

MIRACLE MONOCLE
ISSUE 20



WRITING AND NEURO- DIVERSITY

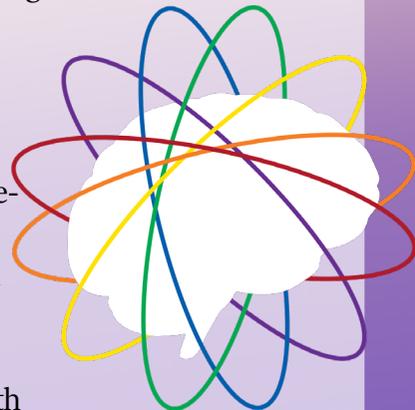
a digital roundtable

by
ERIN WEDEMEYER

WHY TALK ABOUT NEURODIVERSITY?

Neurodivergence is a difference in mental or neurological function from what is considered typical; it is most commonly associated with autism and ADHD, but it is an all-embracing term that includes conditions from social anxiety to personality disorders.

It is beyond important for there to be neurodiverse spaces where neurodivergents feel safe to connect and share their experiences. This is especially so because being neurodivergent in a dominantly neurotypical world can sometimes feel isolating and exhausting. My purpose with this roundtable is to create said space for neurodiversity, with special attention to neurodiversity in the literary world.



I am Erin Wedemeyer, a senior at the University of Louisville with a major in English and minors in Creative Writing and Spanish. I like to call myself a fantasy fanatic, and I could probably consider dragons my special interest. My journey with neurodiversity started with anxiety four years ago. I am still learning self-awareness, but it has since become apparent to me that my unique, awkward, enthusiastic self is neurodivergent. While I am diagnosed with anxiety, ADHD, and symptoms of OCD, I have recently begun exploring if I am autistic.

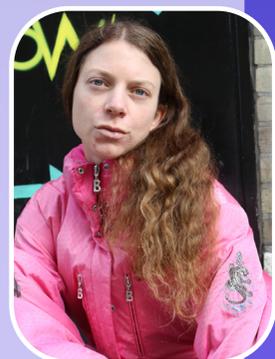
I had the pleasure of interviewing Amy Lee Lillard, Chris Martin, Robin Lee Mozer, Anna Nygren, and Margeaux Weston for this roundtable. I asked them a series of questions on their experiences, both life and literary.

MEET THE WRITERS



MARGEAUX WESTON is a middle grade author and editor. Her latest book, *Malcolm X and Muhammad Ali: The Fatal Friendship*, is due out October 2023. The book is a young readers' adaptation of the adult novel, *Blood Brothers*. She is the author of *20th Century African American History for Kids*, as well as several other nonfiction books. Weston is the nonfiction editor of Hugo award-winning FIYAH Literary Magazine of Black Speculative Fiction. She is also an acquiring editor at North Atlantic Books.

ANNA NYGREN is a writer, playwright, literary scholar and teacher from Sweden. English is not her first language, and she currently works with translations in an experimental and playful way (which she describes as “a big part of the neurodiverse world experience, like needing to translate other people and myself and always being aware that understanding in some way involves a translation”). She loves horses in books and her cat.





ROBIN LEE MOZER has an MFA in Creative Nonfiction from Penn State and a BA in English and Vocal Performance from Birmingham-Southern College. Her writing has appeared in *PANK*, *Booth*, *Miracle Monocle*, and *McSweeney's Internet Tendency*. She teaches reading, writing, and thinking in Louisville, Kentucky, where she lives with a partner, a middle schooler, a dog, a cat, and a very needy, high-maintenance 99-year-old house.

CHRIS MARTIN is a tilted listening animal languaging. He teaches and learns at *Unrestricted Interest* and is the curator of *Multiverse*, a series of neurodivergent writing from Milkweed Editions. His most recent book of poems is *Things to Do in Hell* and his first book of nonfiction is *May Tomorrow Be Awake: On Poetry, Autism, and Our Neurodiverse Future*. He lives on the edge of Bde Maka Ska in Minneapolis, among the mulberries and bur oaks, with Mary Austin Speaker and their two bewildering creatures.



AMY LEE LILLARD is the author of two short story collections (*Dig Me Out* and *Exile in Guyville*), and a nonfiction collection (*The Past is a Grotesque Animal*). Her fiction and nonfiction also appears in *Vox*, *LitHub*, *Barrelhouse*, *Foglifter*, *Epiphany*, *Off Assignment*, *Autostraddle*, and more. She has worked as a copywriter and marketer for over twenty years and is based in the Midwestern United States. She is autistic, bisexual, and “a Gen X weirdo obsessed with punk, animals, and art in all forms.”

