Autism and cognitive embodiment: steps towards a non-ableist walking literature

by Anna Stenning

Introduction

How can environmental writing and ecocriticism embrace the perspective of neurodiversity?[i] Two recent autism memoirs, read in the light of earlier works in environmental humanities and critical disability studies, suggest ways this can be achieved. Temple Grandin's *Animals in Translation* and Chris Packham's *Fingers in the Sparkle Jar* both unsettle the ideology of human exceptionalism, by describing their narrators' cognitive embodiment as autistic individuals.[ii] Packham's and Grandin's cross-species identification described in these works shows how supposedly 'abnormal' forms of experience and perception, when removed from their stigmatised position in culture, can alter our engagement and empathy with other species. It is only once we move beyond dominant conceptions of human subjectivity and agency that we can comprehend the extent of human interdependence and vulnerability in line with ecological thinking. I will argue that this movement may begin to offer a framework within which to critique the perspectives of those with different abilities in environmentally-oriented literature. This is particularly necessary for walking literature, nature writing and wilderness literature, which often involve the presupposition of a hyper-fit body and mind that is represented as attaining a problematic spiritual purity by performing a series of physical and mental tasks.

This chapter ultimately argues for an ethics based on relationality – including relations between disabled and non-disabled people, those with impairments and chronic illnesses, as well as with other species. It is also the aim of this work to show that certain forms of experience and knowledge are devalued by ideologies that celebrate human physical and mental perfection and supposed self-sufficiency. Grandin's and Packham's narratives pose challenges for both the implicit ableism of environmental writing and medical literature, and the presupposition of human exceptionalism that still dominates cultural and scientific representations of other species. In orienting themselves towards a neurodivergent subjectivity, Grandin and Packham suggest what a non-ableist walking narrative, involving human and animal encounters, might look like.

This chapter does not aim to represent all autistic experiences nor suggest that Grandin and Packham stand for all autistic people. It is hoped that readers will not assume all autistic people experience cross-species affinities to the extent that Grandin or Packham do. It just so happens that

there is a growth in autism memoirs that simultaneously present a marginalised subjective identity, contribute to a burgeoning autism culture, and describe different forms of human embodiment that foreground privilege, dependency on the environment and non-human others, and vulnerability to different types of pain and to mortality and loss. It is argued that the outsider status of writers who identify as autistic provides opportunities to challenge the ideologies of human uniqueness and ableism. These ideologies are perpetuated by environmentalist texts that posit self-sufficiency and bodily and intellectual perfection as the unique indicators of human worth. These memoirs have, in turn, the potential to open environmental movements to new audiences, including the disabled and those with specific mental and physical impairments.[iii] Yet, it seems that the valorisation of subjective autonomy and rationality are deeply embedded in Western culture, well beyond environmental literature.

Cary Wolfe is a critic of liberal humanism who believes that humanities and social sciences are still deeply implicated in perpetuating anthropocentrism. In *What is Posthumanism?* he suggests that many have failed to distinguish critical 'posthumanism' or the posthumanist stance from the myth of posthuman as being "after" our embodiment has been transcended'. Instead, understanding our true role in a continuum of technological and biological systems we discover that it 'opposes the fantasies of disembodiment and autonomy, inherited from humanism itself'.[iv] The objects of Wolfe's critique are humanist conceptions of agency, autonomy and subjecthood, which are often linked to narrow conceptions of rationality and communication.

A case can be made that this critical stance is itself inherent to humanism itself which has always been by definition 'critical' and does not require the supposition of a posthumanist condition. For the sake of developing a model which may de-centre (if only temporarily) the human from its centrality in the social sciences, a concern for cognitive embodiment in the form of a neurodivergent perspective will allow us to question assumptions about ideal cognitive functioning, rationality, communication and, eventually, anthropocentrism, as we discover alternative cultural valuations of the non-human. It offers a unique role for situated experiences by those with neurobiological differences.

It is hoped that the neurodivergent perspective will become a helpful tool for disability studies scholars and the environmental humanities alike. Those working within the field of disability studies question the ways that particular bodies and minds are valorised in literature. They explore the ideology of ability, or ableism, which is the paradoxical position whereby two contradictory positions are held; the body is unimportant compared to the realm of the mind and its attributes, and at the same time the

physical body must be perfected. These contradictory values impede our recognition of ordinary experiences of embodiment, and result in our belief that individual bodily and mental ability – such as overcoming, self-reliance and will-power – are the exclusive markers of human value.[v] Within this ideology, 'ability is the ideological baseline by which humanness is determined' – 'the lesser the ability, the lesser the human being'.[vi]

Critical disability theory seeks both to critique ableism and the notion that disability resides exclusively in the individual, rather than being composed, at least in part, by the society that values certain types of bodies and minds. One way to critique ableism is to stress the positive knowledge that people possess by way of their embodiment as biological, historical and social beings. The position known as complex embodiment was first articulated by Tobin Siebers in *Disability Theory.* He explains how 'many embodiments are each crucial to the understanding of humanity and its variations, whether physical, mental, social, or historical'.[vii] Stories of embodiment – including the visibly and invisibly disabled – along with the marginalised and the poor, may help us to understand 'ability' as a temporary and occasional state. [viii]

