



## Book analysis: invisible differences: a story of Asperger's, Adulting, and Living a Life in Full Color - Julie Dachez & Mademoiselle Caroline

by Dachez, J., *Invisible Differences: A Story of Asperger's, Adulting, and Living a Life in Full Color* (M. Caroline, Illus.), Lion Forge Comics, Oni-Lion Forge Publishing Group, LLC, Portland, OR, 2020, 196 pp., \$19.99 (Hardcover)

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**To cite this article:** Rebecchi Kevin (01 Apr 2024): Book analysis: invisible differences: a story of Asperger's, Adulting, and Living a Life in Full Color - Julie Dachez & Mademoiselle Caroline, *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*, DOI: [10.1080/21504857.2024.2337357](https://doi.org/10.1080/21504857.2024.2337357)

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/21504857.2024.2337357>



Published online: 01 Apr 2024.



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## BOOK REVIEW

**Book analysis: invisible differences: a story of Asperger's, Adulthood, and Living a Life in Full Color - Julie Dachez & Mademoiselle Caroline**, by Dachez, J., *Invisible Differences: A Story of Asperger's, Adulthood, and Living a Life in Full Color* (M. Caroline, Illus.), Lion Forge Comics, Oni-Lion Forge Publishing Group, LLC, Portland, OR, 2020, 196 pp., \$19.99 (Hardcover)

'Invisible Differences: A Story of Asperger's, Adulthood, and Living a Life in Full Color', written by Julie Dachez and illustrated by Mademoiselle Caroline tells the story of Marguerite, a young autistic woman, shedding light on her socio-professional and emotional experiences with co-workers, neighbours, friends, and her romantic partner. Towards the end of the book, the author presents a more scientific section titled 'What is Autism?', wherein she traces the history of autism, the situation in France, delineates Asperger's syndrome, and addresses the concepts of specific interests, social interaction difficulties, hypersensitivity, adaptation strategies, strengths, before sharing some resources.

The images are predominantly rendered in black and white, seemingly to underscore the essence of the narrative and the paramount importance of visual elements over the setting and background in comprehending Marguerite's experiences and feelings. The illustrator also puts a lot of emphasis on Marguerite's face to make her feelings clear. This 2016 (first published in French) comic aligns with works such as Sarah Bargiela (2019) and Sophie Standing's comic 'Camouflage: The Hidden Lives of Autistic Women' (published in 2019), which accentuates the unique experiences of autistic women, often misunderstood or disregarded in conventional portrayals of autism, and Matteo Farinella and Hana Ros's (2013) book 'Neurocomic: A Comic About the Brain' (published in 2013), which utilises visual art to educate readers about the scientific facets of autism and brain functionality.

Comics and graphic novels provide a unique and powerful means of exploring the complexities of autism, allowing authors and readers to delve into the lives and experiences of individuals on the autistic spectrum.

Among the numerous works that have emerged in this domain, a variety of perspectives and themes are explored, offering a deeper and more nuanced understanding of this neurological condition. Many comics and graphic novels address the issue of parenthood and family dynamics. Indeed, works such as Keiko Tobe's (2016) 'With the Light: Raising an Autistic Child' and Yvon Roy's (2020) 'Little Victories' delve into the challenges and joys of raising an autistic child, providing poignant insights into family dynamics. Additionally, graphic novels like Jeffrey Kaufman's (2013) 'Angel Falling GN' and Kirsti Evans (2011) and John Swogger's 'Something Different About Dad: How to Live with Your Amazing Asperger Parent' adopt different narrative styles to explore the realities of being autistic or being a parent or caregiver to an autistic individual.

Furthermore, works like Miguel Gallardo's (2017) 'Maria and Me: A father, a daughter' and Bridget Hudgens and Carlton Hudgens (2019), and Nam Kim's 'Brother: A Story of Autism' explore familial dynamics and intimate relationships through the prism of autism, offering poignant and personal narratives on love, support, and understanding. Broader educational and social themes are also addressed. Nancy Mucklow's (2010) 'Comic Sense: A Comic Book on Common Sense and Social Skills for Young People with Asperger's and

ADHD' offers practical advice and valuable insights into supporting autistic individuals in various contexts. Graphic novels such as Kathy Hoopmann (2017) and Mike Medaglia's 'Lisa and the Lacemaker – The Graphic Novel: An Asperger Adventure' and Jeff Krukar, Katie Gutierrez, and James Balestrieri's (2013) 'Melting Down: A Comic for Kids with Asperger's Disorder and Challenging Behaviour,' as well as Michelle Mohrweis's (2022) 'The Trouble With Robots,' sensitively and empathetically address sensitive themes such as social integration, emotions, challenging behaviours, and collaboration.