Q&A

Q1: What has your journey with your neurodiversity been like?

MW: Since moving into a more creative field, my journey with neurodiversity has been better. I was diagnosed with ADHD as an adult, however my symptoms and aversion to certain sounds and activities (sensory overload) started early on. Without much help to manage my hyperfocus or extreme bouts of disorganization and lack of focus, I had to mask most things and traded comfort for acceptance. However, it's been great finding the neurodivergent community and working with creative folks who understand that we all process differently.

AN: I was diagnosed with autism at age 28. Before that, I spent my whole life in and out of mental hospitals. I was a child who was always told to speak louder (and I could not), and eat properly (and I could not), and everything was always very overwhelming to me. I found comfort in texts and animals. Being diagnosed for me was a relief because people stopped being so keen to cure me and were more open to adapt things to my needs (for example, when I was seen as anorexic, I was told I had to learn to eat everything, but that is a complete sensory overload for me; then when I was "allowed" to eat the same thing every day and have a space where I can eat alone, it became much easier for me to eat). I also can't be social in the typical ways (groups, talking, and so on), but I have realized that writing, being silent together, and being with cats also counts as sociality, and that makes me feel less like an alien. I also realize my writing is based on my neurodivergent way of viewing the world. It has been called "unique," "crazy," "strange," and "experimental," but to me, I just do realism and play.

RLM: A marriage counselor first asked about ADHD when I was 29. I was diagnosed at 31. After diagnosis, I began to realize that my way of being in the world isn't everyone's way.

I did a double major and completed my MFA while undiagnosed and unmedicated, thanks to almost a decade of all-nighters. Masked constantly. Lists upon lists on scraps of paper, then and still. I am a copious note-taker in classes and in conversations because actively taking notes helps me (A) focus and (B) not forget what was said ten minutes later. I feel overwhelmed a lot and like I can never shut down because I simply feel like I must do it all.

Medication was a god send. I am less anxious because I am less forgetful. I'm more able to keep things in perspective. I can also begin and complete a task in a reasonable time frame. Before, I was highly distractible (Example: start the laundry and then forget it in the washer).

CM: It has been a journey of deepening into neurodiverse relation throughout my life, finding increased momentum over the past ten years, especially as I began spending daily time with nonspeaking autistic writers. One of the things that's been especially healing for me of late is the generosity with which nonspeaking autists have gifted me with language that I could relate to in highly personal and poetic ways. For instance, I self-identify as a tilted thinker, a gift from my friend Imane Boukaila. I also think of myself as someone who desires to wander madly with other mad wanderers, a gift from my friend Sid Ghosh. I have been so grateful to find coalition with other forms of neurodivergence, including Blackness, dysfluency, Down Syndrome, and many more. I am also someone who lives with chronic illness, which I see as systemically related to my neurodivergences. I am easily overwhelmed and fatigued, just as I am prone to exuberance and intimacy. I crave intensity and long periods of rest.

ALL: I learned I was autistic at age 43. I'm soon to be 46, and the last few years have been relearning nearly everything about myself, my needs, my limits, and my powers. Throughout my life I knew I felt different, but didn't have the language for how or why. All I knew is I found friendships and relationships very hard to make and maintain, found social situations very draining, felt physically ill from open-office plans, and felt safe only when I was alone. To cope, I learned how to mask from a very early age, and played the part of normal pretty well. The toll it took over time, however, was intense—I've struggled with depression for decades, as well as anxiety, alcohol abuse, GI issues, OCD, and eating disorders. At the time I found out I was autistic, I was breaking down systematically and thoroughly. Learning who I am has been a process of relief as well as grief. With the help of trauma-informed therapy, I'm learning how to unmask, and determining how I want my life to look and feel, no matter if it's different from the norm.

Q2: Do you write about neurodiversity?
If so, why is it important to you?

MW: I sold a middle grade book focusing on neurodiversity recently. I hope that this is my first in a long list of books that center neurodiversity and dynamic characters. It's important for me to write books for young readers to relate to. There is an educational saying that books (paraphrasing) should be windows and mirrors. It's such a strong, important saying. Books should be windows into other cultures and experiences, as well as mirrors—allowing readers to see themselves. It's important for young readers to learn about neurodiversity and understand that everyone processes differently. I'd also love for a kid to read one of my books and relate to that neurodivergent character—to feel seen.

AN: Sometimes. But I think more like neurodivergence is a mode(mood?) of my writing. Like, I write about the world from my view. But I also write about neurodivergence—I almost forgot, I do!—often in a collective setting, like trying to collectively figure out what works, what happens, what is fair/unfair, and sharing experiences. I think it's really important to sort of, recognize your world inside another's world(word!), like feeling you're not alone.

