Autism in fiction film

A chronological filmography
with English descriptions



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Autism in Fiction Film — Chronological Filmography with English Descriptions

Free sample

Compiled from the film lists on a-typist.nl, ordered chronologically (oldest to newest). Each entry gives a brief overview of the plot, the role autism plays in the movie, and the film's country of origin, to help you decide whether a title is worth watching for your situation.

Contents

This free sample contains the introduction, all films from the 1990s and the opening of the analysis. The blue lines are clickable; the gray titles are in the full e-book.

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Words used in this list

1960s

- Change of Habit (1969)

1970s

- The Candy Snatchers (1973)
- Son-Rise: A Miracle of Love (1979)

1980s

- Mario (1984)
- The Boy Who Could Fly (1986)
- Rain Man (1988)

1990s

- Backstreet Dreams (1990)
- Little Man Tate (1991)
- Ipagpatawad Mo (1991)
- House of Cards (1993)
- What's Eating Gilbert Grape (1993)
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- Relative Fear (1994)
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- Cube (1997)
- Journey of the Heart (1997)
- Spoonface Steinberg (1998)
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- Mercury Rising (1998)
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- Down in the Delta (1998)
- Molly (1999)
- The Other Sister (1999)

2000s

- Bless the Child (2000)
- Elling (2001)
- Zig Zag (2002)
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- Milwaukee, Minnesota (2003)
- Swaathi Mutthu (2003)
- Miracle Run (2004)
- Killer Diller (2004)
- Marathon (2005)
- Mozart and the Whale (2005)
- Magnificent 7 (2005)
- Raam (2005)
- Snow Cake (2006)
- De Gek op de Heuvel (2006)
- After Thomas (2006)
- Mysterious Creatures (2006)
- Bajo las Estrellas (2007)
- Václav (2007)
- The Pye-Dog (2007)
- Imagination (2007)
- Margot at the Wedding (2007)
- Ben X (2007)

- Apna Asmaan (2007)
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- Dark Floors (2008)
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- God's Ears (2008)
- The Black Balloon (2008)
- If You Could Say It in Words (2008)
- Chocolate (2008)
- Suzie (2009)
- Drive Me to the Sea (2009)
- Dancing Trees (2009)
- Technotise: Edit & I (2009)
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2010s

- Simple Simon (2010)
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- SuperBrother (2010)
- Pieds nus sur les limaces (Lily Sometimes) (2010)
- Dear John (2010)
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- The Great Fight (2011)
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- Salmon Fishing in the Yemen (2011)
- Fly Away (2011)
- Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close (2011)
- A Mile in His Shoes (2011)
- The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo (2011)
- The Story of Luke (2012)
- A Man Called Nereus (2012)
- Barfi! (2012)
- White Frog (2012)
- Das Pferd auf dem Balkon (A Horse on the Balcony) (2012)
- Visionary (2012)

Soft in the Head (2013)
Stand Clear of the Closing Doors (2013)
Season of Miracles (2013)
The Girl From the Wardrobe (2013)
The Odd Way Home (2013)
Daglicht (2013)
Haridas (2013)
Killers (2014)
X+Y (2014)
Musical Whispers (2014)
Stay Then Go (2014)
NightLights (2014)
Jack of the Red Hearts (2015)
Jane Wants a Boyfriend (2015)
Le Goût des Merveilles (The Sense of Wonder) (2015)
The Big Short (2015)
I Am Me (2015)
El Faro de las Orcas (The Lighthouse of the Orcas) (2016)
A Boy Called Po (2016)
A Remarkable Life (2016)
Cruel Summer (2016)
The Accountant (2016)
Ostitto (2016)
Split (2016)
A Man and a Woman (2016)
Beautiful Pain (Redha) (2016)
Please Stand By (2017)
Artax: Un Nuevo Comienzo (2017)
Colors of Wind (2017)
On Body and Soul (2017)
Keep the Change (2017)
The Drummer and the Keeper (2017)
House by the Lake (2017)
Light Thereafter (2017)
For Izzy (2018)
The Predator (2018)
Guang (2018)
Tully (2018)

