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**LATE**  
**BLOOMER**  
HOW AN  
AUTISM  
DIAGNOSIS  
CHANGED  
MY LIFE  
**CLEM**  
**BASTOW**

*Hardie Grant*

BOOKS

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## CONTENTS

Author's Note	vii
Introduction	1
Well, How Did I Get Here?	4
A Brief History	18
An Amazing Secret	29
Sensory Overload	48
Walk the Dinosaur	61
Fear Response	71
Who You Gonna Call?	79
Happy Meals	93
The Fall of the Apple Worm Bank	108
The Undiscovered Country	134
A Zero-Sum Game	143
Dear Dolly Doctor ...	153
Buck's Fizz	162
Singled Out	169
A Certain Type of Man	184
I Love L.A.	195
They Go to Bed With Gilda, They Wake Up With Rain Man	205
Higher and Higher	215
You Can Go Home Again	223
Epilogue: #ActuallyAutistic	233
Endnotes	256
Acknowledgements	260



## AUTHOR'S NOTE

You will notice that, outside of direct quotes from other writers, I capitalise the 'a' in Autism. This is a personal choice, reflecting the importance of Autism to my identity and sense of community, though it's a choice that many others make also. In capitalising Autistic and Autism, I am recognising that this is not just a 'condition', but a community and a culture.

I also use identity-first language rather than person-first (except where it would clash with someone's personal preference, or where an alternative is used within a quotation): 'Autistic person' rather than 'person *with* Autism'. Again, this is a personal choice, though it is also one that is increasingly prevalent among Autistic people. I use identity-first language to reflect the fact that Autism is an important part of my identity. I may have been recently 'diagnosed with Autism', but I have been Autistic since birth.

Person-first language is often preferred by parents of Autistic children, and by some clinicians and therapists who work with Autistic people, due to concerns that their child or charge will be unduly stigmatised by identity-first language. I understand that this comes from a place of care, and from a desire to protect. However, while the intention is to affirm the person, the separation of their 'condition'

suggests there is nothing about Autism that could contribute to that person's worth. Identity-first language, on the other hand, believes that a person has worth *because of* their Autistic identity, not in spite of it.

Any use of functioning labels – ‘high functioning’ and ‘low functioning’ – outside of direct historical quotes will be placed in inverted commas. To many in the Autistic community, functioning labels are unhelpful at best and slurs at worst. ‘Low functioning’ denies agency (such as the notion that a person is incapable of communication simply by virtue of being unable to speak), and ‘high functioning’ prevents access to supports. Some Autistic people choose to self-identify as ‘high functioning’ as a point of pride, or to distance themselves from Autistic people with higher or more complex support needs; this book is probably not for them. Similarly, ‘nonspeaking’ is used where ‘nonverbal’ might once have been expected. This is because nonverbal implies that a person has no forms of symbolic language, whereas nonspeaking simply means they do not use speech to communicate. The vocalisations that a nonspeaking person may make, while they are not ‘words’, are still vibrant and valid forms of intentional communication.

The neologism ‘neurotypical’ is used to refer to people who experience, as queer Autistic scholar Dr Nick Walker puts it, ‘a style of neurocognitive functioning that falls within the dominant societal standards of “normal”’. It doesn’t mean ‘non-Autistic’, but rather, is the opposite of ‘neurodivergent’. While humanity as a whole is neurodiverse, a person is neurodivergent. There are multiple types of innate neurodivergence, such as dyslexia and ADHD; my experience of neurodivergence is one of Autism. There is a lot of overlap between the Neurodiversity Movement and the Autism Rights Movement, but they are not quite the same thing.

Where I have mentioned a study of Autism, I have provided citations in endnotes. This is an act of academic accountability, but it is also political: it is a way to demonstrate, however subtly, that the

Autistic person is so often viewed as an object, not a subject. There is a reference list at the end of the book, which provides both broader context and further reading for anyone who is keen to go deeper, but I have tried to avoid extensive endnotes, if only to pretend, for one brief, shining moment, that I'm not a complete nerd. My reading of any studies (etc.) was based on what was current during the writing process, but Autism research is a dynamic field.

