

## ***Homo aspergerus: Evolution Stumbles Forward***

by Gary Westfahl

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As publicity about the condition has increased in recent years, I have gradually come to the conclusion that I have suffered all my life from an undiagnosed case of Asperger's Syndrome — although, as will be explained, I don't think that "suffered" is the proper term.

Certainly, I have always displayed the standard symptoms, including a persistent failure to establish eye contact, visible discomfort in most social situations, obsessive interests in a few subjects, a tendency to fall into routines that I am reluctant to abandon, and a tangible aura of emotional detachment, even in extreme situations.

For decades, I accepted what well-meaning friends and the self-help books incessantly preached — that I had simply picked up some bad habits which I could overcome with determination and practice — but I now recognize that these inclinations are part of my fundamental identity. I am what I am, and I can no longer listen patiently to purportedly helpful pep talks along the lines of "All you have to do, Gary, is maintain eye contact and smile a lot and make small talk, and you'll get along fine." In reality, offering me such comments is like telling a gay man, "Now, I'm sure if you just tried a little harder, you could learn to like girls."

However, in being someone with Asperger's Syndrome who is devoted to science fiction, I am hardly alone. Surfing the Internet brings to light numerous observations that science fiction fans frequently exhibit all the traits of Asperger's Syndrome; a recent autobiography by one man with the condition, Will Hadcroft's **The Feeling's Unmutual: Growing Up with Asperger Syndrome (Undiagnosed)** (2004), describes his youthful fascination with science fiction and fantasy; and a book designed to comfort children with Asperger's Syndrome, Kathy Hoopmann's **Of Mice and Aliens: An Asperger Adventure** (2001), describes a boy with the condition who meets a newly arrived space alien and compares the boy's problems in adjusting to his world with the alien's problems in adjusting to life on Earth. All explicit links between science fiction and Asperger's Syndrome will necessarily be recent, because the condition — although first identified by Austrian doctor Hans Asperger in the 1940s — was not named until 1981 and was not accepted by the medical community until the 1990s; but there seems little doubt that Asperger's Syndrome has been around for a long time, and some have theorized that a wide variety of historical figures, including as Isaac Newton, Ludwig van Beethoven, Jane Austen, Alexander Graham Bell, and Albert Einstein, had Asperger's Syndrome. Still, there are reasons to believe that the condition became more and more common during the twentieth century — perhaps uncoincidentally, also the century that saw the emergence of the genre of science fiction.

Looking back at the science fiction of the 1930s pulp magazines, filled with lonely adventurers on solitary quests to distant planets and the far future, one can easily see how these stories would appeal to those young men (and some young women), then regarded only as "reclusive" or "eccentric," who we would now classify as undiagnosed cases of Asperger's Syndrome. As I can testify, a person with this condition always feels like an alien being in an alien world: why are all these people

able to relax and have fun at this party while I am feeling so uneasy and uncomfortable? Why am I so different from everybody else? Indeed, while one typically believes that people turn to science fiction in search of colorfully unusual vicarious experiences, an entirely different set of motives often may be in play: to a teenager in the 1930s with Asperger's Syndrome, a story about an astronaut encountering aliens on Mars might have had an air of comforting familiarity, in contrast to stories set in the bizarre, inexplicable, and thoroughly socialized worlds of Andy Hardy and the Bobbsey Twins.