- Monsieur Je-Sais-Tout (2018)
- Rainbow Jelly (2018)
- Dancing in the Rain (2018)
- Mind My Mind (2019)
- Hors Normes (2019)
- The Fanatic (2019)
- Love is Blind (2019)
- Innocent Witness (2019)
- Kia and Cosmos (2019)
- Copperman (2019)
- Haunting Inside (2019)
- The Spiders' Man (2019)

2020s

- The Night Clerk (2020)
- In Your Afterglow (2020)
- Big Blue Sea (2020)
- Come Play (2020)
- Nathan's Kingdom (2020)
- Drive Me to the End (2020)
- Drought (2020)
- Music (2021)
- The Innocents (2021)
- The Radio Amateur (2021)
- The Lone Ume Tree (2021)
- Sonata (2021)
- Butterfly, Lost (2021)
- I Used to Be Famous (2022)
- Fang (2022)
- When Time Got Louder (2022)
- Cha Cha Real Smooth (2022)
- The Sound of Violet (2022)
- Royal Ashes (2022)
- Ezra (2023)
- In His Mother's Eyes (2023)
- One More Chance (Be Water, My Friend) (2023)
- Wochenendrebellen / Weekend Rebels (2023)
- Bailey's Voice (2023)
- Gerald's Hands (2023)

Boy Makes Girl (2023)
Goyo (2024)
Flaminia (2024)
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Mountain Boy (2024)
The Unbreakable Boy (2025)
Tanvi the Great (2025)
The Accountant 2 (2025)
Sitaare Zameen Par (2025)
MMA - Meu Melhor Amigo (2025)
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A note on inclusion

This filmography aims to be comprehensive rather than curated. It includes every fiction film I could identify in which a character is explicitly autistic, coded as autistic, or widely discussed as autistic by critics and audiences, regardless of the quality of that portrayal, the accuracy of its research, or the size of the character's role in the story.

No selection has been made based on how good, harmful, respectful, or realistic a given depiction is. Some entries reflect thoughtful, well-researched portrayals shaped by autistic input; others rely on outdated stereotypes, "genius savant" tropes, or characters whose autism is only ever implied and never named on screen. Both extremes, and everything in between, are included side by side.

So a film's place on the list says nothing about the quality of its portrayal of autism: inclusion is not an endorsement. The short descriptions are written to help you judge for yourself, before watching, what kind of portrayal you're likely to encounter, and films that may be harmful or distressing carry a content note. In the chapter 'What this list shows', at the end of this e-book, I do look at representation: the patterns that emerge when you put all the films side by side, and how they have changed over time.

Words used in this list

A few words come up again and again in this list. Here is what they mean, so you do not have to look them up while you read.

Coded as autistic — A character who is never actually called autistic in the film, but who shows traits that many viewers or critics read as autistic.

Savant — Someone with a striking, stand-out skill — often in memory, calculation, music or art. Not all autistic people are savants, and savant skills can also occur without autism.

Asperger's (syndrome) — An older diagnosis for autistic people without a language delay or intellectual disability. It is no longer given as a separate diagnosis and now falls under autism, but you will still see it in older films and reviews.

Non-speaking / nonverbal — Describes someone who does not communicate through spoken words. Many non-speaking people communicate in other ways — writing, devices or gestures. 'Non-speaking' is the more current term.

Neurotypical — Someone whose brain works in the way society treats as the default — that is, not autistic or otherwise neurodivergent.

Neurodivergent / neurodivergence — An umbrella term for brains that work differently from that default, including autism, ADHD and dyslexia, among others.

High-functioning / low-functioning — Older labels for how much support an autistic person is assumed to need. Many autistic people find them misleading, but they still turn up in older films and descriptions.

Stimming — Repetitive movements or sounds, such as rocking, hand-flapping or repeating a phrase. Stimming helps people process sensory input, release tension or express joy.