I could never hope to address every possible way Autism has manifested in my life (nor how it might manifest in others'), so there may be some 'typical' Autistic experiences, behaviours or 'symptoms' that you are surprised to find don't get a look-in here. It may be that you read this book and think, 'Hey, what gives? I thought this was a book about Autism?' Well, it is and it isn't: it's the story of an Autistic person's life, written by that Autistic person. Some of it may be hard to read; indeed, some of it was hard to write. But I have been honest in my account of my life's ups and downs as they intersect with my Autism because, as Autistic Self Advocacy Network co-founder Ari Ne'eman has put it, 'By being proudly Autistic in our moments of excellence as well as our moments of struggle, we help to change the public image of Autism and tell the world that we have much to offer.'

Online reviews of so-called 'Autism memoirs' often seem perplexed that these books do not involve the experiences of others throughout, as though one might pick up the memoirs of Noël Coward and come away disappointed that the book didn't go into great depths about the life of Gertrude Lawrence. For the most part, *Late Bloomer* concerns my own experience, though I have included the voices of other Autistic people to convey a sense of the diversity of experiences within the Autism spectrum. Some readers may see echoes of their own experience in mine – indeed, I hope they do! That's the nature of Autism; sometimes our Venn diagrams collide – but I can only speak for myself. To give some sense of this diversity, I have included a chapter of short interviews that offer some insight into the lived experiences of

a number of Autistic people I know. Some of their experiences are very similar to mine, and some are very different.

Every day I am inspired by and learn from the young Autistic people around me. Their self-actualisation astounds me; not having had that roadmap of earlier diagnosis and support, I can only look back on my life and consider the ways in which my strengths and challenges were intertwined with my Autism. In this way, *Late Bloomer* is not a memoir in a traditional sense, nor is it always chronological; to write and remember in neat order would be to deny the nature of my Autistic personhood.

Now get in my spaceship and let's go back in time.



## INTRODUCTION

‘Fucking *asps*.’

Even though it takes, on average, probably about fifteen seconds to ascend from the Melbourne Central food court to Hoyts Cinemas, this might be the longest escalator ride I’ve ever taken; it’s like someone has welded me to the step. I can see his words floating in the air before me, like they’re in a speech bubble: ‘Fucking *asps*.’

It’s 25 July 2018, and I’m here to see a movie

on a date?

just catching up??

being friends???

with a guy

I like?

who had subpar sex with me once so thus should probably be the recipient of my other free ticket to *Mission: Impossible – Fallout*???

I’m not sure I do actually like but now it’s too late oh god

I want to go home

and he’s just gone on a tear about his painful day at work, because I asked – as I have been led to believe a good Human Woman should ask, on a date or otherwise – how his day was. His store was not,

in case you were wondering, overrun by small snakes: ‘asps’ is how he refers to ‘Aspies’, or people with Asperger syndrome, or Autism Spectrum Disorder, or Autism, who are evidently overrepresented in the clientele of the pop culture store he works at.

These ‘fucking *asps*’ evidently had the temerity to ask for ... things they wanted to buy? From a shop where things are available to buy? (I’m trying to keep up.) At this point it’s becoming clear that I, too, have been confused about the rules of engagement in pop-cultural retail for some time. ‘Ha ha,’ I laugh, ‘yeah ...’. I stare somewhere off into the distance at a smear of bain-marie lemon chicken on the floor of the food court, wishing that Tom Cruise would come crashing through the Shot Tower and hold this dude down while I roundhouse kick him in the face (the dude, not Tom; I’d never do that to Tom).

I wonder how long it takes for Tom to start running in this movie?

he’s so good at running

I wish running didn’t hurt my knees

As the escalator grinds skywards I start wondering what I’m doing here: why did I give this guy my +1 to see the film that one of my favourite critics described as ‘like watching the most intense man on Earth compete in a relentless foot race against his own demons’ when I could have brought literally anyone else? Why, in fact, did we have sex in 2013 in my suite at the Town & Country San Diego, where there are ‘beautiful roses everywhere you look!’ (©TripAdvisor), when I would have been better off looking at said roses or visiting the ice machine or ordering room service or doing literally anything other than having ho hum sex with a guy I’m pretty sure had mistaken my bumhole for my vagina and who I will discover, six years later, refers to Autistic people as ‘asps’ with acidity so cutting it takes my breath away?