Since that time, as I have argued elsewhere, science fiction has increasingly attracted more conventional, well-adjusted people, and the literature has correspondingly adjusted to place a greater emphasis on conventional, well-adjusted characters who happily function in social situations. (To get a sense of how the literature has changed, one might contrast Alvin's solitary journey through a mostly deserted universe in Arthur C. Clarke's **Against the Fall of Night** [1948] with the overpopulated cosmos of various humans and aliens jostling against each other in Gregory Benford's 1989 sequel, **Beyond the Fall of Night**.) Still, even as the lonely, maladjusted hero grew less prominent in science fiction stories and figured more in comic books and video games, the link between science fiction and Asperger's Syndrome has remained strong. To this day, although observers might be incredulous to hear it, science fiction conventions represent my most enjoyable social experiences. There, I feel accepted as what I am; as in no other place, I can stand by myself or walk silently through the corridors, contentedly watching my surroundings, without any sense that I am out of the ordinary or that I am violating existing social norms; except for longtime friends, no one approaches me to make small talk and nobody seems disturbed because I am not joining their conversations. More so than any other community, the world of science fiction has always understood Asperger's Syndrome, long before the term was devised, and it has always been open to people with that condition.

The rest of the world, unfortunately, has never understood and has never been open to people with Asperger's Syndrome. Labeled as a form of autism, or severe detachment from the world, it is — as a matter of medical definition — a damaging affliction. And unquestionably, having Asperger's Syndrome has had adverse effects on my life. Being a loner drove me away from the career I once dreamed of — as a keyboard player and songwriter in a rock band — although I later found fulfillment as a scholar and writer, avocations that required far less social contact. I make horrible first impressions, and I am rarely able to establish valuable contacts with the influential people I encounter. Moreover, as someone called "the World's Worst Interview" by one of my graduate school professors, I have regularly interviewed for desirable positions and have regularly failed to obtain them, passed over in favor of less qualified people who undoubtedly displayed more charm and personal appeal. Still, I will leave it to somebody else to file the Mother of All Lawsuits alleging blatant discrimination in hiring and promotions illegally based upon the recognized disability of Asperger's Syndrome — because, as already indicated, I do not feel like a victim at all. Indeed, I am now prepared to argue that Asperger's Syndrome should not be regarded as a handicap or as a debilitating condition; rather, it is a tremendous asset, a set of beneficial traits that may someday be recognized as the characteristics of a new, and superior, form of humanity.

In mounting this argument, as I am uncomfortably aware, I am recalling the views of the infamous Claude Degler, who announced to the science fiction community of the

1940s that "fans are slans": readers of science fiction, as evidenced by their high intelligence and keen interest in science fiction, are the early representatives of an emerging new species, *homo superior*, destined to overcome and supplant those merely human persons who do not like science fiction. (For some contemporary readers, I suppose I must explain that "slans," as depicted in A. E. van Vogt's 1940 novel **Slan**, are a race of hyperintelligent mutants with psychic powers who live among, and are persecuted by, "normal" human beings.) Much about Degler's life remains mysterious, but it seems that whenever he was not traveling across the country expressing these opinions to any fans he encountered, he was confined at a mental institution, and many who listened to him would probably agree it was exactly where he belonged. However, people with Asperger's Syndrome do not think the way the rest of the world thinks, and they do not care what the rest of the world thinks, and hence they may discern hidden truths in the ravings of a lunatic, and they may have no qualms about expressing such views.

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So, why on earth might it be advantageous to suffer from Asperger's Syndrome? Consider, first of all, the fact that valuable new ideas and worthwhile artistic creations are always invariably the products of one individual mind. True, people depend upon, and are enriched by, the accomplishments of their predecessors and colleagues; but progress usually requires one person who can think outside the box, extend concepts into unexpected new realms, and develop new ways of looking at the world. Even in an overcrowded world that increasingly celebrates "teamwork" as the ultimate human virtue, we have observed in this century remarkable individuals whose novel ideas sparked revolutions in fields ranging from mathematics and physics to music and art. (It is strange and irksome that science fiction, employing a false analogy to the way that individual cells united to form multicellular organisms, so frequently posits that combining many individual intelligences into one group intelligence would represent tremendous progress — despite the fact that all of our experience with corporate thinking suggests exactly the opposite.)

In the past, solitude was a regular, and inevitable, aspect of human life. While traveling, working, or staying at home while others worked, most people were necessarily alone for long periods of time. Even the most compulsively sociable people often had the option of connecting with other humans only by means of reading, an activity that lends itself to pauses for extended contemplation, and they were otherwise forced to think by themselves, and hence to think for themselves.

