**Netflix, ABC Portrayals of Autism Still Fall Short, Critics Say**

Like a lot of kids in high school, Sam worries that he doesn’t fit in.

“I’m a weirdo. That’s what everyone says,” declares the 18-year-old character at the center of Netflix’s new dramatic comedy series [**Atypical**](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ieHh4U-QYwU).

One reason Sam struggles to fit in: He has autism. As his character explains at the start of the first episode, sometimes he doesn’t understand what people mean when they say things. And that makes him feel alone, even when he’s not.

Sam’s family in Atypical is thrown in all sorts of new directions by his quest to date and find a girlfriend. Creator **[Robia Rashid](https://www.imdb.com/name/nm1968720/)** says she wanted to tell a different kind of coming-of-age story, inspired by recent increases in autism diagnoses.

“There are all these young people now who are on the [**spectrum**](https://medlineplus.gov/autismspectrumdisorder.html), who know … they’re on the spectrum,” she says. “And [they] are interested in things that every young person is interested in … independence and finding connections and finding love.”

On-screen depictions of autism have come a long way since Dustin Hoffman’s portrayal of Raymond Babbitt in the 1988 Oscar-winning film [**Rain Man**](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mlNwXuHUA8I&list=PLisCa6uoS1slRD9vwNw4I7wqEgmItLzLt&index=134).

Hoffman’s Babbitt focused obsessively on watching The People’s Court and getting served maple syrup before his pancakes. He could also memorize half the names in a phone book in one reading and count the number of toothpicks on the floor, moments after they spilled out of the box.

For Atypical, Rashid says she researched accounts of adults with autism, has several parents of autistic children working in her crew and hired an actor with autism to play a minor role.

Still, some critics say Atypical presents some troubling images despite its good intentions. Mickey Rowe, an actor who has autism, says that because the show doesn’t have any writers, producers or actors in major roles with the disorder, it can feel like the series is allowing people without autism to make fun of people with it.

“The motto of the autistic community is ‘Nothing about us, without us,’ ” Rowe says. “There is such a long history of other people making decisions of behalf of autistic people and deciding what’s best for their well-being and how to represent them to the world.”

Rowe, who [**has written about the show**](http://www.teenvogue.com/story/netflix-atypical-autism-representation) for Teen Vogue magazine, was troubled by a scene played for laughs, where Sam wears headphones in public to cut down on sensory overload. He also criticized another moment when Sam is shown frightening a girl because he doesn’t quite know how to smile comfortably.

And he’s not the only critic with concerns.

“The audience is basically laughing at [Sam] being autistic,” says Elizabeth Bartmess, a writer and editor with autism who has written often about [**how autistic characters are depicted in literature**](http://disabilityinkidlit.com/2015/04/14/writing-autistic-characters-behaviorizing-vs-humanizing-approaches/).

“That’s partly a problem because in real life, autistic people … get laughed at a lot for showing autistic traits,” she says. “He’s trying to make a facial expression that will look like the facial expressions that other people expect him to have. … It’s stressful, and it takes up a lot of energy and attention. And you’re always at risk of getting it wrong.”

Another show that Bartmess finds troubling is a new series debuting this fall on ABC called [**The Good Doctor**](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fYlZDTru55g). It’s centered on a surgical resident named Shawn Murphy who has autism and [**savant syndrome**](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2677584/). He’s highly skilled at medicine but struggles with social skills.

West Wing alum Richard Schiff plays the hospital president, fighting to convince a skeptical hospital board to hire Murphy.

“We hire Shawn, and we give hope to those people with limitations that those limitations are not what they think they are,” the character shouts during a board meeting as inspiring music rises in the background. “They do have a shot!”

Still, because not all people with autism are savants like the character Hoffman portrayed in Rain Man, Bartmess takes a different message from that moment.

“That’s basically saying the only way that you can get to have a job and keep a job is to be this incredible, super-powered autistic person that you can’t be, because almost no one is,” she says. “That’s kind of the opposite of inspiring.”

David Shore, executive producer of The Good Doctor, says the show argues against attitudes which keep people with disabilities from employment.

“People look at them and make judgments,” Shore says. “I hope this is part of a dialogue that gives rise to simply reducing prejudices right across the board and [being] open to … [the question of] what does it mean to be qualified? What does it mean to be a good doctor?”

Both Shore and Rashid say their characters aren’t meant to be symbols for every person with autism.

But with so few autistic characters on TV, the few who do appear on-screen often become symbols, whether the creators intend it or not.