Speaking of acidity, whenever he speaks I can smell bile on his breath, and I’m not sure if the smell is actually coming out of his mouth

(he's still talking), or if my brain is doing that thing where it can't understand a particularly *live* metaphor as anything other than scientific reality; ergo, to say something with bile; ergo, to literally smell bile when someone says something mean. Then *I* feel mean for thinking this. Be more empathetic, Clem, maybe he vomited from nerves before he got here; maybe he has an eating disorder; maybe he has one of those rare stomach issues that typically appear around the midpoint of an *ER* episode when a guest character presents with hiccups that won't go away and it turns out they have a one in a million type of fatal diverticulitis.

in Year 8 I became so obsessed with *ER* that I decided I wanted to be a doctor

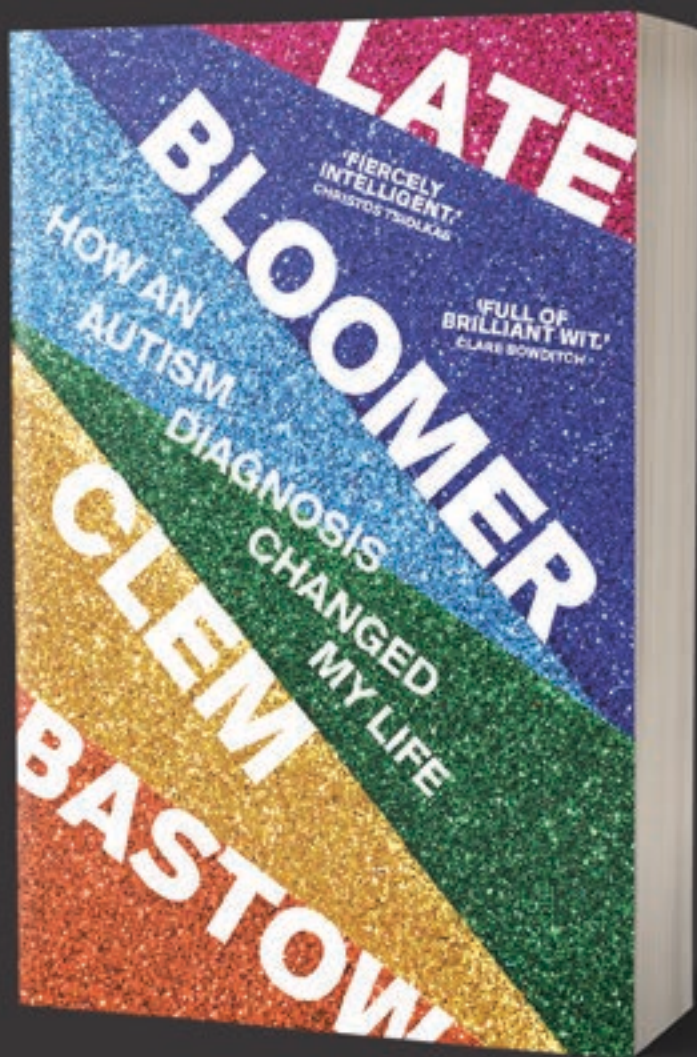
in Year 8 I was so bad at maths that my teacher asked my parents if there had been a death in the family; she couldn't comprehend how else a student could be both so catastrophically bad at maths and so evidently uninterested in improving this situation

later in Year 8 I discovered that you had to be good at maths to study medicine

Dating has always been difficult for me – the small talk, the existential confusion, the looming threat of post-coital Cronenbergian body horror – but I'm struck at this moment by how paralysed I feel, as though I'm being sucked into the escalator, living out my vivid childhood fear of being vacuumed into the gap at the top where the steps disappear into the void. But this is different. 'Fucking *asps*,' he says, and the rest of his words go all fuzzy, like those trombone noises the grown-ups make in *Charlie Brown*, because at that very moment I am in the process of investigating whether I, myself, am also an 'asp'.

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