

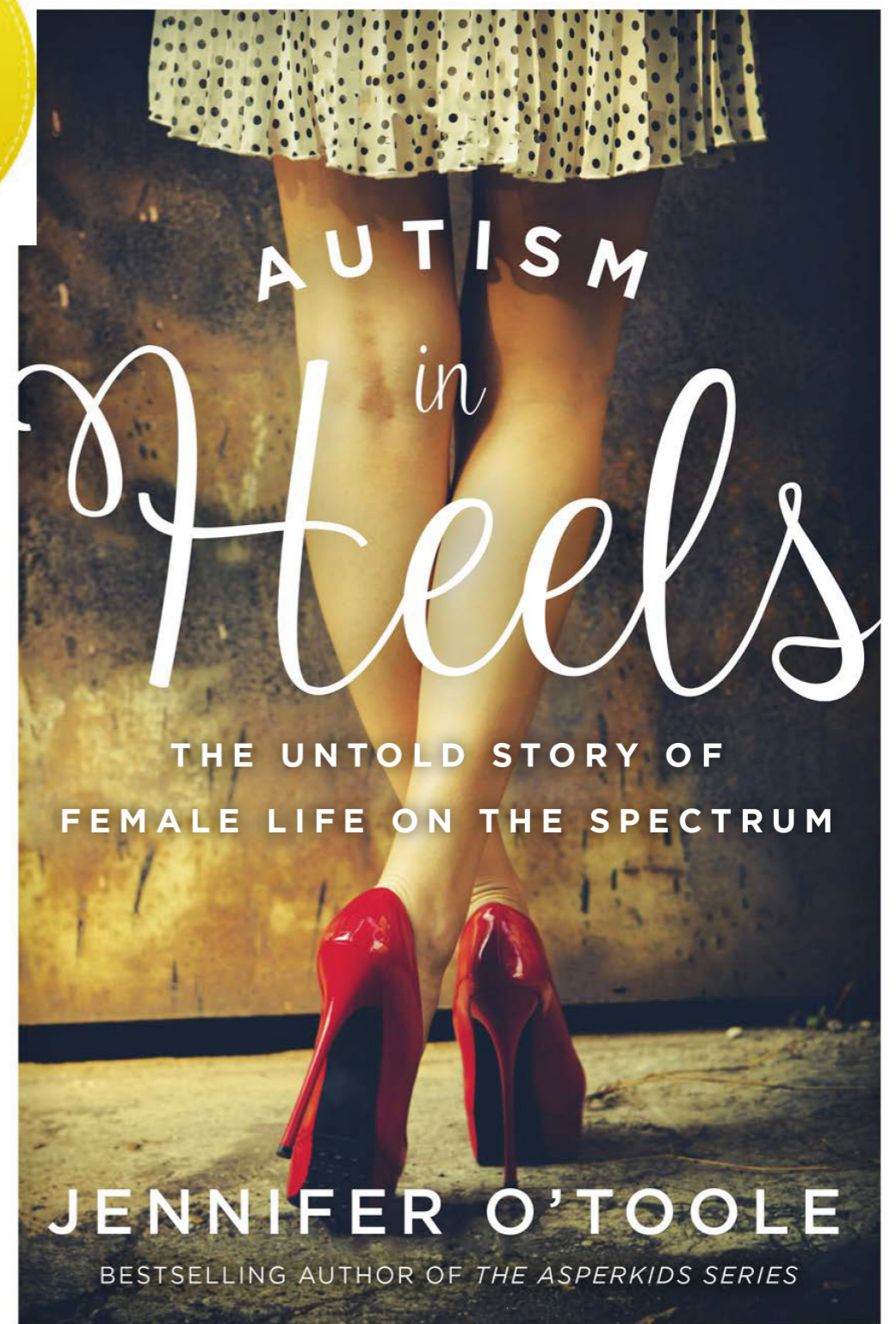


# The Chick-list Checklist

*A Portrait of Women, Girls,  
and Our Unique Autism Style*

THE WALL  
STREET  
JOURNAL.

BEST SELLER



# Autism in Heels

*The Untold Story of a Female Life  
on the Spectrum*

Jennifer O'Toole



Skyhorse Publishing

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### Sketching Our Portrait

What’s it like to be a us? Too much. We *feel* too much. *React* too much. *Say* too much. *Need* too much. So says the world. I say: the world is wrong. There is an exquisite trade-off for a life so differently led: complex imagination, limitless curiosity, profound compassion, and restless independent thought. They are the core of everything I am. They will be responsible for whatever legacy I leave behind.

