

Angeline Schellenberg, *Tell Them It Was Mozart*.
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\$20.00

In her first full-length book, *Tell Them It Was Mozart*, Angeline Schellenberg reveals the effects of autism on relationships and family life mainly from the mother's point of view. The collection includes poems that reflect scientific knowledge of genetics, psychology (including the 2013 absorption of the Asperger's classification into the Autism spectrum), psychotropic drug side effects, a catalogue of famous people on the spectrum (Mozart composed music at age 5 and was diagnosed posthumously), and so on. Some poems have clinical titles like "Pain Threshold," or "Drug Trial," and numbered sequences have titles like "Autism for Dummies" and "Support Group."

There's plenty of information and documentation in this book, then, yet the poet conveys both facts and emotional insights with striking, sometimes raw, language and engaging formal play. Her free-verse poems are sometimes framed as single-stanza blurts, sometimes carefully constructed in open fields. The collection

includes prose poems, lists, monologues in several voices, dialogues, laments and odes, prayers and dreams. It is as if the extremity of the experience has driven her to seek linguistic strategies of all kinds. Throughout the collection, formal variation finally enacts and demonstrates the pleasures of difference while challenging notions of the normal or ordinary.

Erasure, a poetic treatment of found documents, also called black-out or redaction poetry, is especially important in this collection. This technique may be as old as the Egyptians who scratched out the names of deceased enemies on their tombs in the belief that they could doom the person's soul in the afterlife, but contemporary poets have grabbed the censor's hand to make political commentary. Schellenberg transforms "Welcome to Holland," an allegorical poem by Emily Perl Kingsley that is often passed on to mothers when a child is diagnosed with a disability. Five redacted pieces of "Welcome to Holland" frame the collection, ultimately transforming the conventional text into unpredictable, even joyful, fragments. From the start, then, we see that family life with autism invariably skews off script and cannot be captured by a platitudinous narrative. This life can be intense and frustrating, the poet concedes, but she insists it is not without surprises and immediate pleasures, if we only look past received narratives and stereotypes.

Playful erasures start, conclude, and divide the book into three sections. Arranged chronologically, the collection opens with the speaker in a car with her parents and baby brother, praying "for Jesus to leap / from the Life is Precious sign / and save us from this / Tuesday errand. / Save us from each other." The next poem, titled simply "X", weaves information about the "fragile X" chromosome associated with "inherited mental delay" and autism together with details of the speaker's life, thereby establishing the context for the collection along with essential facts and the highest of personal stakes. Thus begins the journey of a speaker from a family with apparently disabled siblings, mindful of living under the shadow of the "fragile X" chromosome herself. She considers genetic testing, falls in love and marries, and inevitably gives birth to two extraordinary children whom we recognize as "the diminutive professor" and "the imaginative child."

The speaker candidly—sometimes heartbreakingly—renders desperate experiences of early motherhood that any mom will recognize. With wit and irony, she also chronicles episodes from life with children in a world unprepared to be of much help: the well-intentioned friend, the clueless expert, the punishing teacher, the one who recommends feeding the child vegan cheese. Finally,

we see the speaker reach the place that many of us reach, regardless of our circumstances: I'll love this kid and do my best, although that may not be enough, though in this case, even this basic expression of motherhood is complicated by the fact that the child cannot physically tolerate gestures of love or express affection. The collection is driven by an urgent sense of presence in the immediate moment, as well as the gradually unfolding narrative that tends toward love, acceptance, and gratitude. "I will write a poem about today / before today is lost forever."

Tell Them It Was Mozart presents both factual and emotional knowledge in the most immediate language, and this immediacy is its strength. In an age of "project books" that present poems drawn more from research and information than experience, this collection manages to place facts in the service of exploration, feeling, and emotional insight. Some readers will find it an important text for disability studies. I especially appreciate the poems that portray the world of mothers and children, a world that is often so intense and particular, so fraught with guilt, blame, and struggle, that it is difficult to render honestly at all. These poems gather fascinating and particular information, yet Schellenberg also writes from the poet's deepest sources – reflection, self-awareness, confession, observation, humour, and vision – to create a poetry of knowledge that is hard won, honest, quirky, and profound.

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