Additionally, some graphic novels combine fictional plots with elements of real-life experiences of living with Asperger's syndrome, such as Kathy Hoopmann's (2015) 'Blue Bottle Mystery – The Graphic Novel: An Asperger Adventure,' illustrated by Rachael Smith and adapted by Mike Medaglia. Others, such as Vero Cazot (2020) and Lucy Mazel's 'Olive,' explore the imaginary adventures of an autistic character, offering a unique blend of reality and fiction. Autobiographical comics about autism, such as Kaveh N. Adel's (2020) 'Aspersian: Autobiographical Graphic Novel, A Journey in Embracing Oddity,' offer intimate accounts of life with this disorder, exploring the challenges and triumphs of self-acceptance through a personal lens. Works like 'Sensory: Life on the Spectrum' by Bex Ollerton (2022) and Rebecca Burgess's (2022) 'Speak Up!' offer a compilation of diverse stories and experiences from individuals on the autistic spectrum. Daniela Schreiter's (2016) 'The World beyond my Shadow' offers a humorous autobiographical account of life with Asperger's syndrome. Others, such as Nathan McConnell (2016) and Victoria Elliot's 'Growing Up Aspie: Year One: A collection of comics about growing up with Aspergers Syndrome' and Matt Friedman's (2012) 'Dude, I'm An Aspie!: Thoughts and Illustrations on Living with Asperger's Syndrome,' or 'The Girl with the Curly Hair' by Alis Rowe (2013), offer personal and insightful perspectives on autism and Asperger's syndrome.

Overall, comics and graphic novels about autism provide a rich and varied platform for exploring the complexities of this condition, while amplifying the often marginalised voices and experiences of individuals on the autistic spectrum. By situating them within the broader context of artistic representations of autism, we are better able to appreciate the richness and diversity of the autistic experience, while fostering a deeper understanding and greater respect and empathy towards autistic individuals. Dr. Dachez's comic illustrated by Mademoiselle Caroline is part of this galaxy of comics and graphic novels about autism.

In the preface on the history of autism and autistic women, Carole Tardif and Bruno Gepner shed light on the evolution of understanding autism, particularly Asperger's syndrome, from the works of Hans Asperger and Leo Kanner to those of Lorna Wing and the present day. They underline the imbalance between the number of men and women diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome, with a higher prevalence among men. They highlight the existence and importance of Asperger women, often underdiagnosed due to their more developed social adaptation abilities. According to them, Asperger women can be invisible in society due to their camouflage strategies and the difficulties they encounter in conforming to social norms. However, Carole Tardif and Bruno Gepner overlook some very important elements on these topics: while it is true that Hans Asperger (1944) detailed four autistic boys in his habilitation thesis (1944, translated and commented by Rebecchi 2023a), the highlighted characteristics were based on a sample of over 200 children, predominantly boys.

Furthermore, in his later work on autism (Asperger 1982, translated and commented by Rebecchi 2023d), Hans Asperger explained that these characteristics could also be observed in girls, and indeed he had observed them. Moreover, they do not mention the work of Sukhareva (1926a, 1926b; Sukhareva 1927a, 1927b, translated and commented by; Rebecchi 2022), the first woman to study a sample of 11 children (five of whom were girls) in the 1920s (Manouilenko and Bejerot 2015; Posar and Visconti 2017; Sher and Gibson 2021; Wolff

1996). Sukhareva observed essentially the same things that Hans Asperger had described almost 20 years earlier, with differences between boys and girls that could be easily explained by sex-specific neurobiology. Today, there is a growing body of literature, both popular and scientific, on issues of invisibility, camouflage, and masking in the female autistic population (Fombonne 2020). However, a significant portion of these works rely on gender stereotypes (in a population detached from the sociocultural environment, as described by Kanner and Asperger), deficit-based conceptions of autism that closely associate intellectual disabilities with autism, and focus on a few behavioural traits that are pathological but not pathognomonic of autism (Waterhouse and Mottron 2023). Beyond these omissions, the assertion by Carole Tardif and Bruno Gepner that Lorna Wing updated the works of Asperger and Kanner appears to be incorrect. Indeed, based on a sample of approximately 100 children, mostly with intellectual disabilities (in contrast to the descriptions by Kanner and Asperger), Lorna Wing (Wing and Gould 1979) described a triad, which later became the autistic triad (Wing 1981). While disagreeing with Hans Asperger's work and his descriptions of autism, she named the condition 'Asperger syndrome' when individuals presented her triad, regardless of the presence of intellectual disabilities (she did describe individuals with Asperger syndrome who had intellectual disabilities). It appears that the autistic dyad often describes intellectual disabilities quite well but often fails to capture autism accurately. Differential diagnosis remains challenging today due to social (Thurm et al. 2019) and clinical (Blacher, Baker, and Moody 2022) reasons. Additionally, Kanner (1943, 1971, commented by; Rebecchi 2023b) described autism as an unusual way of relating to situations and people, characterised by anxious desires to preserve similarity. Thus, the dyad in the fifth version of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) represents Lorna Wing's work on the autistic spectrum (Wing 1988, commented by Rebecchi 2023c). She ultimately overshadowed the work of her predecessors (Lolk 2013), particularly the work on autism in girls and women, and she transformed a conception of autism that focused more on character and personality, into a conception that was entirely pathological and stereotyped.