Trope — A familiar, often over-used pattern in storytelling — for example the 'autistic genius'.

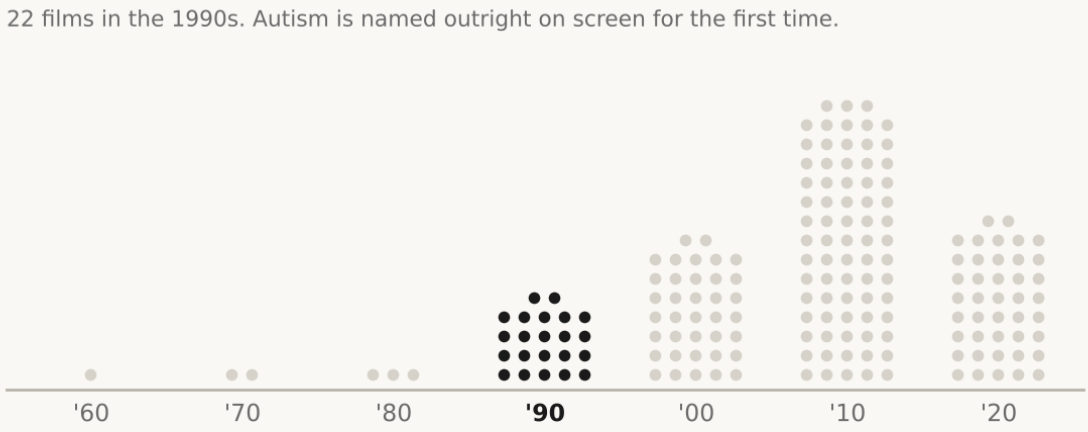
Feature film — A film made for cinemas or film festivals. Smaller titles have sometimes been released mainly on DVD or online since.

TV movie / made-for-TV — A film made to be shown on television rather than in cinemas.

Streaming film — A film released directly online, for example on Netflix, rather than first in cinemas or on TV.

Exploitation film — A low-budget film that leans on shocking or sensational content to draw an audience.

1990s



Backstreet Dreams (1990)

United States · crime drama · feature film

A small-time gangster is raising his autistic young son largely alone as his marriage collapses, until a young psychologist steps in to help the boy learn to connect with others. As she works with the son, she and the father grow closer, and his criminal life increasingly conflicts with his hopes for his son's future. It blends inner-city crime drama with a more tender story about a father learning to understand his child's autism.

Little Man Tate (1991)

United States · drama · feature film

Fred Tate is a seven-year-old genius from a working-class American background, caught between his mother and an ambitious psychologist who clash over how best to nurture him. Fred is not explicitly identified as autistic, though his intense focus, sensory sensitivity, and social awkwardness are often read by viewers as autistic traits. The film centers more broadly on giftedness and the tension between emotional and intellectual needs.

Ipagpatawad Mo (1991)

Philippines · drama · feature film

A career-driven married couple's relationship is tested when their first-born son, Mike Jr., is diagnosed with autism, a condition neither parent initially understands or knows how to accept, in this pioneering Philippine drama. The father in particular struggles with denial and shame before gradually coming to terms with his son's diagnosis. It was the first major Filipino film to treat autism seriously and compassionately, and is credited with raising public awareness of the condition in the Philippines.

House of Cards (1993)

United States · drama · feature film

A widowed American architect becomes alarmed when her young daughter stops speaking and develops autism-like behavior after witnessing her father's death, eventually building an elaborate house of cards as her only form of communication. A child psychiatrist diagnoses autism, but the mother suspects trauma rather than a neurological condition and pursues unconventional methods to reach her.

What's Eating Gilbert Grape (1993)

United States · drama · feature film

Gilbert Grape struggles to hold his family together in a small Iowa town while caring for his morbidly obese mother and his brother Arnie, who has an intellectual/developmental disability, often associated with autism in popular discussion of the film though not stated onscreen. Gilbert's own dreams take a back seat as a visiting free spirit gives him a glimpse of a different life.