Having now appeared live before hundreds of thousands of people worldwide, I can say that I have never met a girl born before the mid-1990’s who was ever even considered for an Asperger Syndrome diagnosis. If they were nonverbal or showed lower cognitive abilities, “female” and “autism” *might* be spoken together, otherwise, no. Girls had to be *more* obviously affected in *more* ways to be noticed, which is likely why experts believed that, on average, girls with autism had more severe symptoms and more significant intellectual disabilities. Those days are not long gone.

Bright, verbose, articulate, sensitive, intense girls and women—some introverted, some stage divas, some trendsetters, some followers, and some leaders—can be just as “autistic” as the guys and still not be seen by “experts.” Or by ourselves.

The most common route to identification is the one I took—the mother of spectrum kids, recognizing myself and my history in

my children’s present-day. At age sixty, fifty, forty, thirty, so many have suffered for so long without the one, accurate identifier that could change everything. And we are asking, now . . . is it finally our turn to make sense?

Lift the mask. Spot the patterns. Sketch an ever-improving portrait. Then tell our stories around the world.

I have become a Teller *and* Keeper of Stories. A guardian, not an owner. Witness to the disorientation, anger, exhalation, hope, relief . . . sounding board for the frustration and unanswered questions. Why don’t professionals know more? Why don’t they understand more? Why are so many sisters of spectrum brothers dismissed—their struggles equally real, yet routinely overlooked? Why, after enormous investments of time, money, and energy in “expert” guidance, do so many women and girls still walk away, characters questioned, unhelped, without even compassion or recognition?

I had to recognize myself in *Someone Else’s* Story for me to drop my guard—had to have external validation before I could consider believing my own mind. Right now, there are thousands of women still camouflaged, even from themselves. And while I can’t answer all of their questions, I *can* lift the mask. Point out the patterns. Sketch them into portraits, and, right here, be the Someone Else in the stories . . . so that we can all see and be seen.



# *The Chick-List Checklist*

## *A Portrait of Women, Girls, and Our Unique Autism Style*

- We tend not to act *out* as often as we act *in*. We focus the majority of our anger and frustration at ourselves. If we get in trouble, it's much more likely for sounding like a "know-it-all" or for trouble regulating our moods.
- We can have a very difficult time navigating the complexities and nuances of female friendships, which, in comparison to male friendships, rely more acutely on storytelling (though our nonlinear thinking and easy distractibility tend to stall conversations instead of furthering them) and emotional and conversational reciprocity (though we can't shift perspectives, unwittingly tend to dominate "air time," and neglect to ask open-ended questions).
- Oversharing or sharing with the wrong people in the wrong circumstances is a common downfall.



- We are frequent victims of bullying and abuse, though we may not understand it as such, and tend to feel overwhelming compassion or sympathy for those who hurt us.
- Girls on the spectrum are often word/linguistically-based thinkers with a keen interest in word and phrase origins, foreign language, and regional accents—which we have an uncanny ability to imitate.
- We frequently have a strong connection to poetry and song lyrics and can detect incredibly subtle patterns within both.
- It is not uncommon to see us collecting and rescuing animals.
- Spectrum girls are more likely to gather and memorize as much information as we can on social rules, social psychology, and sexual expectations. It's our way of compensating for what others pick up naturally.
- We tend to be socially naive, blind to others' motives, and have a tough time clearly distinguishing between levels of a social hierarchy.
- It's not *always* making friends that's difficult. Often, it's our tendency to be unaware of strain in the relationship and/or the sustained attention required to maintain relationships that are our downfall.
- Our friendships can be broken down into eras where close ties end abruptly, though the cause of the “break-ups” may elude us.
- We find it difficult to understand manipulation, disloyalty, vindictive or cruel behavior, and social retaliation (because we cannot see strategy or perspective).
- Throughout our lives, we often gravitate towards people who are older and/or younger than us, rather than direct peers. The relationships we prefer have clear

roles and rules and less need to spontaneously negotiate dialogue, compromise, and group dynamics. In a situation where we are older, we understand that are in the teacher/leader/big sister role, so it's alright to be more didactic. That we're actually *expected* to take the wheel, so to speak. On the other hand, if we're the younger, we can settle into an apprentice role—watching, learning, and following along.

