

Uniquely Human: A Different Way of Seeing Autism

By Dr. Barry M. Prizant with Tom Fields-Meyer

Reviewed by CAROL-ANN O'SÍORÁIN, a teacher at Scoil Bhríde, Donaghmede. She is pursuing a PhD in the area of autism and literacy and is the current president of the Irish Association of Teachers in Special Education (IATSE).

Uniquely Human: A Different Way of Seeing Autism is the product of a collaborative venture between an academic, Dr. Barry Prizant and a literary expert, Tom Fields-Meyer. The narrative journalism of Fields-Meyer provides a rich descriptive style to Prizant's academic life work. Fields-Meyer enables the reader to access, through empathic storytelling, the academic theorising of Prizant.

Dr. Barry Prizant is an internationally well-respected practitioner in the field of autism and education. His four-decade career has enabled him to have a unique perspective and insight on the education and life span development of young children and adults with autism. The author's note is essential reading as it sets the tone for the language used throughout the book and pointedly presents the underlying philosophy, values and practices of the authors.

The book is set out in two sections Part One: *Understanding Autism* and Part Two: *Living with Autism*. In neither section will you find a definition or a list of autism characteristics because the message in this book is that learning about autism is learning with the person, focused on practice and not solely through the acquisition of academic knowledge. Other key points in Part One include the importance of regular 'movement' or physical exercise for people with autism, the power of observation, authentic listening and seeking answers to 'why?' Prizant also emphasises attention to self-regulation in adults while supporting or working with people with autism. Possibly the most compelling argument is seeing all behaviours as attempts at communicating, valuing and exploring verbal and non-verbal behaviours to make connections. Throughout the book he itemises some extreme cases, which are at times upsetting to read.

In Part Two of the book, *Living with Autism*, Prizant revisits historical therapeutic practices where brute force and gravely inhumane behaviours further impacted

on already vulnerable families and potential abilities of people with autism. The case of Andrew Randall and his family is used as an example. Prizant, through Fields-Meyer's empathic narratives and portrayal of family life and stories like the Randall's, places enormous significance on the uniqueness of families, the persistent drive of parents and their unconditional love and support for their child. In the final chapter *The Big Questions*, Prizant presents the issues parents and teachers experience and myths about autism in a question format and then he answers the question in a logical, coherent manner with practical solutions.

Whether you are a parent of a child with autism, a teacher, a therapist, a special needs assistant, or carer, Prizant calls for a shift in our attitudes and behaviours towards persons who exhibit difference. He offers a voice of reason, reassurance and practical advice in acknowledging and supporting what is unique about the person with autism. Prizant has written this book in a narrative form and positions the reader in an active listening mode as he relates case studies through the voice of an experienced, deeply empathic practitioner. This presentation of cases calls the reader into a depth of reflection and self-evaluation of personal attitudes, behaviours and responses towards repetitive stereotypical behaviours and different communication systems.

UNIQUELY HUMAN: A DIFFERENT WAY OF SEEING AUTISM by Dr. Barry M. Prizant with Tom Fields-Meyer is published by Souvenir Press, London, 2016 and costs Stg£20.00.

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