All of this began to change in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when new forms of technology gave people more and more ways to stay in touch with the world. Two new forms of entertainment in the home, radio and television, demanded one's constant attention more insistently than books, and the interactive communication system of the telephone — and for a few, walkie-talkies and ham radio — made it easy for solitary individuals to spend hours talking with other people who were far away. The computer age brought even more ways to connect with others over long distances — e-mail, chat rooms, instant messaging, websites, blogs — and there has also emerged the ultimate facilitator of 24/7 contact with friends and family members, the cell phone. Today, if somebody chooses — and many people do so choose — they can spend virtually every waking moment intently connected to other human voices.

I observe the results of this new technology every day at the university campus where I work. The instant they step out of class, most students take out their cell phones and walk to their next destination engaged in constant chatter, or they put on their headphones to listen to their favorite songs, or they sit down with their laptops to surf the Net and check their e-mail. They never want to be alone, and they never have to be alone. And I pity them; for, if you incessantly listen to what the rest of the world thinks, you will always think precisely the way the rest of the world thinks. It is not surprising that these students so often report that they have trouble coming up with ideas for their term papers; and when they move on into their adult careers, one wonders how frequently they will be enriching their professions with novel approaches and exciting new innovations.

In this new era, then, those with a natural inclination to avoid others and the world around them will have an advantage. People with Asperger's Syndrome don't want to have cell phones; they don't want to be constantly disturbed by other people. Unlike naturally sociable people who will feel compelled to take advantage of the many forms of communication now available, they will naturally prefer to eschew them. They may still prefer reading to watching movies or television. They may love to take long walks through natural settings, spending hours and hours comfortably alone with their own thoughts. Thus, with everyone else's minds incessantly connected to the zeitgeist of contemporary civilization, those with Asperger's Syndrome will become the people most likely to come up with brilliant new ideas, to create memorably distinctive works of art, to develop entirely new ways of looking at the world.

Still, one might argue, they will remain at a disadvantage, because simply coming up with brilliant new ideas has never ensured that a person will have an effect on society. Other people must be persuaded that the new ideas are valuable and merit some attention; other people must examine, test, improve, augment, and fully develop the new ideas before they can be effectively implemented; and all of these necessary processes will require social interactions and cooperative endeavors involving many other people. While social skills may be a hindrance to the process of generating new ideas, then, it might seem that they remain essential to the process of promulgating and perfecting those ideas.

Long ago, however, science fiction fandom addressed and solved this problem. While the emerging science fiction community did involve some forms of personal contact — regular meetings of local clubs and annual conventions that attracted fans from all over the world — the primary instrument of fan communication was the fanzine, a self-published amateur magazine that virtually anyone could produce all by themselves and mail from their homes. While voluntarily staying alone as was often their preference, fans could still spread their ideas and influence other people by publishing, editing, and writing for fanzines, while writing lengthy letters was a common strategy for staying in touch with other individuals. Even professional magazine editors might work in virtual isolation, the most famous example being H. L. Gold, whose notorious "agoraphobia" might be better diagnosed today as a form of Asperger's Syndrome. Further, while many science fiction writers have seemed eminently sociable, there have also been some famously reclusive writers, ranging from H. P. Lovecraft to Greg Egan, who have communicated with the science fiction community almost exclusively through their publications and correspondence, possibly due to their Asperger's Syndrome.

And, as Benford and others have argued, science fiction fandom was the most significant precursor to today's Internet — a vaster and more flexible instrument that allows people without social skills to interact with, and have an impact on, the world around them. People with Asperger's Syndrome can contentedly isolate themselves to come up with new ideas, and then, when the time comes to spread those ideas or collaboratively improve those ideas, they can turn to the Internet and achieve those goals without leaving their homes or coming into physical contact with other people.