RLM: Yes and no. There seemed to be no room in my failing marriage for my neurodiversity, so I didn't write about it—not loudly, anyway. I cached pages of nonfiction and fiction in various hidey holes like a squirrel storing nuts for winter. To write about it publicly would be admitting that my brain was *different*. In many areas of my life, *different* was not okay. I spent a lot of time and used all the skills gained as a performance major to appear “normal.”

I didn't begin to advocate for myself or acknowledge my neurodiversity in earnest until the age of 41—mid-pandemic, after my marriage ended. And not coincidentally, the writing that I am now most excited about are those pieces cached in notebooks and computer drives.

I'm not the only 40-something mom working full time and juggling neurodivergence. I know what it means to see yourself reflected back at you on the page. That's how we learn and grow. Contributing to that, even tangentially through essays or stories—that's important.

CM: I write about neurodiversity because I find it irresistible, liberatory, and healing. It is an area of devoted study, and I engage with it whenever I can.

ALL: Before I learned I was autistic, I was writing about neurodiversity and not realizing it! I was writing characters and stories that came from my perspective, meaning they felt at odds with the world and the demands placed on them. I knew I was writing from a deeply feminist perspective, infused with anger at the world and the way it treats women. But I didn't realize I was infusing my autism into the stories as well. Once I learned who I was, I began to write more specifically autistic themes and characters into my fiction. And I also started writing nonfiction. I was appalled that it took 43 years for me to find myself. I was angry that we still assume it's only white boys that are autistic, and so many girls like me suffer(ed) in silence. I was shocked at how much undiagnosed autism had influenced my life, and allowed for abuse and manipulation. So I started writing nonfiction in the hopes that others might be spared similar situations.

Q3: What are the positive and/or negative ways in which your neurodiversity has affected your writing?

MW: One of the challenges has been time management and avoiding hyperfocus as much as possible. It's hard to have adult responsibilities and the urge to hyperfocus! I'd love to spend days just writing or reading about some interesting new fact. I like to dive into things I'm interested in, sometimes forgetting that I need to come up for air. Sometimes that works, but most times it poses a problem because I work and I am a mother/wife. So, I have to write in increments. It feels weird, and like I'm moving way too slow. However, I'm able to balance creativity with responsibility a bit better.

AN: My autism is part of my language. I think Words are like one of the Senses; I *feel* through words. Like words are small persons or beings, and I need to play with them and take care of them and keep them happy. It's like emotional, and like a play, a language relation.

RLM: I struggle with time blindness. Organizing time so that I have the ability and space to write is my biggest challenge. If I don't write when the idea hits me, I can lose it. It's not uncommon for me to miss a submission deadline, which is frustrating. As frustration grows, it can transform into a far more sinister apathy: "Why should I bother? I'm just going to miss it."

On the plus side, the way my brain processes the world allows me to see connections between events or moments that might at first appear completely unrelated or incongruous. This helps with meaning making: transforming seemingly disparate situations into a cohesive story.

CM: Just as “poet” was the first word that helped me live into and through my neurodivergence, writing for me is always a positive act of neurodiversity, of unmasking and remaking my worlds through poetic experimentation. I would say they are inseparable.

ALL: When I first started writing, I did what I did in all other areas of my life: masked. As a kid and then adult, I obsessively looked at people around me to determine what normal was, and what I should be doing. While I knew I was different, I didn’t always know why or how, so I relied on copying others to survive. It was the same when I was writing my first stories and books—I tried to be the authors I loved. And it didn’t work. I was stuck, and stymied, and couldn’t figure out how to do better, for many years. Only when I started experimenting, writing in different ways, exploring my own voice, did my writing take off. I didn’t know it at the time, but I was embracing the weird, the odd, the neurodiverse parts of me. So when I stopped masking, and let myself be, the words flowed, the stories got some attention, and I became who I am now.

Q4: Has your neurodiversity affected your career? How so?

MW: I think I didn’t do well in more structured environments. I had a career in education that I enjoyed, but I lost interest pretty quickly and constantly needed to recharge. It took me a while to find my stride, but I figured out how to manage some of my differences, and just accept that some things don’t work for me, and that’s okay.

AN: Yes, I am now involved in several artistic and academic projects for/with/by neurodivergent people. I’ve sort of, found my crew... And I think in my work as a teacher I am really helped, as are my students, by my need for structure and equality. I am very passionate about my work, like monotropically interested in it. In Sweden, there’s a lot of “fika” (coffee breaks), and I have excused myself from participating in them so I can do art instead.