- Girls on the spectrum may feel more intensely connected to fictional or historical characters than to real people.
- Biographies (books, documentaries, films) are a favorite way to study people and from their strategies, choices, accomplishments, and relationships, develop a larger personal emotional vocabulary and learn “how to be.”
- Hyperlexia—very early, very fast, self-taught, highly-skilled reading—is common among spectrum girls.
- Girls on the spectrum are often particularly sensitive to artistic, pattern-based mathematical realities, extending their concrete knowledge adeptly into musical cadence and visual art.
- Many girls find it very tough to clearly distinguish between levels of social hierarchy.
- We tend to be socially naive, blind to others' motives, have trouble distinguishing acquaintances from close friends, or define what constitutes an actual friendship (we haven't had enough experience).

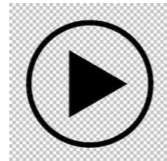
- For many girls, “show-womanship” skills far exceed comfort with spontaneous or one-on-one social interaction. Intuitive use of this sidestep around social anxiety can lead to excellence in teaching, narrative presentation, litigation, and performance.
- Girls often hyper-focus on one, all-encompassing “best-friendship” (and later, romantic relationship) which evolves into an all-or-nothing self-concept. Girls desperately want friendship and easily direct an inordinate amount of energy and emotion toward someone perceived as ‘theirs.’
- Perfectionism is the all-hallowed deity (and nemesis) of the majority of spectrum girls.
- Challenges with impulsivity, problem solving, emotional balance, and compulsions make us vulnerable to substance use/abuse (alcohol/marijuana) as well as process addictions (eating disorders, self-harm, skin picking, acting out sexually, shopping, gambling), despite our awareness of the negative impact on our lives.
- Eating disorders, like binge eating, anorexia nervosa, and bulimia are indicators of perfectionist tendencies, a need for artificial control, extreme rigidity, and adherence to routine. They are exponentially more present among girls and women, and should be considered serious “red flags.”
- Females are more likely than males to try to manage anxiety, depression, trauma, and low-self esteem through self-harming behaviors, such as cutting and skin picking.
- Women and girls are more apt to find less detectable ways to limit or avoid eye contact. We may look at the space between a speaker’s eyes in order to reassure them of our attention, while simultaneously reducing our sensory input by avoiding a direct gaze, and thus be able to listen to what’s being said. If we really focus on looking at someone in a personal conversation, we may lose our train of thought almost immediately. So, when listening, we may make brief eye contact, accompany it with a nod or smile, then look off into the middle distance as if considering what we’re hearing. Personally, if I am speaking, I may angle my head so that I can cast my gaze slowly but sharply down and to the left, then ahead again, then slowly upwards to the right—very practiced theatrical techniques that are both attractive *and* communicate “I am thinking about what you’re saying *or*, extemporaneously, about what I’m saying.” In either case, because it’s done with a certain amount of “art,” until or unless it’s pointed out, most people don’t notice anything unusual about my eye contact.



- Unlike our male counterparts, it's the level of intensity and almost-professorial knowledge about our special interest, rather than the interests themselves, that set us apart from neurotypical peers.
- People on the spectrum are much more likely to experience synesthesia. Girls are three times more likely to be synesthetes.
- Scripting from favorite TV shows, books, plays, and movies is one of the ways we mask social anxiety best. We copy the dialogue perfectly, though often miss the innuendos beneath.



- Frequent passions (a.k.a. special interests) include genealogy and timelines, Disney, mythologies, folklore, cosplay, history and historical fiction, time travel, literature and literary figures, language, animals, anime, fashion, music, and theater.
- Special interests provide two primary functions: they give our brains a pleasurable topic on which to ruminate and persevere, and they act as a social buffer, transportation to a distant time, place, species, or social scenario where interpersonal rules, hierarchies, and customs can be “studied and mastered.”
- Lining up our collections—of books, figurines, dolls, collectables—is one of the ways we “play” at *all* ages. The enjoyment comes more from setting precise “tableaux”—miniatures, fairy gardens, replicas, even Barbie wedding—rather than engaging in spontaneous, interactive activities.
- Gender identity varies with great obviousness amongst spectrum females. More commonly expected is some level of androgyny in clothing preference and a fluid sexual self-concept. But just as many of us greatly enjoy a rich, distinctly “womanly” sensuality, and/or strongly identify with a more classic-Hollywood female aesthetic. And most of us fall in the thousands of spaces in-between. As always, there are as many ways to embrace and embody “female” as there are people living the experience.



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