

## Multimedia

### 'Autism in Love' Review

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**Abstract:** This article provides a review of the documentary film *Autism in Love* by Matt Fuller, a film that profiles the romantic lives of four people affected by Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). In addition to an overview of the basic themes of the movie, the review also contains excerpts of an interview with the film's director.

**Keywords:** autism, film, documentary

*Autism in Love* is the portrait of four very different people and their unique searches for romantic love. One of the only things uniting these very different individuals is that their lives are affected by ASD. Their varied stories are revealed in a series of interviews drawn from a year first-time director Matt Fuller spent listening to them reveal their most personal experiences with love.

Through these often remarkably revealing interviews we learn that, at least for some of them, it appears their greatest challenge in finding and keeping love has been navigating the stigma of ASD. Two interviewees, Lindsey (a woman in a committed relationship) and Lenny (a single young man in his 20s) share their devastation from being made to feel “worthless” by others because of the stigma of their diagnosis. While Lindsey was eventually able to overcome this pain (but not forget it), in the course of the film, Lenny continues to struggle with these feelings. For him, his diagnosis seems to make what he sees as society's already impossible ideals of manhood even more unattainable.

While the film presents some unique challenges for those affected by ASD, the overall focus is on what is common to all who love and seek to love. This includes the importance of having larger networks of support: in the case of Stephen (a married man) we see how essential larger familial networks are for sustaining his marriage. Similarly, the young couple depicted (Lindsey and David) were able to meet in the first place because of a larger support network through which they were introduced at a conference on autism. We also see how essential these support networks are by seeing their absence in the life of Lenny, who seems to struggle to find such networks.

Focusing in on such basic, shared needs was a central aim of the film project. Speaking with RDS, director Matt Fuller notes that “we said very early on, if when you're watching this movie [and] you forget you're watching a movie about people with autism, but rather a story about people pursuing love, then we've done our job.”

With this in mind, the film also seeks to address some stereotypes people may hold about those affected by ASD and their ability to love. The interviewee Stephen, both in his appearance and speech, has at least superficial similarities to Dustin Hoffman's character with ASD in the popular 2000 film *Rainman*. Despite these similarities (e.g., an apparent affective disorder coupled with unusual cognitive abilities—for example, Stephen is shown naming a random day of the week 15 years ago), Stephen is presented as someone, who despite considerable challenges, is capable of sustaining a long-term committed relationship.

Hoffman's character in *Rainman*, on the other hand, like many characters with disabilities in films, is essentially portrayed as an asexual being, someone wholly disinterested in (or incapable of) the physical comfort of others. This is surely one of the most significant contributions of the film: it reminds viewers, especially those who do not identify as disabled, of the simple obvious truth that those affected by ASD remain sexual and romantic beings, an obvious truth rarely addressed in film.

The initial concept for creating such a film that might demonstrate 'love on the spectrum' came from *Autism in Love*'s Executive Producer Ira Heilveil. A clinical psychologist, Heilveil was hoping to help create a film to answer a persistent question he hears from anxious parents of children with ASD: *will my child be able to experience one of the most meaningful parts of adult life; will my child be able to grow to have a loving, romantic relationship?*

Director Mat Fuller's rich portraits of Stephen, Lenny, and David & Lindsey and their unique journeys towards love surely answers this. At the same time, the moving film ultimately leaves us with more questions than answers. For instance, what kinds of support (direct and intangible) do people affected by ASD need? How may parents' beliefs (and fears) about their children's abilities, even if well intended, cause young people pain or even limit their own concepts of their own capabilities? How may we best leverage a diagnosis to provide support? And, finally, how might all of these questions be considered in a way that best invites those meeting challenges to recognize their own self-worth and limitless capacity for love?

-R.R.

*Autism in Love*

Documentary

Run time 1hr:16mins

Educational Distributor: GOOD DOCS

Contact info: [www.gooddocs.net](http://www.gooddocs.net)

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**Raphael Raphael** is a film and media scholar whose most recent work, *Transnational Horror Cinema: Bodies of Excess and the Global Grotesque* (with Sophia Siddique), looks at intersections of the horror genre, disability and trauma across borders. Other writing includes *Transnational Stardom: International Celebrity in Film and Popular Culture* (2013) with Russell Meeuf and contributions to the *Encyclopedia of American Disability History* and Modern Language Association's *Teaching Film* (2012). His scholarship is also informed by his own practice as digital artist.

### References

Fuller, M. (Director), & Heilveil, I. (Writer). (2015). *Autism in Love* [Documentary]. United States: The InSight Picture Company.