CM: Like writing, my career is inseparable from neurodiversity. It is my career. Everyday I make a practice of meeting with other neurodiverse writers, in roles that range from teacher to editor to friend. Almost always these roles overlap. In terms of disability, I find that my neurodivergence and chronic illness make it necessary to be very intentional about how and how much I work. I try to limit myself to two teaching sessions per day and I travel much less than I’d like to. Events can severely deplete my resources for days afterward.

RLM: Absolutely, and it's a mixed bag. I'm a quick study, so learning new skills is easy. But I struggle with effective communication. I have to work to not interrupt, to stay present, to be thoughtful and slow down when explaining why one course of action is better than another.

Sometimes, when I'm distracted or hyperfocused, I might come off as blunt or rude. When others aren't as quick as I am/as I would like them to be, I can seem impatient and snippy. Similarly, when I am overwhelmed, I might come off as angry or exasperated. I am a chronic apologizer; after a lifetime of being told "I forgot isn't a good enough answer," I assume far more responsibility for situations than needed. Finally, I tend to procrastinate, or else I'll start something well ahead of time, but get interrupted and forget until the last minute.

All of these things make me seem to neurotypical colleagues and superiors as absent-minded, careless, uninvested, and unreliable. I understand how these impressions are formed. However, I have also had wonderful working relationships with superiors who appreciate my strengths and thus, know how to get the best out of me—a reminder for a particular meeting time, checking in weekly about a project so I don't forget, and so on.

ALL: In my day-to-day career as a marketing and communications manager, the analytical and thoughtful and obsessive qualities that autism brings me helps create good work. But for many years, I worked in an office. And that hurt me physically and mentally. The lights, the noise, the expectation that I must be "on" at all times—I knew I hurt, but I never knew why. Ten years ago, I started working remotely from home. And it was an absolute life changer. When I could remove the social requirements of being in an office, and eliminate all the sensory difficulties, I could work better and happier. I will never be able to go back to working in an office—which restricts some of my job mobility and forward momentum. But it's a sacrifice I need to make to ensure my physical and mental health.

Q5: What advice would you give fellow neurodivergent writers? Emerging neurodivergent writers?

MW: Write more stories! We need more books featuring neurodivergent characters. NDs can be heroes, they can be love interests, they can be funny. It's important to show the full spectrum of who we are and what we can be. And I'd tell emerging writers to just go for it. Things don't have to be perfect to just start. Start a little at a time, on days when you can really focus. There's no real rush to write the next bestseller. The perfect time is whatever time is right for you.

AN: Feel the words. Play with them. Take care of them, let them take care of you, let them comfort you, find your friends among them. It's okay to love texts more than humans.

RLM: Give yourself permission to write differently and quit comparing yourself to others.

As a student, I heard the same things over and over again: “Write every day.” “Establish a writing routine.” “Treat it like a job.” That advice probably works well for a lot of people, but it didn’t work well for me. And it took me a long, long time to admit it.

I didn’t start really generating prose until I gave myself permission to write anywhere. Literally anywhere: at my desk, outside, at the kitchen table, on the bus, during a church service scrawled on every square inch of blank space on the worship bulletin. I stopped chaining myself to only one modality, too: I write on my laptop, on an old library desktop, in my notebook, on scratch paper, on the Notes phone app. And I write at all times of day. My two most widely circulated pieces were both pecked out with one finger on my phone. My first real publication was submitted on a whim while I was waiting on an oil change.

CM: Writing is not something to do right, just as there is no right way to be a human. Writing should be exuberant, strange, unique, but only insofar as it is true to your way of moving through the world and through the world of ideas. Find other writers who have a similar relationship to language and read widely (and wildly!).

ALL: Don’t mask. Don’t try to channel other writers, or do what other writers are doing. Let yourself be weird, and odd, and different. And your writing will become yours.

CLOSING WORDS

As I continue my journey as a writer and with my neurodiversity, I am excited to carry these responses with me. Unlike many of my experiences with in-person writer readings and Q&A’s, I see a little of myself in each response, and I hope other neurodivergents will too.

It’s wonderful to see how writing has been a comfort for these neurodivergent writers, whether it was through solace, play, community, or reflection. I think that any writer can relate to these sentiments, and it shows the importance of writing beyond the publishing world. It is truly a heart-felt act.

Just as there is a process of unmasking and embracing one’s true self in the world at large, I have learned there is also a process of unmasking and embracing one’s true writerly self. I hope to be able to embrace the truest writer in me soon, and I am walking away from the roundtable in search of other writers like me, young and neurodivergent, to help me do so.

I would like to thank Amy Lee Lillard, Chris Martin, Robin Lee Mozer, Anna Nygren, and Margeaux Weston for their vulnerability and honesty in their responses and their encouragement to the neurodiverse literary world.