention to other people, regimented routine and singular focus on a problem, to name a few. Paul Dirac, who predicted the existence of the positron, is offered as another example of a historical figure with what we consider the modern markers of autism. I learned he was on the autistic spectrum when I reviewed Graham Farmelo’s biography a few years back. Silberman fast-forwards into the modern era with a case study of a boy named Leo Rosa. Leo’s parents worked endlessly to try to help him through diet and therapy to find these only alleviated symptoms caused by the autistic behavior, not autism itself.

Then, Silberman rewinds to the early 20th century to look at the work of Hans Asperger at the Heilpädagogik Station in Vienna. Asperger had worked out many of the details we understand about autism today, but this information was lost in the Anschluss and subsequent purge of Viennese medicine. Asperger stayed in Vienna during WWII, but his work was suspect after the war ended because of the Nazi influence in Austria.

After the war, Leo Kanner, a psychotherapist in the United States, developed the model of autism that became the standard for many years. He proposed that autism was the result of toxic parenting. Silberman then takes a moment and clarifies what behaviors are associated with autism, citing radio hobbyists as a group that embraced technical prowess with real human contact. A similar situation occurred when computers became available and the same personalities that handled the radio so well came to work with this new technology.

Silberman’s history of autism and its role in fostering the idea of neurodiversity is perhaps best summarized by this quote from Temple Grandin in the book:

“Aware adults with autism and their parents are often angry about autism. They may ask why nature or God created such horrible conditions as autism, manic depression and schizophrenia. However, if the genes that caused these conditions were eliminated there might be a terrible price to pay. It is possible that persons with bits of these traits are more creative, or possibly even geniuses. If science eliminated these genes, maybe the whole world would be taken over by accountants.”

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[*Dark Matter*](#), by Blake Crouch, Penguin Random House, New York, 2016, 352 pages: 978-1101904220.

I listened to an interview with the author, Blake Crouch, on Science Friday. Then, when I saw copies of the book all over the place, I picked one up for myself. The author took 10 years to write this book because he spent considerable time with scientists in order to make the idea of traversing the multiverse plausible. The premise is that the antagonist has developed a human version of Schrödinger's Cat and uses the device to traverse space, but not time. This a fun summer read but don't think too hard or the ideas of the multiverse and quantum coherence/decoherence are likely to give you a headache.

Reviews by Joseph D. Ferrara, Ph.D.
Deputy Director, X-ray Research Laboratory, Rigaku