Benny & Joon (1993)

United States · romantic comedy · feature film

An eccentric young drifter moves in with a man and his mentally ill sister, Joon, whose condition is left unspecified onscreen rather than identified as autism, in this American romantic comedy. His quirky, silent-film-inspired behavior and gentle patience help Joon flourish and fall in love. The film is often mentioned

alongside autism-representation lists for its whimsical treatment of neurodivergence, even though it isn't explicitly framed that way.

Cries From the Heart (1994)

United States · drama · TV movie

Content note: this film deals with the sexual abuse of a child, and presents facilitated communication, a scientifically discredited method, as a breakthrough.

A divorced mother is raising her non-speaking autistic seven-year-old son, Michael, largely alone, until an incident leads her to place him at a specialized school. There a therapist teaches him to "speak" through facilitated communication, typing on a keyboard while she supports his hand, and through it he appears to reveal that he has been sexually abused; the case ends up in court. The film presents the method as a breakthrough, but research has since shown that messages produced through facilitated communication usually come from the facilitator rather than from the autistic person. This American made-for-TV drama was also released as *Touch of Truth*.

David's Mother (1994)

United States · drama · TV movie

For years, a single mother has secretly avoided social services in order to keep raising her autistic teenage son at home rather than institutionalize him. When a social worker discovers her situation, mother and system clash over what is truly best for her son, while a new romance complicates things further. The film won several Emmy Awards for its performances.

Relative Fear (1994)

Canada · horror, thriller · feature film

Content note: this film portrays an autistic child as inherently violent, and is widely regarded as one of the most damaging autism portrayals on this list.
A young autistic boy is depicted as inherently violent and dangerous, killing those around him, in this Canadian thriller. Scholars of autism representation have criticized the film as one of the more damaging portrayals of the condition, with little that is recognizably autistic in the character beyond the label itself. It functions more as a horror-thriller than a serious exploration of autism.

When the Bough Breaks (1994)

United States · thriller · feature film

A police profiler investigating a string of child murders is led to an institutionalized autistic boy who seems to be receiving supernatural messages connected to the killer. As she works to earn the boy's trust, she uncovers a disturbing link between him and the crimes. Autism here functions mainly as a plot mechanism in a *Silence of the Lambs*-style mystery.

Silent Fall (1994)

United States · thriller · feature film

A psychiatrist is called in to reach an autistic boy who witnessed his parents' brutal murder and is the only possible source of information about what happened, in this American thriller. As the psychiatrist tries to reach the traumatized, non-speaking boy, the investigation reveals dark secrets within the family. The film treats the boy's autism largely as a barrier to solving the central mystery.

The Silence of Adultery (1995)

Canada · drama · TV movie

A father brings his autistic child to an unconventional therapy center and begins an affair with the child's therapist, who is unhappily married, in this Canadian made-for-TV drama. The autism therapy setting is mainly a device to bring the two adults together rather than a focus of the story itself. It is a fairly minor romantic drama of the era.

Under the Piano (1996)

Canada · drama · TV movie

Based on a true story, this Canadian made-for-TV drama follows an autistic musical savant growing up in the 1940s and '50s with a controlling mother who cannot accept her daughter's gifts or her condition. Her devoted older sister, herself disabled by a paralyzed arm, fights to help her gain independence and a fuller life despite their mother's fear-driven restrictions. It is a sensitive period piece about sibling loyalty and misunderstood autism.

Cube (1997)

Canada · science fiction, horror · feature film

This Canadian science-fiction horror film traps a group of strangers inside a shifting labyrinth of deadly cube-shaped rooms. One of them, Kazan, is a savant with intellectual and social differences whose unusual mathematical abilities the others come to rely on for survival. Although never explicitly labeled, Kazan is widely discussed as one of the more interesting early savant characters in genre cinema.