Marguerite's profile does not specifically address Lorna Wing's 'Asperger syndrome,' 'autism in females,' 'invisible difference,' or the DSM dyad since many non-autistic people also have these experiences. Instead, this comic primarily addresses, as excellently described on page 6 by the author, the fate of deviants and abnormal individuals, the rejection, discrimination, pressure, and exclusion they face in a society 'sick with normality,' conceived for and by individuals with flawed perceptions and limited powers of observation and analysis.

The character portrayed by Dr. Dachez perfectly illustrates (though not exclusively) the daily life experiences, both personal and professional, of an autistic person (and I deliberately use the gender-neutral form) that have been widely reported in scientific and popular literature: fatigue, mutual incomprehension, difficulties with double empathy, lack of consideration, overwhelm, discrimination, rejection, stigma, pressure, manipulation, insults, verbal violence, aggression, incompetence of 'autism professionals,' tasteless jokes, foolishness, etc. These issues, applied to the comic book character, arise from her friends (her friend leaving her alone during their outing to the park because Marguerite talks about her special interest on page 46, telling her she always invents problems on page 130, and all her friends mocking her on page 131), her partner (accusing her of always being the first to leave parties and stating that it's not fun for him on page 36, referred to as a 'special' burden by her friends on page 41, implying that she is abnormal and lacks humour on pages 65–66, and suggesting that being autistic is a convenient excuse for not doing everything he wants her to do on pages 134–135), her family (her cousin telling her she should open up to others,

give herself a kick, and stating that she is borderline asocial on pages 49–50), her neighbour (inviting her to his place under false pretences, forcibly kissing her, and calling her crazy on pages 70, 82–85), her co-workers (saying that Marguerite is a friendless loser who always looks upset on pages 21–22, not communicating clearly and then complaining that Marguerite doesn't understand on page 57), her hierarchy (her boss acknowledging her impeccable work but reproaching her for not having lunch with her co-workers, even though it's not part of her job on pages 26–27, the team leader telling her not to act stupid, not to dress like a perpetually immature teenager, and to make an effort on pages 58–59, and the Human Resources director giving a speech about inclusion and diversity when Marguerite mentions her recognition as a disabled worker, but ultimately explaining that nothing can be done, suggesting that if she wants to wear earplugs and noise-cancelling headphones, it should be outside office hours, and she has to adapt on pages 146–147), and professionals (arguing that she cannot be autistic because she makes eye contact and doesn't resemble an autistic person on pages 102–103 and 129). These experiences are echoed in all the remarks she encounters, as reported on page 132.

The word 'invisible' means 'unseeable' and 'not perceptible.' However, autism, in general, and particularly in Marguerite's story, is highly visible and perceptible (except for those who cannot or do not want to see it or who are incapable of seeing beyond the occasionally inadequate prism of certain standardised clinical tools). Hans Asperger himself explained that autism is clearly evident in an intimate (understood as 'personal') relationship with the autistic individual and that the use of standardised tools is futile (1982). He described autistic children as having strong introspection, great creativity, extensive knowledge in one or more domains, and high intelligence (in terms of exceptional abilities, more so than intellectual quotient, as described by Dr. Dachez on page 195). Thus, it is not that autism is or would be invisible; rather, society does not always understand what autism is and tends to label a different person as 'weird' or 'deviant,' ostracising them instead of questioning the biases of perceiving difference, which is seen only through a pathological and pathologizing filter and through the lens of cinematic clichés. Society should instead contemplate how to create a livable and pleasant society for everyone.

In conclusion, Dr. Dachez's book deals with an anthropological question about the place of humans and differences in our world, more so than a medical and clinical question or autism in women. It tells the story of Marguerite, a sensitive, thoughtful, and empathetic autistic person (and I deliberately use the gender-neutral form) who tries to adapt. Marguerite willingly offers her hand sanitiser to the baker on page 150, makes an effort to accompany her partner to a party and on a weekend trip on pages 39 and 89, and tries to visit her cousin at her home despite the deafening noise of the children on page 49. She socialises in her own way (selectively, as Sukhareva noted regarding autistic girls) and can work with respectful individuals, both autistic and non-autistic (pages 171 and 176). By offering a nuanced perspective on autism and media representation, this comic book contributes to the existing literature and calls for a more inclusive understanding of autism in society. It underscores the anthropological significance of accepting and accommodating alterity, advocating for a society that promote living together and accessibility.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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<https://doi.org/10.1080/21504857.2024.2337357>

