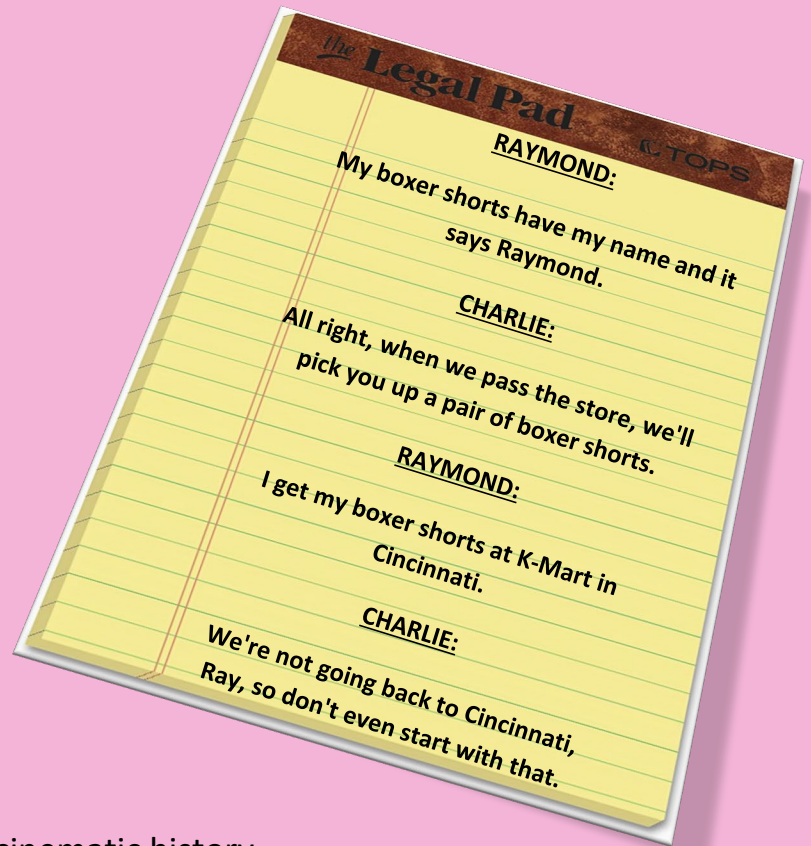


AUTISM

&

POP CULTURE



The above dialogue is etched in cinematic history.

Rain Man, the highest grossing film of 1988 tells the story of actor Tom Cruise's character, Charlie, and his road trip adventure with his autistic savant brother, Raymond, played by Dustin Hoffman.

The film went on to win four Oscars and thrust autism spectrum disorder (ASD) into mainstream pop culture in the United States.

"I think *Rain Man* did a great job in calling attention to autism and humanizing the diagnosis," said Amanda Tipkemper, education and autism services director at The Children's Home. "It was a springboard for making it part of the national vernacular, but it also created a stereotype that all people with autism are savants, which is not the case at all.



Melissa Grondin, (r) lead associate principal at the Heidt Center of Excellence, assists a student in one of the state-of-the-art classrooms at the Heidt Center campus. Grondin says despite the talents of many actors who depict characters with autism, there is no substitution for those living with the diagnosis daily.

Raymond in *Rain Man* was based on a man named Kim Peek, who was a real-life savant and who had several traits emulated by Hoffman in the film. Peek did not actually have a diagnosis of autism, but had congenital brain abnormalities that resulted in his differences.

“I think pop culture is doing an admirable job in broadcasting autism as something that’s real and should not be shied away from,” Tipkemper said. “But, there’s also a danger of lumping all people on the spectrum together. The reality is that no two people with ASD are alike. There really is no singular way to depict autism.”

One current character TV show that does a great job in depicting autism in a specific character is *Sesame Street*, says Melissa Grondin, lead associate principal at the Heidt Center of Excellence by The Children’s Home.

“In fact,” she said, “about 10 percent of people with ASD are recognized savants. Within the general population, savants make up only about one percent of people.”

