

Finally Autistic: Finding My Autism Diagnosis as a Middle-Aged Female

By Theresa Werba

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reviewed by Andrew Benson Brown

Finally Autistic: Finding My Autism Diagnosis as a Middle-Aged Female is a revealing portrait of one woman's lifelong struggle with autism.

As someone who worked in mental health for nearly a decade, I can testify that this memoir shows a level of insight and awareness that many people with mental health issues struggle to achieve, and never find. Werba herself groped towards awareness after being misdiagnosed for years, and admits to still struggling with the underlying emotional and behavioral issues that come with an Autism Level 1 diagnosis. As she put it, "Why, with grey hairs abounding, do I still have problems when people ask me, 'How are you?'"

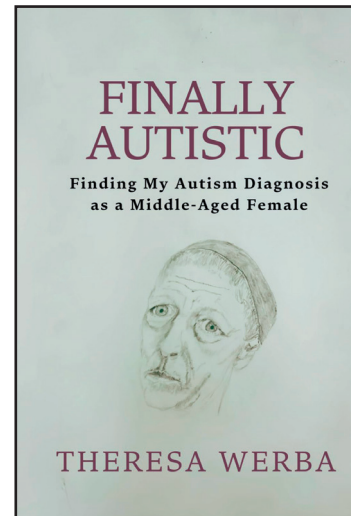
Calling it a memoir is not entirely accurate. It is more of an autobiographical case study.

Werba's personal reflections and anecdotes are firmly rooted in data: an autism assessment, school report cards that highlight her "unsatisfactory" levels of self-control, and even developmental reports from when she was in preschool (all reproduced in full within these pages). Her blending of subjective reflections with objective data points make this a unique work.

This is not Werba's first go at autobiographical writing. She is also the author of *Warning Signs of Abuse: Get Out Early and Stay Free Forever* (2015), and *When Adoption Fails: Abuse, Autism, and the Search for My Identity* (2001). Even further back, as she tells us in the pages of this book, she wrote her first autobiography in second grade: "I was 'a baby that cried a lot,'" she tells us.

Theresa Werba's life story is fascinating in the worst possible way. "Childhood was difficult, challenging, painful, and even sad for me," she writes. Born of a teenage sex worker, adopted by members of a religious cult who abused her, getting in constant trouble at school, self-harming as an adolescent, struggling to hold jobs as an adult, being disinherited by her adoptive mother, living in an abusive marriage to a drug addict: these experiences are superficially similar to those of many who end up on the wrong side of the criminal justice system, or in a psychiatric institution.

Somehow, though, Werba did not end up like so many others. Quite the opposite, in fact — she became a successful classical singer and poet. She had a litter of children, all of who are successful today. In short, she beat the odds.



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How? Well, as she described it, things got better for her “as I developed the ability to ‘mask’ — the face I learned to put on when singing and in social activity.” Interestingly, she attributes her successful masking to her identity as an artist, since eccentric behavior is tolerated more in this social type. Her talent for singing music and performing poetry, she tells us, turned out to be her “saving grace.” It not only provided her with a creative outlet, but allowed her to communicate with an audience in socially acceptable ways.

My own familiarity with Werba, prior to reading this book, was through poetry. She is a widely acknowledged master of formal lyric verse, one of the best sonneteers writing today. Reading her published work or watching her perform, one would not have any idea that she struggles with neurodivergence, and most who know her from this world remain ignorant of the fact. I’ve known her for several years now myself and had no idea about any of this until a few months ago. Her masking, as she put it, has “led to many close friendships throughout my life, as well as more lovers and entanglements than I care to remember.”

I read this book in one sitting, unable to put it down. I think this, in part, has to do with humankind’s addiction to *schadenfreude*: while it is illuminating and usually sad, it is also entertaining in a tragicomic sort of way. Werba chronicles, in detail, all the jobs she was fired from for behavioral issues that affected her performance, as well as social situations that wrecked many of her personal relationships.

One disastrous social situation highlights the book’s instructive and entertaining aspects. Once while substitute teaching for a Kindergarten class, Werba decided to bring some historical context to a reading of “The Night Before Christmas.” Conditioned by her religious beliefs to believe that presenting fairy tales as truth was bad, she told the children about the real Saint Nicholas, saying that he died in the 4th century. This somehow turned into children going home and telling their parents that “Teacher said Santa Claus is dead,” which turned into a teacher’s visit to the principal’s office, which turned into an interview with a local news station. “I ended up getting hate mail from all over the country,” Werba said. This in addition to being fired from substitute teaching at that school.

The explanation she gives for her behaviors here could well stand in for every situation in the book: “I was rigid and inflexible when confronted with this dilemma and I could not see any nuanced resolution to my problem.” This is, in a nutshell, how people with Autism Level 1 deal with the world.

In uncovering the roots of her “rigid and inflexible” nature, Werba highlights the surprising connection between autism and religion. She partly attributes her early lack of proper diagnosis to living in a conservative Anabaptist community and the black-and-white thinking this engendered. “My one-minded obsessive thinking could be interpreted as religious fervor,” she writes, observing that people with autism are prone to being drawn towards fundamentalism, “and even cults.”

Werba does not go into much detail about her years in a fundamentalist religious community or her abusive marriage, events she has previously recorded in *When Adoption Fails* and *Warning Signs of Abuse*. While this

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would no doubt make for more fascinating reading, she stays focused on the topic of neurodivergence and only relates life events directly relevant to her autism.

A chapter that describes being wrongly classified as having bipolar disorder goes into the horrors of misdiagnosis. During a particularly difficult time when the responsibilities of life were overwhelming her, Werba's psychiatrists placed her on a bevy of medications she shouldn't have been on. She was largely bedridden for five years.

Werba remained misdiagnosed for three decades, into her early fifties. Eventually it was a relative, not a medical professional, who first noticed that Werba was probably not bipolar. After reading about autism in a psych 101 textbook, her daughter-in-law told her son, "this sounds like your mom."

"Bulls**t," said Theresa when her son brought it up. "I am bipolar with anxiety. I don't have autism."

She slowly came around to the idea, though, and "welled with tears" when receiving the results of her 2015 autism assessment. "I was glad and sad at the same time," she writes.

The book ends on an inspiring note. Since being properly diagnosed, she has been living her best life: tracking down her Jewish biological father, studying Hebrew and exploring Judaism, publishing numerous books of poetry, and living independently.

Finally Autistic is good source for professionals researching this area. More generally, it is useful for anyone seeking to understand people with this diagnosis. Above all, it is a window into the mind of a great artist.



Theresa Werba was diagnosed with Level 1 Autism in 2015 at the age of 53. She is the author of eight books, four in poetry, including the newly-released *Finally Autistic: Finding My Autism Diagnosis as a Middle-Aged Female* and *What Was and Is: Formal Poetry and Free Verse*. Werba holds a Bachelor of Arts in vocal music performance from Skidmore College and a Master of Music with distinction in voice pedagogy and performance from Westminster Choir College. Her poetic work ranges from forms such as the ode and sonnet to free verse, with topics ranging from neurodivergence, love, loss, aging, to faith and disillusionment and more. She also writes on autism, adoption and abuse/domestic violence. Find Theresa Werba at www.theresawerba.com and on social media @thesonnetqueen.