



• RALPH JAMES SAVARESE •

SEE IT FEELINGLY

Classic Novels, Autistic Readers,
and the Schooling of
a No-Good English Professor

"Impassioned and persuasive . . . A fresh and absorbing
examination of autism."—*Kirkus Reviews*

Ittai Orr // In *See It Feelingly: Classic Novels, Autistic Readers, and the Schooling of a No-Good English Professor* (Duke Univ. Press, 2018), Ralph Savarese writes that literature is a kind of social medicine, that it represents a “way of restoring relation” (193). There is no better illustration of this power of literature—or rather, of a literary community—than Savarese’s own book, a richly researched and often self-deprecating account of the simple, joyful activity of reading literature and talking about it with a friend. That the independent variable happens to be the fact that his friends, including his son, with whom he reads *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, are autistic, only serves to strengthen his point: what emerges from his conversations is not only a generous and capacious exploration of how autists read or how to read autistically, but the overturning of many common assumptions about the emotional and cognitive deficits associated with autism, such that an integrated community can no longer be understood as a farfetched fantasy. Savarese shows that literature—

with its imagery, inclusivity, and rich detail—is a natural tent pole for a truly neurodiverse community, one populated by autists and neurotypicals alike.

One particularly valuable feature of this literary study is that Savarese does not hide behind a veil of scholarly sureness; he instead dramatizes at every turn the uncertainties he grapples with as he listens to and absorbs the responses of his fellow readers. He allows himself to be the student, a fact that quickly does away with his claim to be a “no-good English professor.” The best teachers are life-long-learners. Like Chaplin lost in the fog of war in the opening scene of *The Great Dictator*, Savarese finds himself in the trenches of minoritizing and then universalizing discourses, bibliotherapists and neuroqueer academics, emerging disoriented in the ranks of medical researchers and plasticity evangelists. Then it’s off in an airplane with the cognitive and evolutionary literary critics who may forget who he is after they crash land together. This promiscuity is really the most honest response to the multidisciplinary conversation around neurological difference: talking about autism is not easy or straightforward, particularly because it is not just one thing. Because nothing these days can be true until there’s a brain scan of it, particularly when it comes to autism, Savarese’s dance with neuroscience is understandable, and even helpful: I learned a lot, for example, about visual and spatial thinking, and the tendency for autists to rely on the posterior region of the brain, which is largely dedicated to sense processing. Nevertheless, the most profound lessons of this book—for example, that despite its clear advantages, the neurotypical impulse to generalize can be a failing—do not derive from experimentally-achieved generalizations or brain scans. They come from the autists themselves.

It is a well-known truism that when you meet one person with autism you’ve met exactly one person with autism, and the range of responses to literature in *See It Feelingly* is as wide as any sample of the non-autistic community would be. That said, some distinct similarities emerge from the five examples Savarese provides. In the first chapter, he reads *Moby Dick* with Tito Mukhopadhyay, a young man who had been nonverbal and considered on the more profound end of the (somewhat questionable) autistic spectrum before learning how to communicate with technological assistance and writing several books, including the groundbreaking *The Mind Tree* (2003). It is important to note that the act of reading and communicating was for several of Savarese’s interlocutors not a simple or straightforward task, sometimes involving several layers of mediation: one person types into a communication assistance device with one finger, another with two, and a third with all ten. Jamie, who reads Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony* with Savarese in chapter two, types and then reads aloud what he intends to say, and he thinks in spatial structures. As Savarese writes, “autism is a profoundly visuospatial intelligence” (70). Savarese identifies a shared tendency among autists to see the world in much higher definition than typicals. This attention to detail also extends to autists’ often fraught relationship with language: “they simply hear too much specificity,” as Savarese puts it. Tito’s response to the famous Mast-Head chapter in *Moby Dick*, in which the narrator Ishmael mans the crow’s-nest but forgets his duty to seek for whales, instead pondering, among other things, the incomprehensibility of nature, is a poem (poems, it turns out, provide many autists with a grounding rhythm that can order unruly thoughts), and it stands as a potent statement on Tito’s experience perched high atop his own crow’s-nest, failing to pay attention in a linguistic sea. It ends: “He asked me questions—maybe

one or two—/As I manned the mast-head but failed to pursue/Those shoals of meaning in a faraway blue.” “Up with the seagulls and the wind, clinging to that spar we call a human voice,” Savarese explains, “he once again struggled to make phonemes, but something mysterious and ennobling, he suggests, is at least the equal of semantic comprehension” (46-7). The two read the novel slowly, as if through a microscope, to the point that Savarese begins to understand the ubiquitous practice among literary scholars of “close reading” as synonymous with autistic reading.

Another moving feature of Tito’s engagement with *Moby Dick* is his identification with the tortured and slaughtered whales, including the titular white whale, which became for Tito a symbol of autism itself, vengefully hunted down by the organization Autism Speaks. This tendency to identify with animals is shared with other readers, for example Dora in chapter three lingers on the maligned electric sheep in Phillip K. Dick’s *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (the source material for *Blade Runner*), feeling sorry for the way Deckert treats it; meanwhile, in the fifth chapter, Temple Grandin ignores the misanthropic protagonist in Midge Raymond’s short story “The Ecstatic Cry” for the penguins that character studies. The affinity many autistics feel for animals and even things is reflected in neuroimaging studies, which show that they display similar responses to humans and non-humans, suggesting that contrary to their stereotype as emotionless, autists actually have a *superabundance* of sympathy related to their non-generalizing cognitive process. As Savarese acknowledges, Neurotypicals could learn a lot from such specific regard for the “more-than-human,” as Erin Manning puts it.

Tensions inherent to the neurodiversity movement bubble to the surface throughout the book—in chapter four, for example, Eugenie, who is autistic and mixed-race, grapples with the limits of identity politics when it comes to her autistic son, and only uses her status as autistic strategically. Despite this, she reports that “receiving a diagnosis came as a great relief.” When is it right to minoritize, and when is a label a burdensome construct? Although Savarese tends to celebrate autistic cognition, he is also astonished and delighted by his son DJ’s plasticity and capacity to adapt and change. Disappointed in Temple Grandin’s lack of empathy for the main characters of the stories they read together, Savarese realizes that his desire to romanticize autism turned him into one of the curative bad guys. In his words, “A legitimate critique of normativity should neither stand in the way of ‘rehabilitative’ efforts nor fetishize alterity, especially when doing so can end up being just another, covert sort of pity” (188). He therefore offers both an important corrective to what many assume about autists, showing for example how empathetic autists are beneath the veneer of stoicism—how much they can partake, with a little assistance, in that very human activity of reading and comprehending a good book—and at the same time, how autistic cognition vastly differs from and in some ways is better than that of neurotypicals, despite simultaneously representing serious challenges. The radical possibility this book ultimately offers is that the gap that has for so long existed between nonverbal autists and neurotypicals can be bridged through literature. Literature is, as Whitman said of himself, large, and contains multitudes.