Scholars can develop good working partnerships with other scholars all over the world without ever meeting them; commentators can convey their viewpoints to innumerable people by means of their blogs without ever seeing them. And in other ways, technological advances are eliminating any need for social interaction. As noted, I drifted away from playing the piano and writing songs because I did not enjoy interacting with other musicians in a band; but today, with a keyboard hooked up to the right software, I could be my own one-man band, replicating and blending the sounds of several instruments to produce a professional-quality CD. We are moving toward a world, in other words, where Asperger's Syndrome will no longer be a liability, and instead will become only an asset.

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Granted, this argument might be dismissed as the self-serving delusions of a person who admits that he suffers from a recognized form of mental illness. And I can think sufficiently out of the box to recognize this as a real possibility. Perhaps social interactions and personal contact will forever remain vital elements in the human experience, and perhaps the people ill-suited to such encounters will forever remain marginalized outcasts.

Perhaps, however, I am right. Perhaps, in a world where personal interactions become less and less important, those smiling, charismatic people who once rose effortlessly to the top of the ladder will find that their social skills have become obsolete, as employers no longer care about charm and instead would rather hire, and work from a distance with, people who manifest a strong ability to innovate and blaze new trails. Perhaps, a desire to constantly see and talk with other people will increasingly be viewed as a harmful atavism, as more and more people exhibit the traits of Asperger's Syndrome and benefit from voluntarily isolating themselves most of the time. Perhaps, as advanced forms of artificial intelligence become significant participants in the human community, people who long for human contact will be disadvantaged while people with Asperger's Syndrome — who traditionally preferred the company of machines to the company of people anyway — will get along just fine. Perhaps, instead of science fiction's *Homo superior*, the dominant new form of humanity in the future will be the unanticipated *Homo aspergerus*. Perhaps, then, we will someday live in the world of E. M. Forster's "The Machine Stops" (1909), where people live out their entire lives in enclosed individual chambers while they virtually interact with other people and machines when and to the extent that they choose — and as I have stated elsewhere, I would, unlike Forster, regard such a world as more utopian than dystopian.

Whether people with Asperger's Syndrome are pitiable victims or the vanguards of a new human species, of course, remains to be seen. But one thing is already evident: today, there exist growing numbers of people in our society who cannot and do not conform to conventional expectations regarding sociable human behavior. I can hope that the world will soon adopt the tolerant attitudes long found in the science fiction

community and embrace these odd people as loyal friends and capable workers, but that is something I cannot control.

What I can control, however, is my own life. And let me tell you, I'm tired of trying to pass for human, and I will no longer apologize for being what I am. So, I say this to the world: I am uneasy in social situations and I communicate that unease; I don't like to maintain eye contact; I always seem emotionally distant and detached. Please deal with it. If people don't like the way I am, then all one can say is that they're prejudiced, and that's their problem, it isn't mine.

Do I suddenly sound a bit angry? Well, sometimes I am; nobody likes to be passed over for promotions or denied exciting publishing opportunities because they don't make a good first impression or because they haven't made the right kinds of friends. But most of the time, I am very happy to be what I am and to have had the life I have had, reminding myself that the traits making me the World's Worst Interview are also the reasons why I have become a recognized science fiction scholar and commentator. Blessed with a personality that is conducive to success in this evolving world, I have understandably achieved at least a modicum of success in this world, and while I can sometimes be resistant to change, I also feel extraordinarily well prepared to handle whatever cold comforts the future may bring. Can the mundane people of this world say the same?

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Gary Westfahl lives in Claremont, California, with his wife Lynne and children Allison and Jeremy. In addition to publishing numerous articles and fourteen other books, he has recently edited **Science Fiction Quotations: From the Inner Mind to the Outer Limits** and **The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Science Fiction and Fantasy: Themes, Works, and Wonders**, and, with Wong Kin Yuen and Amy Kit-sze Chan, he has co-edited **World Weavers: Globalization, Science Fiction, and the Cybernetic Revolution**.