This essay focuses, however, on what has been called 'non-normative cognition', which is a parallel materialist position by David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder that attempts to understand 'the way alternative cognitions/corporealities allow us to inhabit the world as vulnerable, constrained, yet innovative embodied beings rather than merely as devalued social constructs or victims of oppression'.[ix] While acknowledging the reality of neurological difference in people with autism, ADHD and dyslexia (as in 'the medical model'), non-normative cognition tackles normative ethical ideas – which are based on national and cultural ideologies – about what counts as correct or 'normal' bodily and mental functioning. Non-normative cognition offers potential for critiquing medical and social discourses but differs from the neurodiverse perspective in its exclusion of those who might be defined as neurotypical or non-disabled. It proposes that situated (or embodied) experiences of neurological difference have a particular epistemic power within the critique. This perspective informs my own analysis of *Fingers in the Sparkle Jar* [henceforth referred to as *Sparkle Jar*].

This chapter will begin to consider whether memoirs that present complex embodiment and non-normative cognition are capable of challenging some of the ideals of ableism and anthropocentrism. It considers, in doing so, what they might teach us about what Cary Wolfe has called 'the necessity of an ethics based not on ability, activity, agency, and empowerment, but on a *compassion*

that is rooted in our vulnerability and passivity'.[x] While my argument is focused around Chris Packham's memoir it was inspired by observations that Wolfe has made on an earlier autism memoir *Animals in Translation* by Temple Grandin. Professor Grandin's memoir recounted the knowledge she had gained about her own complex embodiment as a result of interactions with farm animals and horses. Diagnosed with autism early in her life due to apparent communicative and behavioural differences, Grandin was given behavioural therapy to develop her verbal skills, but this did little to reduce her feelings of anxiety or alienation. After being bullied at a normal school, she was moved to one for 'emotionally disturbed teenagers', where she discovered she had an intense affinity with 'disturbed horses'; this, in turn, led to an interest in the behaviour of farm animals. The depth of her interest, and uncanny ability to perceive the world as though from the position of farm animals, inspired first the development of unique tools to aid anxious animals and autistic teenagers, and later, her distinguished career as a writer and speaker on both animal behaviour and autism. For Wolfe, this is an example of Grandin's autism, or her disability, being a 'pre-requisite for a particular experience'.[xi]

In *Sparkle Jar*, the highly accomplished British naturalist and TV presenter, Chris Packham, narrated his childhood devotion to wildlife and his discovery of his unusual preference for interacting with the non-human world, rather than fellow humans. Drawing on his ability to discern visual patterns, and willingness to create tools from everyday objects such as jam jars, library books, binoculars and paper, he learned to map and record the comings and goings of wild animals and birds and, in doing so, develop an understanding of their, and his own, complex embodiment.

In the case of Packham's memoir, walking is prominent but it is always walking in search of another species, or to get to school or home, rather than the retreat from, and return to, civilisation that informs much pastoral walking literature and nature writing. In this, it is closer to the 'new nature writing' than to either classic memoirs or nature writing. Like Robert Macfarlane's *The Wild Places,* inner experience and outer nature are addressed; in Packham's memoir, however, inner experience is much more deeply entangled with his perception of non-human lives. His adolescent walks into the wilder areas around his suburban home demonstrate both his isolation from human and familial activities and his hunger for interaction with other types of life. In *Sparkle Jar* and unlike classic pastoral narratives, walking out of the limits of the urban is movement towards the social, rather than a retreat from it. Although the narrative shares some formal features with the new nature writing (where the search for something external parallels the inner quest for knowledge or transformation), in Packham's treatment walking is almost free from the dominant cultural constraints of the genre,

including high-cultural references and the elevated or spiritualised tone.

Packham's encounters with other species suggest new forms of solidarity and affinity between different forms of life, human and otherwise. In line with material ecocriticism, which affirms the co-creation of all the various forms of life, and the neurodivergent perspective described above, the memoir shows that the most interesting stories develop our understanding of what it is to be human. My reflections on Packham's narrative will be used to produce a series of initial suggestions for how ecocriticism and environmental writing might become more attuned to neurodiversity by addressing cognitive embodiment, ableist assumptions and chauvinism towards new forms of writing and cultural movements. In my conclusion, I propose some ideas for what a non-ableist walking literature might look like.

