ForeWord Reviews

FAMILY & RELATIONSHIPS

Siblings and Autism: Stories Spanning Generations and Cultures
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Editors Debra L. Cumberland and Bruce Mills have compiled a moving collection of sixteen narratives by authors growing up with siblings who have autism. Cumberland, whose brother is autistic, and Mills, the parent of a "neurotypical" as well as an autistic child, present readers with a series of sensitively written memoirs from the US, Britain, China, and India that tell personal stories of families affected by autism. These narratives, they note, "defy the tendency to construct simple tales of recovery or redemptive self-sacrifice," shining light instead on the impact of autism on siblings.

Throughout are echoes of pain, loss, and the experience of coping with difference. Debra Elder's "My Brother's Speaker" is about someone who has never spoken a word; "Visiting Becky," by Anne Barnhill, profiles a sister placed in a group home; and Ericka Nanes' "Family Resemblance" addresses the deeply existential questions that arise when a friend terminates her pregnancy after a blood test suggests neurological abnormalities.

Resilience also reverberates: "Our Family Has Two Hearts," by Helen McCabe and Chuan Wu, recounts the dual cultural differences of growing up in China in a family with two children, and is told by a younger sister who does not have autism. In "Life With Runi," Aparna Das brings humor and pathos to bear upon life with her autistic sister. "Autism Connects Us" has Matthew Belmonte reflecting on "turning outrageous fortune into something of value;" he asks, "Does my brother have autism because he was meant to show us something about humanity—perhaps to show me something that I can show you?"

There is much to recommend and to learn in this important collection of voices. In “This Night Will Pass,” Thomas Caramagno poetically reflects upon the development of his brother, whose family sought effective intervention and support: “Joe David has blossomed. As I look back over the years, I realize he had been slowly blossoming all along. It was I who underestimated him, and myself, for the capacity to find solace simply in being oneself.” May this memorable set of stories help others do likewise.

Pamela Harris Kaiser