“An autistic savant can be characterized as someone who possesses extraordinary abilities, usually within a specific area,” said Dr. Joe Rieman, medical director of The Children’s Home. “These people usually exhibit a laser-like focus onto a subject and their capabilities within that subject manifest into almost otherworldly skills and aptitudes.”

Dr. Rieman said these topic areas often include, but are certainly not limited to, subjects in music, art, calendar calculating, math and others.



Autism rates are steadily increasing in Cincinnati. According to the Autism Society of Greater Cincinnati, over 7,600 of the more than 35,000 students attending Cincinnati Public Schools have special needs, including autism.



Sesame Street’s Julia is a recurring character on the show with autism. Heidt Center of Excellence experts say the show does a great job illustrating autism to their audience.

“The show has identified Julia as a character with autism right away and up front,” she said. “While they illustrate some traits that are common to autism, like communication challenges and reacting adversely to unexpected stimuli, they also demonstrate she is unique and that she has positive interactions with her friends.”

Grondin said she would like to see an increase of actors with autism portray characters with the diagnosis.



Melissa Grondin, lead associate principal at the Heidt Center of Excellence, and one of her students working on a STEM project. While movies have made autism part of mainstream pop culture, she says she'd like to see an increase of actors with autism play characters with the diagnosis.

“Characters depicted by people with autism gives a breath of authenticity to the story,” she said. “As talented as any actor might be, there’s no substitution for not being able to ‘turn off’ autism if you live with it every day.”

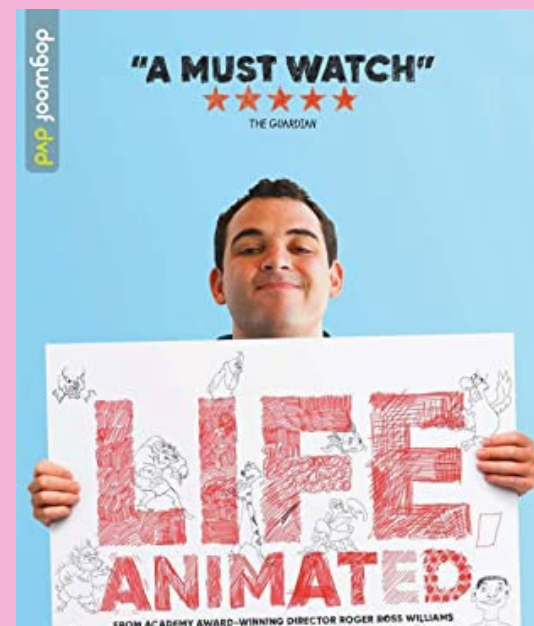
Tipkemper agreed.

“It’s encouraging to see characters in movies or on TV that are beginning to show the diversity of the diagnosis,” she said. “Most people with autism are not the brilliant teen trauma surgeon. Not everyone is the troubled youth who bangs his head against the wall so hard he causes repeated concussions either. Good, authentic depictions of autism can be a catalyst for increasing acceptance, improving understanding, and creating empathy for people on the spectrum, their caregivers, and the educators who live with ASD daily.”



Atypical. The 2017 series has three seasons so far and character Sam Gardner, played by actor Keir David Peters Gilchrist, is portrayed as having autism. The show is about a college-aged Sam who navigates college, dating, family and work. While actor Gilchrist does not have autism, *Atypical* has featured autistic supporting characters and writers.