Autism, perception and cross-species identification

As Wolfe explains in a 2008 essay, if we are able to overcome the illusion of a stable human subject, and understand our dependence and vulnerability, we can create the possibility that:

> [N]ew lines of empathy, affinity and respect between different forms of life, both human and non-human, may be realised in ways not accountable, either philosophically or ethically, by the basic coordinates of liberal humanism.[xii]

Wolfe describes how Temple Grandin had recognised the rarity of her visual thinking and heightened tactile sense as a result of her work with cattle in the livestock industry. Grandin, who is Professor of Animal Studies at Colorado State University, explained in *Animals in Translation* how other animals, including cattle, are visual creatures to a greater extent than humans. She believes that her own neurological difference – which she attributes to autism – has provided her with the tendency to think in pictures. By this, she explains:

> I don't just mean that I am good at making architectural drawings and designs, or that I can design my cattle-restraining systems in my head. I actually think in pictures. During my thinking process I have no words in my head at all, just pictures.[xiii]

Grandin does not assert that all autistic people are visual thinkers. In her later book, *The Autistic Brain* (2014), she identifies two other thinking styles of autistic individuals: mathematical/pattern thinkers and word thinkers. In this earlier work, however, she confirms her belief – following the research of John Mitchell and Alan Snyder – that 'autistic people don't process what they see and hear into unified

wholes, or concepts, rapidly the way normal people do'.[xiv] She continues: 'autistic people are stuck in the *pieces* stage of perception to a greater or lesser degree, depending on the person'.[xv]

Grandin's *Thinking in Pictures* shows how her own visual thinking and tactile sensitivity provided her with the ability to understand and hence to empathise with the suffering of animals in so-called 'livestock processing facilities'. Freed from 'inattention blindness' caused by verbal processing (which is where an individual fails to respond to an unexpected stimulus in plain sight because it does not conform to linguistic expectations) Grandin believes that her experiences of her surroundings are more akin to those of other species.[xvi] According to Wolfe, as Grandin narrates her experiences of using the restraining chutes of the cattle processing facility in *Thinking in Pictures*, 'disability becomes the positive, indeed necessary condition for a powerful experience by Grandin that crosses not only the lines of species difference, but also of the organic and inorganic, the biological and mechanical, as well'.[xvii]

Whatever we think of the ethics of Grandin's involvement in the livestock industry and whether it is meaningful to talk of such an encounter as a crossing of species lines, her writing sheds light on experiences that are widely described in autistic life writing but could not be accounted for by the existing medical literature on autism. The medical understanding is sustained by the widely-used diagnostic criteria for an Autism Spectrum Disorder, which are contained in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Volume 5* (DSM -5).[xviii] Grandin's focus on the unique perceptual differences that she attributes to autism is supported by recent research, produced in partnership with autistic researchers, into the nature of autistic experience. In the first decade of the millennium, Laurent Mottron and Michelle Dawson developed the 'enhanced perceptual functioning' theory of autism:

> We suggested that the operations that are superior among autistic persons can be encompassed under the term 'perception', as understood in the 1990s cognitive neuropsychology literature […] This broader view of perception ranges from feature detection up to and including pattern recognition.[xix]

Perceptual performance was demonstrated across the visual and auditory fields, and was accompanied by 'greater autonomy of discrimination processes from the top-down influence of categorization'.[xx] And yet according to anecdotal sources within the autism community, the sensory and perceptual experiences of people with autism can be sources of the greatest areas of discomfort, as well as of joy.

These experiences are seldom taken into account in medical and social interventions for autism, which focus on curing or eliminating autism, rather than improving the day-to-day lives of autistic people.

In *Sparkle Jar*, the naturalist and TV presenter Chris Packham emphasised, among other things, the unusual perceptual experiences that resulted from his encounters with non-human nature. As he explained in a National Autistic Society (NAS) interview about his latest book, what may be described as deficits in filtering perceptual information – his fascination with 'light, patterns, sounds and smells' – actually meant he was able to 'see things which others couldn't in nature'. [xxi] He does not automatically locate the ability in himself, but suggests that this knowledge is embedded between the 'sensory qualities' of animals and 'his ability to engage'.[xxii] He does, however, believe that he is 'uniquely visual':

> I am more visual, so my pattern recognition is good. It's not that I conjure the image in my mind, because when I see something, it's a matrix and everything is interconnected and forms a pattern. I can remember the pattern. If a branch falls off a tree, I can tell because I remember that pattern. When you take a piece out, it no longer fits. I tried to infuse the book with those things to get the reader to try and feel it too.[xxiii]

Although he does not explicitly state this, Packham's adolescent walks to locate nesting kestrels – which are an important component of the narrative – depend on his enhanced perception of his surroundings (see below).

The following section argues that *Sparkle Jar* presents neurodiversity, with a particular emphasis on visual perception. It considers what Packham's text offers to supplement our knowledge, understanding and empathy with other species. In presenting his complex embodiment as a positive identity that brings with it a degree of vulnerability, Packham challenges the ideology of nature writing narratives that focus on self-improvement and self-reliance. However, even as he makes explicit his views on the positivity of autistic identities, he risks having his words subsumed into an ableist culture that regards disability as something to be overcome at the individual level.

