

DISCUSSION GUIDE

Before Reading

1. Share any experiences, feelings, or associations that come to mind when you hear the word “autistic.”
2. What is your experience with autism?
3. How have you heard autism talked about in your life?

Prelude

1. For many, an official diagnosis is a privilege and a challenge to obtain. How have you or your loved ones journeyed toward self-understanding, whether or not that included an official diagnosis?
2. Bowman asks of his experience with meltdowns, “How could anyone expect to know what’s unfolding when you don’t know you’re autistic?” (14) How does framing these “emotional avalanches” as part of autism have the potential to change understanding and offer hope?
3. Bowman writes about the feelings of belonging that came with identifying himself with other autistics—particularly writers. Yet he also writes, “Those of us on the spectrum will always deal with loneliness and alienation” (30). How does the tension between belonging and alienation coexist in your life?

Why You Should Read This Book (and How)

1. Bowman writes, “There are no shortcuts to learning how to love your neighbor” (37). Can you think of a time when someone with good intentions tried to show you love but misunderstood what you actually needed?
2. If “attention is the form of love called for here” (38), then what are some practical ways you can love the autistic person in your life by paying closer attention to how their brain works?
3. What are some implications of seeing autism through the lens of a neurodiversity model rather than a pathology model?

Diversity and Dignity

1. Bowman talks about the need to hear from more autistic voices to “begin rounding out the national consciousness of what autism is” (47).
 - a. Why do you think there is such a narrow cultural understanding of autism?
 - b. What can be done to create a more welcoming environment for additional diverse voices to join in?

Speaking the Words

1. What has been your experience “speaking the words” to tell your story? Was it difficult, easy, or both? What factors made it so?
2. Bowman writes about the loss he experienced when sharing about his autism: “My admission was a kind of death: the death of a certain type of image I had wanted to project to the world” (51).
 - a. Autistics, in what ways have you felt the cost of sharing your story?
 - b. Others, in what ways have you noticed the cost that autistics experience when telling their story?
3. Autistics, have you felt pressure to educate people about autism while telling your story? Others, how can you facilitate discussion when autistics are sharing their story without placing on them the burden of educating you?

A Portrait of the Autist as a Young Man

1. Bowman writes, “My life as an undiagnosed autistic kid was tough and weird, but I got through it, and I even achieved my dream” (61).
 - a. Autistics, what support did you receive, or not receive, while growing up? What is your experience with dreaming and pursuing the future you want?
 - b. Family members and loved ones, have you been part of the process of supporting the autistic person in your life? What was that like?

The Neurodiversity Paradigm

1. Language is powerful, and the way we talk about autism has consequences. Share how you’ve experienced hurt through pathology language.
2. How did you react to the neurotypical syndrome parody in this chapter (69–70)?
3. Autistics, what is your preference in terms of identity-first (“autistic”) versus person-first (“she has autism”) language?
4. What might it look like for you to embrace the language of the neurodiversity paradigm in your sphere of influence?

Living Maps

1. In this chapter, Bowman is not explicitly talking about being autistic. Even so, how do you see “the autistic heart, mind, body, and spirit” (37) at work in this piece?
2. Bowman writes, “I wanted to learn how to love this place, to start seeing what it would require of me, and to begin shaping new routines and rituals that would soothe my days and nights” (81). Do you see any connection between learning about the place you’re in and caring for yourself?
3. Autistics, have you ever experienced an upheaval in your routines or comforts? Share about that experience.

4. How would you describe your feelings about the place where you live? In what ways have you experienced familiarity or discomfort based on where you are physically?

Autistic Culture Making

1. Autistics, what has culture-making or community involvement looked like for you? What challenges have you encountered?
2. Bowman shares about a time when he “catastrophized” and resigned from the board in a moment of being overwhelmed. Autistics, have you experienced moments like this?
3. Bowman talks about how he must “silence the voice that equates a nontraditional, autistic approach with a bad take, a half-hearted attempt, or an un-Christian pursuit” (99). What has helped you discern between a legitimate, healthy approach to serving your community and a lack of faithful effort?

Riding while Autistic

1. Bowman describes a motorcycle ride: “The sensory overload I experience . . . is powerful, but it is also soothing, as it occurs within a (mostly) predictable environment that I must honor and engage carefully” (105). Autistics, what forms of self-regulation and stimulation are most soothing and helpful to you?
2. The author equates being autistic to riding a motorcycle in the world. Does that metaphor help you better understand the autistic person in your life?

Autism and Church

1. Autistics, how have you experienced church or faith settings? What has helped you thrive? What has been difficult?
2. Autistics, how has your experience at church affected your personal faith?
3. A common saying in autistic circles is, “If you’ve met one autistic person . . . you’ve met one autistic person” (113). Bowman’s experience is not indicative of every autistic’s experience in the church. Even so, what are some takeaways from his story that you can apply to cultivating a more welcoming environment in your own church?
4. What is at stake in the church’s witness to the world in how it welcomes autistics?

Shining like the Sun

1. Reflect on a time you saw the beauty in someone who was different from you.
2. Bowman writes of his experience at the lake in Kentucky, saying, “In those moments, we belonged: we ‘could not be alien to one another’ even though a few of us were total strangers” (117). Have you had moments when you experienced God in community outside a traditional church setting?

Service and the Spectrum

1. How did this chapter broaden or challenge your view of what service should look like?
2. Autistics, how have you had to “count the cost” in order to serve in healthy ways?
3. Bowman asks, “Can I say no to service and ministry as often as my autistic needs dictate and still bear good fruit?” (125). What do you think? What could that look like?