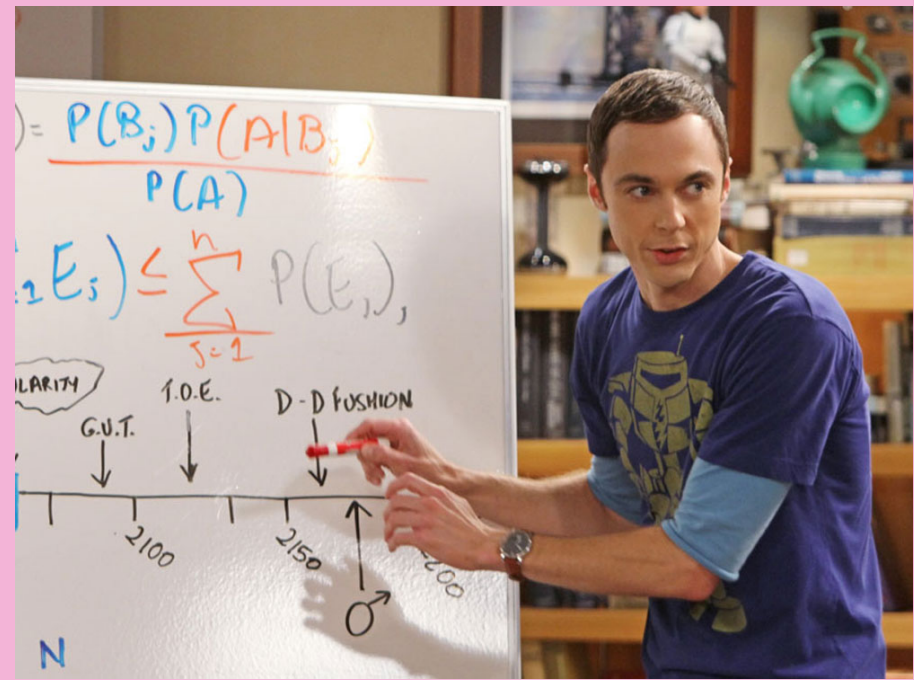
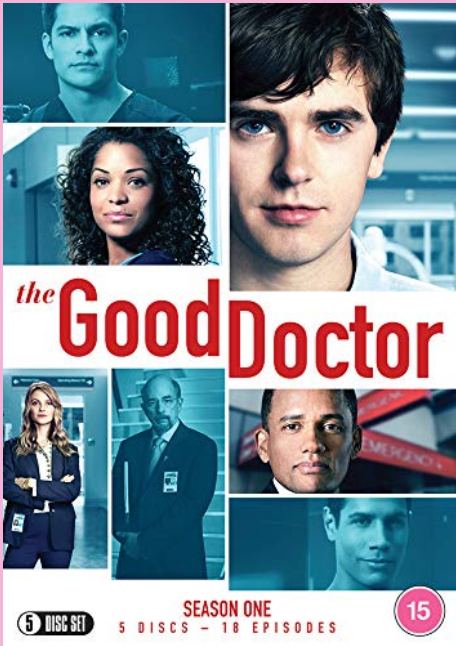
Life Animated. A 2016 documentary based on the story of Owen Suskind. Owen struggles with autism and learned to communicate with the outside world through his love of Disney films. The film has received mostly favorable reviews and won several awards.



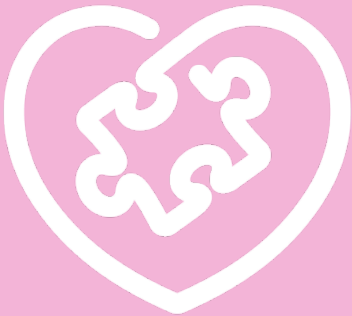


The Accountant. This 2016 stars Ben Affleck who portrays a certified public accountant named Christian Wolff with autism who is a math savant. As a child, the character is trained in martial arts and the stoic philosophy by his career military father. The movie's storyline follows Wolff as he works for criminal organizations uncovering internal fraud and eventual having to defend himself against hitmen and crime bosses. The movie received mix reviews although some reviewers called the film a vehicle to "give autistic kids their own superhero."

The Good Doctor. This series began airing in 2017 and is currently in its fourth season. The main character is Shaun Murphy, an autistic savant surgeon who works at a San Jose, Calif. Hospital. The story depicted in the show has received positive reviews, but some critics have pointed out that The Good Doctor illustrates that people with ASD can only benefit society if they are savants.



The Big Bang Theory. The remarkably popular sitcom ran from 2007 – 2019 and central to the show was fan favorite Dr. Sheldon Copper, played by Jim Parsons. Many fans, scientists, and advocates within the ASD community have related the character exhibits classic indications of Asperger's syndrome. In fact, actor Jim Parson's once said that, in his opinion, Sheldon Cooper "couldn't possibly display more traits" of Asperger's. However, the series writers maintained that Sheldon did not, from a specific storyline element, have a diagnosis related to autism or Asperger's syndrome.



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