Fingers in the Sparkle Jar and *Animals in Translation* as autism-biographies

Sparkle Jar is Chris Packham's first published memoir. It describes his early and teenage years growing up with a passion for non-human nature, the pain of losing a beloved companion, his relationships with family and neighbours, his first love interests, and his intense social alienation from his peers. It is told through a non-linear series of flash-backs, in a broad range of grammatical persons and tenses, but with

Packham as the focaliser. The book does not once mention autism, but it is popularly understood as a memoir about autism in the form of Asperger's Syndrome, which Packham spoke about in the BBC documentary entitled *Asperger's and Me* in 2017, which is the same year the book was published.

In this sense, *Sparkle Jar* is not classic 'autism-biography' in the sense of providing a description of autism for autistic or non-autistic readers, or of the process of seeking diagnosis. Packham's search for a diagnosis happens after the events narrated in the text. However, the author is 'an autistic subject who writes about his/her autistic experience or identity'.[xxiv] In recent autism-biography texts, the work is increasingly motivated by 'a socio-cultural disability perspective and education and raising awareness'.[xxv] In an announcement about his role as an NAS ambassador, Packham states his intention to develop what people know about how young autistic people see the world.[xxvi] In the NAS interview about his book, he says he wishes to 'facilitate an environment where autistic people don't have to suffer'.[xxvii]

The radical potential for 'autism-biography' comes from the fact that, until recently, autistic people were seen as unreliable informants about their own condition due to the nature of autism itself. However, as I argue below, both Packham and Grandin demonstrate both greater sensitivity to (and willingness to share their feelings in a general sense than typically present in much (although not all) nature writing and, if we require ethics to be founded on moral sentiment, then there is potential in this writing to encourage readers to widen the scope of their moral concern. It becomes clear in what follows that it is necessary to explore how atypical sensory and emotional experiences challenge ableist assumptions about 'correct functioning'.

Packham's memoir fulfils the social function of autism-biography by contributing a narrative that challenges ableist discourses. As I explain below, Packham contradicts stereotypes that deny autistic people an inner world, and he encourages the self-identification and social validation of autistic and Asperger's individuals. By focusing on the knowledge his unusual perceptual faculties afford, Packham suggests that his autism is not an abject social identity. In these ways, Packham takes on the role of representing autism as a cultural identity with positive aspects.[xxviii]

The subsequently stated aim of *Sparkle Jar* is to contribute to greater understandings of autism. The equally radical second narrative thread of the book is also of interest. This story presents the author coming to terms with the death of his pet kestrel and subsequent realisation of mortality and vulnerability. The two narrative threads are intertwined: Packham's validation of autistic self-knowledge provides support for his claims to experience empathy with other species, and hence we

understand his despair at losing his beloved companion. However, Packham's emotional attachment to these other lives raises questions that belong to broader considerations than autism studies.

The focus on autistic experience within the book in the NAS interviews deflects the presentation of Packham's radical identification with other species in the text itself. The narrator's intense reaction to the death of the kestrel and description of his depression after losing two of his dogs suggests both his personal vulnerability and high valuation of non-human lives. The story of cross-species identification, and the narrative of self- understanding and acceptance, provide a new direction in the 'new nature writing'. *Sparkle Jar* does not focus on the recuperation of an able body and mind – it is a story about survival in spite of, and perhaps because of, awareness of vulnerability across all species.

Grandin's arguments about cross-species identifications and changing our attitudes to autism are much more explicit in *Animals in Translation: The Woman who Thinks Like a Cow*. While her earlier memoirs *Emergence: Labelled Autistic* and *Thinking in Pictures: My Life with Autism* dealt more overtly with the validity of autistic self-presentation, *Animals in Translation* addresses how autism has informed her work in animal studies. She argues that the predominantly visual nature of her inner life provides her with a unique perspective on the ways that animals respond to their environments. She determines that animals possess far more sophisticated perceptual and sensory processes, and hence more thought and consciousness, than is commonly understood. Grandin concludes that animals and humans share a capacity for non-verbal thought that is overlooked by human exceptionalism. A secondary narrative is akin to Packham's bildungsroman, although less prominent in this text. Grandin found herself alienated from her peers during teenage years, and found social contact with animals provided her with the opportunity for happiness and self-knowledge.

This chapter will begin to explore how far both texts go to offering an alternative ethics based on cross-species identifications, but it is worth asking how far both authors perpetuate ableist discourse with their combination of personal and nature memoirs. Are the autism narratives that aim at a non-autistic audience operate at the level of social curiosity? Do Packham and Grandin represent their efforts to overcome their disabilities to serve as useful members of society, providing able-bodied readers with curious information about other species? To create what Cary Wolfe calls 'new lines of empathy, affinity and respect' between all types of lives, it is important that Packham and Grandin don't just describe their bonds with the non-human world, but that they are able to show us what these bonds

feel like. To be able to do so, however, they need to persuade readers that they are reliable informants about their own mental states. It is perhaps unfair to expect that two authors may overcome the discourses that would position autistic writers as incapable of recognising their emotional states and to challenge readers to rethink ideologically-loaded narratives about human independence and invulnerability. The wide popularity of both texts suggests that they are able to do this.