Dancing in Fields of Wheat and Tares

1. Bowman talks about making “art that respects the suffering that leads to seeing” (134). What kind of “seeing” do you think he’s talking about?
2. Do you agree that suffering is “whenever you are not in control” (132)? Why?
3. Bowman talks about the human tendency to make false distinctions between “in groups and out groups, positions of advantage and positions of humiliation” (133). Reflect on how you tend to make those distinctions. What might it look like to “let God have control in the end” (133)?
4. Bowman describes his experience dancing at the end of his residency, saying, “I stopped trying to dance, to be in control, and just did it, just danced” (136). Where have you experienced joy as the result of relinquishing control?

Autism and Poetry

1. Bowman describes the impact that reading had on him growing up. What role have books and stories played in your life?
2. For Bowman, writing poetry has been a way to engage the reality that he is made in the image of a creative God. What pursuits have played a similar role in your life, allowing you to express your creativity?

The Insidious Nature of Bad Christian Stories

1. If “bad storytelling is bad theology” (143), how might good storytelling help us love God, ourselves, and our neighbors? Share about a story (book, movie, etc.) that comes to mind that has done that for you.
2. “Autistics circle back to honesty over and over as a touchstone of authentic identity and relationship” (144). Autistics, how has the presence of honesty and authenticity in relationships impacted you?

Beautiful Loser

1. Bowman writes about quickly adjusting his expectations after arriving at his poetry reading at the mall. Autistics, when have you had to suddenly change your expectations? Share the difficulty involved in that.

2. Bowman writes about how reading his poetry publicly in the mall causes him to question, “Why are you doing this?” (152). Where in your life might you need that kind of prompting?
3. Think of a time when you felt humiliated. Reflect on your own reaction. What could it look like to pray for “one good humiliation every day”? (152). What might it change in you?

Meaning and Estrangement

1. If fiction is a way of putting ourselves in another’s shoes to see a different perspective, how might it be able to “deliver us from certainty” (153)?
2. Bowman writes about the disappointment he experienced when Sanders read something outside his normal genre at the conference. But he comes to appreciate the value of creatives like Sanders who “navigate by estrangement” (153) and engage in risky projects outside their usual realm. Why might it be important to support creatives in taking creative risks?
3. Bowman writes that “a life of integrity honors the process, not merely the result” (158).
 - a. When consuming creative work, how can we honor the process that went into making it and not just the final result?
 - b. How can you honor the in-betweens and messy processes in your life, not just the results?

The Tracks of My Tears

1. Bowman shares about the time his medication took away his physical ability to cry. Do you think of tears as a gift? Why or why not?
2. Bowman points to a moment from *Anne of Green Gables* in which a character focuses more on the needs of others than his own needs. Who in your life has been good to you when things were difficult?

A True Name

1. Bowman describes several experiences while growing up that prevented him from fitting in. Autistics, in what ways did you feel set apart or different in your childhood?
2. What names and labels do you live with? Where did they come from? Share about how the names and labels you carry affect your view of yourself.
3. Bowman talks about “the age-old autistic desire for structure and a corresponding abhorrence of change” (171).
 - a. Autistics, can you talk about a time you struggled during a time of transition?
 - b. Are there things that family members or friends have done to help you deal with a transition?

Loving the Expanse

1. Bowman writes, “There is a thin line in the autistic life between controlling one’s environment for safety and attempting to control the people around you” (182). Autistics, what has been your experience with that distinction?
2. Bowman talks about his endeavor to honor the differences between him and his wife, rather than trying to change her. What might it look like for you to “love the expanse” between you and someone important in your life?

Peace in Terabithia

1. Bowman writes, “As an autistic who lacked an intuitive understanding of people, I clung to books to show me the inner workings of others” (185). Autistics, have you ever found fiction or other resources to be helpful in understanding others in your life? How?
2. Bowman shares his desire to raise his children as readers. Parents, describe the structures you’ve put in place to help your children grow in self-awareness and compassion for others.

Interview by Molly

1. Bowman writes about the distinction between the things he can and cannot control.
 - a. Autistics, what are some things you can control about being autistic? What can you not control?
 - b. Parents of autistics, what are some things you can and cannot control about parenting an autistic?
2. Autistics, how has autism helped you succeed? Parents and caregivers, what do you perceive as the strengths and gifts of the autistic person in your life?
3. Autistics, when was a time someone treated you differently because of your autism, thereby demonstrating care?

Interview by Jenna

1. Think about the sources through which you’ve learned about autism. How much is your awareness about autism shaped by firsthand voices?

Interview by Brian

1. Autistics, what helps you feel safe in social environments?
2. The interviewer says to Bowman, “Maybe these are not even the right questions. Please forgive me if they’re not, and help me ask better ones” (215). What questions are you asking the autistics in your life? Reflect on how open you are to being taught to ask better questions.

Falling and Autistic Representation

1. “If . . . stories contain autistic characters but do not reflect the true inner lives of autistic people, then they are false and even dangerous” (221). Autistics, are there any movies or books told from an autistic viewpoint that have particularly resonated with you?
2. Bowman talks about media’s tendency to center the neurotypical individual’s comfort over the autistic individual’s comfort. What movies, books, or shows come to mind that fall in that category?

Therefore Let Us Keep the Feast

1. If our lives are significantly shaped by the people who mentor us, then our successes are not wholly ours to claim. Who has invested in you “with no evidence of future returns” (228)? What has that meant for you?
2. What makes a good mentor?

SEND and the Future of Neurodiversity

1. Autistics, have you ever had someone doubt your identity because you didn’t fit their image of what “autistic” meant? Share about that experience.
2. A student talks about being “for others the person I needed when I was in their place” (241).
 - a. Who did you need in difficult seasons, and how can you step into that role for others?
 - b. Parents/caregivers, have you been able to match your child with an adult mentor on the spectrum?