Fingers in the Sparkle Jar

Chris Packham's memoir may be mined for a portrait of autism that emphasises the 'triad' of impairments, including difficulties with back-and-forth conversation, deficits in developing, maintaining and understanding relationships (with humans) and an intense, unstinting, interest – this time in the natural world. These characteristics are identified in the diagnostic criteria for Autism Spectrum Disorder.[xxix] In the language of DSM-5, autism is described in terms of deviance from a supposed cognitive 'norm' and by the failure to achieve a socially acceptable identity:

- Highly restricted, fixated interests that are abnormal in intensity or focus;
- Hyper- or hyporeactivity to sensory input or unusual interest in sensory aspects of the environment (e.g., apparent indifference to pain/temperature, adverse response to specific sounds or textures, excessive smelling or touching of objects, visual fascination with lights or movement);
- Deficits in developing, maintaining, and understanding relationships;
- Deficits in social-emotional reciprocity, ranging, for example, from abnormal social approach and failure of normal back-and-forth conversation; to reduced sharing of interests, emotions, or affect; to failure to initiate or respond to social interactions.

Packham employs various literary techniques to illuminate both how his childhood and adolescence were affected by these supposed impairments and crucially asks us to reconsider their practical, ethical and emotional connotations. The opening chapter of the book, 'The Collector', presents a 'lonely' 'ladybird boy' who may be regarded as struggling with 'social-emotional reciprocity' and seems to have 'highly restricted, fixated interests'. There is a symbolic transaction with an 'amiable' ice-cream van driver who humours the child's attempts to offer dioramas in jam jars in exchange for lollies. Without knowing how to proceed, the narrator asks, 'What do you say to a weird kid with dinosaurs in jam jars who never speaks, who only ever points, who buys your cheapest ice lollies and seems to think that

bartering with various bugs is a viable currency for exchange?'.[xxx]

The unnamed narrator apparently regards the child as eccentric, yet it becomes clear that the boy is the author's younger self. We soon learn that the boy isn't lonely; or, at least, he does not consider himself lacking in company or connections. It is apparent that the boy's assumed deficits in the range of his interests and in his lack of [human] social reciprocity may obscure our awareness of his other attributes, which include his heightened focus and assumed connection with his chosen interlocutors. Yet, his enthusiasm for wildlife combines with the DSM's 'unusual interest in sensory aspects of the environment', as demonstrated by the description of his experience of the back garden:

> He lay back and whistled, the bird spluttered on, he wet his lips and whistled again adding a flourish and the bird whistled back mimicking his notes, he waited, the bird rambled through its repetitive repertoire, then he whistled again and the bird replied. The duet went on until the mimic vanished and then he whistled and answered himself, stroking the polka dotting of daisies with sweeping arcs of his arms, in synchrony and symmetry.[xxxi]

In whistling to the bird, the boy shows an awareness of its reciprocity, and his own urge to the more thoroughly equal relation of 'symmetry', which might be considered social. This encounter foreshadows encounters with more exotic animals and birds that are presented later on. The dioramas, or sparkle jars of the title evoke the boy-naturalist's urge to comprehend a diverse natural world through a process of joyful close study and familiarity; they make the abstraction of knowledge from lived experience apparent.

The first-person narrator doesn't appear until the third section of the first chapter, 'Brand New Savage', which is set a few months later than the opening section in September 1966. In this way, both the narrator's experiences and his surroundings are revealed in more detail. From this point on, the story moves out of chronological or thematic sequence, with many switches in perspective. The flash forwards to the present day – which is the sort of device we might expect to find in a celebrity memoir – does not occur until page 42, and it is written from the perspective of an omniscient spectator. Chapters often begin with no clues as to who is talking and from where: this is pieced together through details. The reader finds herself in the middle of an intensely detailed rendered, sensory landscape. What prevents this from becoming overwhelming is that the more recent events are presented in italics.

While the text focuses on the boy's interest in the natural world, the descriptions of his surroundings include many references to popular culture and people. A behavioural psychologist

examining these circumstances might take the boy's actions as signs of narrowness of interest and a failure to engage socially; yet the narration of the boy's thoughts and feelings conjures up a sense of pleasure gained from the enormous variety of sensory stimuli including visual, tactile, auditory and olfactory information from many different sources. As Packham reveals later on, it's not so much that he wanted to be alone with animals but that 'it was the only time when I could feel comfortable'.[xxxii]

Packham describes a search for social relationships based on shared interests. By comparison with the popular interests of the majority of his peers, the range of his interests in the natural world is enormous in scope. In the DSM criteria, reciprocity is presented as a positive social exchange, although it is deprived of any significant qualitative description. In his interactions with his peers, the narrator finds little reciprocation in terms of his interests or the emotions he conveys them with. On the other hand, in the description of his relationship with the kestrel the narrator suggests emotional reciprocity:

> [H]e was still there, whispering to his bird. His face was really close to it and it was bending forward and playfully pecking at his nose and, although she could only see his silhouette in profile, she could tell he was smiling.[xxxiii]

When Packham describes his local environment and the creatures found in it, the sentence structure and syntax sometimes require an effort on the part of the reader. The environments of ponds, trees, copses fields, houses and even shops are drenched in adjectives and adverbs, neologisms and pronouns. The subject is at first obscure and heavy with detail. However, despite the potential for the reader to become overwhelmed, the there is also a sense of satisfaction when the subject of the paragraph or sentence is finally revealed in its uniqueness. Another jarring factor is the scarcity of proper names for people and animals (although brands and cultural references are named) apart from the confusing use of 'Kestrel' and 'Tyrannosaurus' for both individuals and the species. Together, these features hint at both the rich sensory world that the narrator experiences as well as a focus on beloved particulars that are constantly changing.

Walking is one of the ways in which the young Chris Packham traces the movements, sound, smells and tracks of the creature he is interested in including foxes, badgers, toads, grass snakes, minnows and sticklebacks, and even the elderly soldier he is fascinated by. He does not always walk along paths, and he is as likely to crawl, scramble, run, stagger or perch as he is to walk. Movement is never a monotonous act but it punctuates the visual descriptions with a kinetic rhythm of its own:

> [H]e turned and smacked his soles down on the pavement, zigzagging in staggers and bounds to avoid stepping on the cracks, skipping along the kerb by dropping his left foot in the gutter, dodging dog shit and curling round the lamp post [...]

Musical effects such as these help to unify the diverse array of information. Packham also incorporates many kinds of reported speech, which provides stylistic variation and, in the case of the conversation with his therapist, allow the narrator to speak at greater length about his emotions. These features reveal a rich and nuanced emotional life and contradict the 'robotic' stereotype of autism. The shifts between perspectives demonstrate an emotional life that differs in quality, but not kind, from the 'neurotypical' norm.

These complex representations of sensory and perceptual detail, alongside the disorienting structural features that confuse the perception of space and time, intimate Packham's 'complex embodiment'. As he explains in response to a question about the 'sensory description' he uses in the book:

> Those passages you mention in the book are deliberately intense. My purpose was to try and get the reader to visualise and feel that cascade of sensory in out that happens at a rapid pace. Too much information is one of [the National Autistic Society's] catchphrases; I think it's actually too much information, too quickly.

The narrator of the text is apparently aware that other people don't see the world in the same way as he does – suggesting he understands the perspective of his neighbours and readers. He has presumably gained awareness of how his ways of perceiving and responding to the world differ to the supposed 'norm'.

The secondary narrative about Packham's relationships with particular species emerges in part out of, but also inseparably entwined with, the discovery of his unusual perceptual and sensory awareness. It is through frequent and solitary explorations on foot that Packham first encounters the kestrel. Walking thus contributes to the central narrative arc, since it enables the bird's acquisition, its taming and eventual semi-'domestication'. His heightened visual perception, combined with the ability to explore the countryside on foot, allow the narrator to locate a nesting kestrel when he is just 14 years old:

> I sat up and breathed and, mildly calmed, gave the second whole page over to a neatly drawn

> map of a tiny patch of Hampshire. It showed individual trees and there was a scale and a legend that illustrated the symbols for fencing, a bog and a wet ditch, and at its centre a great ballooning oak labelled 'nest tree'.[xxxiv]

The narrator's attachment to the kestrel he rears from a chick becomes so intense that he is devastated when it inevitably dies some years later. Only as an adult does he find the language to describe the paradox of attachments that are so intense that they both endanger him and make his life possible:

> I was on my own with the dogs. I couldn't leave them. They loved me. I hated that though, at that point I hated them for loving me … pure love, immaculate, perfect love.[xxxv]

As the adolescent boy develops his love of the kestrel he simultaneously fails to experience reciprocal relations with his human companions. To the narrator, the deficit in feeling lies in the part of his apparently 'normal' peers who seem to have no values that are not based on fashion or hierarchy. As the narrative proceeds, it becomes clear that Packham still finds more meaning and beauty in his relationship with individual animals than in any status he has in the world of humans. His inclusion of a reported dialogue with the therapist provides a perspective through which this can be examined alongside more 'typical' emotional challenges. This indirect characterisation – even in its third-person form – may even be a way to persuade readers of the validity of the narrator's claims about his own mental states. His 'unreliability' is mediated by the perspective of the therapist.

While Packham emphasises his intellectual abilities, there is little in the text that supports ableist assumptions about the importance of individual will and endurance in overcoming disability. In fact, while adolescent Packham refers to his drive to outdo his peers in typical language about motivation and willpower, he later states that he turned to the therapist to find a 'framework' to deal with death (NAS nd: np). The experiences that the memoir celebrates – 'empathy, affinity and respect' – are enhanced by the author's awareness of his own and others' vulnerability and mortality. In the NAS interviews, Packham acknowledges that he is both lucky to have had the type of childhood where he was allowed to collect and obtain such a wide variety of pets, and an adult life where he can afford to pay for help with his mental health.[xxxvi] This acknowledgement of privilege is absent from most examples of nature writing.

Describing himself from the point of view of others, including those of a shell-shocked former soldier and a struggling single dad, suggests that the narrator *does* have a great deal of empathy with other people, and this does not support Simon Baron-Cohen's 'extreme male brain' theory of autism.

There are, in fact, more representations of empathic experience in *Sparkle Jar* than in many other nature memoirs: however, they focus on non-normative subjects rather than dominant cultural figures or family and risk being discounted. Being labelled 'queer' by his peers suggests that Packham's adolescent behaviour challenged hegemonic identities but offered him little cultural recognition at the time. His subsequent adoption of the punk culture he describes in Chapter 7 offered a more empowering alternative to mainstream ideology.

Towards an ethics of shared vulnerability

Packham and Grandin show us valuable things about autism, and suggest that if we question the importance of linguistic reciprocity it will lead us to regard other species in a new light. This has far-reaching consequences for how we *should* behave towards other species, some of which are explicitly stated by Grandin in her text. For Grandin, this does not mean that we should treat other species as we treat humans, but that we need to re-think the suffering we cause them.

There are also key differences between the texts. Grandin reports the experiences that had led to her empathy for other species as a scientist; Packham shows us the processes that led to his stance towards the natural world and its basis in unfolding conjunctions of material dependency and embodiment. Walking is just one of several ways in which Packham develops skills that attune him to the perceptions of other occupants of the ecosystem. While the narrative emphasises Packham's unusual visual perception, *Fingers in the Sparkle Jar* demonstrates how atypical corporeal and cognitive embodiment may lead us to feel empathy for other lives. Perhaps it is precisely this sort of empathy that is needed to dispel Wolfe's 'fantasies of disembodiment and autonomy'.[xxxvii]

Lessons from *Fingers in the Sparkle Jar* and *Animals in Translation*: what might we learn as ecocritics?

What do we learn from both Packham's and Grandin's memoirs that may help us develop forms of environmental literature and criticism? What do we gain from thinking about the role of walking in *Sparkle Jar* in comparison to other works of nature writing or memoir? While it is far from comprehensive, this final section predicts what non-ableist environmental literature might look like, based on the readings of these two memoirs. It is hoped that this will help establish future links between ecocriticism and critical disability studies. The neurodivergent perspective described earlier offers a starting point from which to spot the most salient parallels. Both critical practices ask us to question the cultural basis for the marginalisation of certain forms of life. As a consequence, this type

of intersectional ecocriticism:

- Is aware of how dominant social identities reinforce ableist social mechanisms. For instance, ecocriticism has not yet addressed the way that much (although not all) published nature writing is both produced and consumed by able-bodied, middle class professionals.
- Is conscious of how bodily and mental ability are fleeting and occasional states for humans and other species, produced by complex material and social processes beyond the individual. A related question might be: why are disability and vulnerability so often elided in nature writing?
- Will consider other forms of kinship and 'sym-collaborations' in addition to nuclear human families.[xxxviii]
- Questions why cultural narratives of nature so often focus on the white, male, young, able, educated, middle class individual alone in the wilderness or in communion with more charismatic and endangered mammalian or avian species.
- Continues to question why technology, adaptations, medication and prostheses of different types are assumed to be impediments to meaningful contact with nature.
- Explores how the myths of bodily and spiritual purity in nature are historically dependent on the perceived threats that originated at the beginning of Industrialisation and the diversification of claims against the elite. A fully intersectional ecocriticism will explore how social and democratic changes such as the improved status of women, healthcare, labour movements and migration, combined with elitism and social Darwinism, informed the various strands of the 'back to nature' movements and risk cultures upon which British nature writing is based.

With respect to walking narratives, in particular, such literature will:

- Acknowledge privileged material and social positions, including those produced by ableist culture, and how these are often the basis for solitary walking encounters in remote and sublime places.
- Explore how Romanticist foundations of environmental culture in Britain during the Industrial Revolution and subsequent capitalism produced the foundations of a walking literature that is distinctly ableist, elitist, Eurocentric and anthroparchic.
- Seek out a new aesthetic paradigm that does not require superior physical or mental abilities, but addresses embodiment in all its complexity and entanglement with organic and material prostheses.

- Supplement linguistic mastery with imaginative, kinetic, visual, tactile and auditory forms of environmental knowledge and experience.
- Notice other walkers, wayfarers and inhabitants encountered along the path, including those who do not look or sound like us, who are 'uncanny' or 'unfamiliar', who are less able and fit than us, and where relevant, treat them with empathy and compassion – or at least kindness.[xxxix]
- Acknowledge that feelings of vulnerability and dependency are more likely to be part of our experiences of walking than not. It will address what the disability studies critic Elizabeth A. Wheeler asks: 'How can the vulnerability of disabled people be perceived as a part of our shared vulnerability on the planet itself, rather than a unique and separate kind of weakness?'[xl]

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i Judy Singer, a sociologist, who is autistic, came up with a word 'neurodiversity' to describe conditions including ADHD, autism, and dyslexia. It was hoped that this term would focus on the different ways of thinking and learning that are associated with these conditions, rather than on the litany of deficits that are more typically described. In '"Why can't you be normal for once in your life?"' From a 'problem with no name' to the emergence of a new category of difference', in M. Corker & S. French (eds.) *Disability and discourse* (Buckingham/Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1999). The term has since been applied to other conditions that aren't associated with autism, such as bipolar, schizophrenia and speech difficulties.

ii The definition of autism used in this paper is as follows: 'autism is a developmental (social learning) disability, not an intellectual learning disability or a mental health issue. However, it may be accompanied by an intellectual learning disability and/or mental health issues', Chown et al, "Improving research about us, with us: A framework for inclusive autism research," *Disability and Society,* 32.5 (2017), endnote 3.

iii As Sarah Jaquette Ray explains with respect to American wilderness culture: 'The myths of the individual, genetically superior body, and the wilderness plot all powerfully shape contemporary adventure culture in ways that are at odds with any vision of an inclusive environmental movement'."Risking Bodies in the Wild: The "Corporeal Unconscious" of American Adventure Culture", in *Disability Studies and the Environmental Humanities* (Lincoln, NA: University of Nebraska Press, 2017), 62.

iv Cary Wolfe *What is Posthumanism?* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 2010), xv.

v Opposing the rhetoric of ableism does not entail denigrating all human efforts and achievements and obliterating the notion of individuality – it is about questioning the a *priori* superiority of actions according to dominant cultural ideas of human worth.

vi Tobin Siebers, *Disability Theory* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008), 10.

vii Siebers, *Disability Theory*, 271.

viii Ibid, 278.

ix Mitchell and Snyder, "Precarity and Cross-Species Identification: Autism, the Critique of Normative Cognition, and Nonspeciesism", in *Disability Studies and the Environmental Humanities,* Ray and Sibara (eds) (Lincoln, NA: University of Nebraska Press, 2017) 570.

x Wolfe, *What is Postmodernism?,* 141.

xi Cary Wolfe "Learning from Temple Grandin, or, animal studies, disability studies, and who comes after the subject", in *New formations* 64 (Summer 2008) 117.

xii Ibid p110.

xiii Temple Grandin and Catherine Johnson, *Animals in Translation: The Woman who Thinks Like a Cow* (London: Bloomsbury, 2005) 17.

xiv Temple Grandin and Richard Panek, *The Autistic Brain* (London: Rider, 2014) 299.

xv Ibid, *The Autistic Brain* (299).

xvi Temple Grandin, *Thinking in Pictures* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006) 25.

xvii Wolfe, 'Learning from Temple Grandin', 117.

xviii Clarity about autism is certainly not increased by the fact that by its inclusion in the DSM it appears to be a form of mental illness, when in fact it is generally understood by clinicians as a form of developmental disorder. The *DSM 5* was published by the American Psychiatric Association in 2013,

xix Mottron, Dawson et al, 'Enhanced perceptual functioning in autism: an update, and eight principles of autistic perception', in *Journal Autism Developmental Disorders,* 36.1 (January 2006) 28.

xx The research that Grandin referred to concerned autistic access to typical low-level perceptual processes, rather than the extent and role of such enhanced perception in a range of complex tasks, which is examined by Mottron and Dawson.

xxi NAS, 'Chris Packham, About *Fingers in the Sparkle Jar'*, np.

xxii Ibid, np.
xxiii Ibid, np.
xxiv L Van Goidsenhoven, '"Autie-Biographies": Life Writing Genres and Strategies from an Autistic Perspective'. *Journal of Language, Literature and Culture*, 64.2 (2017) p82.
xxv Ibid, 82.
xxvi NAS 2017: np
xxvii O'Connor, 'Chris Packham opens up on Asperger's Syndrome', np.
xxviii
xxix The terms Asperger's Syndrome, High Functioning Autism and the term Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) are rejected by some neurodiversity activists in favour of the term autism, because of their associations with ableist rhetoric and because they are so generally misunderstood. Further, the DSM-V, published in 2013, removed Asperger's Syndrome as a separate diagnosis and included it under the umbrella term ASD. The term Asperger's was formerly used to refer to an autistic individual with a supposedly higher-than average or an average IQ and no delays with speech acquisition in childhood. It is the term used by Packham, but Grandin refers to herself as 'autistic'.
xxx Packham, *Fingers in the Sparkle Jar,* p7.
xxxi Ibid, p10.
xxxii Ibid, p273.
xxxiii Ibid, p73.
xxxiv Ibid, p19.
xxxv Ibid, p368.
xxxvi Chris Packham, Fingers in the Sparkle Jar (371) and NAS,'Chris Packham, About *Fingers in the Sparkle Jar*' (np).
xxxvii Cary Wolfe *What is Posthumanism?* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 2010) xv. See page 2.
xxxviii Donna Haraway, 'Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin', in *Environmental Humanities*, vol. 6, 2015, pp. 161-162
xxxix Op cit, 165.
xl Elizabeth A. Wheeler, 'Moving together side by side: human-animal comparisons in picture books', in Ray and Sibara eds *Disability Studies and the Environmental Humanities,* p595.