Journey of the Heart (1997)

United States · drama · TV movie

Loosely based on the true story of blind autistic musician Tony DeBlois, this American made-for-TV drama follows a struggling single mother who discovers her blind, autistic son has extraordinary musical talent and moves the family to Boston so he can attend a specialized school. As he develops as a pianist, she must gradually let him grow into independence. It's an inspirational biographical drama centered on music as a bridge past disability.

Spoonface Steinberg (1998)

United Kingdom · drama · TV movie

This British television film, adapted from an acclaimed radio monologue, follows an autistic girl with terminal cancer as she reflects, in her own unusual and philosophical voice, on life, death, and the adults around her who are struggling far more than she is. It is a quiet, poetic piece rather than a conventional drama, praised for giving an autistic child's perspective real depth and dignity.

Drei Herren (1998)

Austria, Germany · comedy-drama · feature film

Three psychiatric patients set off on a summer camp trip in this Austrian film. When their bus driver suffers a heart-attack they are stranded in the wrong village. Herr Sichel is non-speaking and is often coded as autistic.

Mercury Rising (1998)

United States · action thriller · feature film

A nine-year-old autistic savant accidentally cracks a top-secret government code hidden in a puzzle magazine, making him a target for assassination by those trying to protect the operation. A disgraced FBI agent takes it upon himself to protect the boy as the conspiracy closes in. Autism here is largely a vehicle for the boy's code-breaking "superpower" within an action-thriller framework.

Nightworld: Lost Souls (1998)

United States · horror, thriller · TV movie

A family moves into a new country home where their autistic daughter appears to be receiving messages from the ghosts of two murdered children, in this American made-for-TV supernatural thriller. As strange events escalate, the father investigates a decades-old unsolved crime that seems tied to his daughter's visions. It leans on the well-worn "mystically gifted autistic child" trope common to genre television of its era.

Down in the Delta (1998)

United States · drama · feature film

Directed by Maya Angelou, this American drama opens as a grandmother sends her drug-affected adult daughter and two grandchildren, including a young autistic granddaughter, from a rough Chicago housing project to spend the summer with relatives in rural Mississippi. Away from the city, the family reconnects with their history and slowly begins to heal, with the autistic child's needs woven quietly into the broader story of the family's recovery. Autism is a secondary element here, within a larger drama about addiction, heritage, and reconciliation.

Molly (1999)

United States · comedy-drama · feature film

A profoundly autistic woman is left in the care of her reluctant, workaholic brother when the institution she has lived in since childhood closes, in this American comedy-drama. An experimental brain surgery temporarily transforms her into a more conventionally "normal" and articulate person, forcing both

siblings to confront what they've gained and lost. The film was widely criticized on release, including by autistic viewers, for its inaccurate and cure-focused view of autism.

The Other Sister (1999)

United States · romantic comedy · feature film

A young American woman with a mild intellectual disability (often discussed, though never explicitly named onscreen, in relation to autism) returns home from a residential school determined to live independently and pursue both college and love with a similarly disabled young man. Her overprotective mother struggles to let go. It's a well-known but divisive film, criticized by some disability advocates for playing disability for comedy.

What this list shows

A list of 180 films is more than an inventory. Put the films side by side and patterns appear that you would never notice in a single title: which stories keep coming back, which people are often on screen, and which are missing. In this chapter I look at what the list as a whole says about how autism is portrayed in fiction film, and how that has changed over more than fifty years.

One caveat first. This list is as complete as I could make it, but it is almost certainly not complete. Films from countries with a small film industry, films that were never released outside their own country and films in which autism only appears in passing are much harder to find than a Hollywood production. The figures below therefore say something about this collection of films, not about every film that exists. Read them as a direction rather than a precise measurement. That is especially true before 2000: that period covers 28 films, so one title more or less can shift a percentage considerably.

From rarity to genre

Before 1990 I found only six films with an autistic character. After that the list grows quickly: 22 titles in the 1990s, 37 in the 2000s and 73 in the 2010s. The 2020s are not over yet and already count 42. Within a few decades, autism went from a rare subject to something that turns up in every kind of genre, from horror and action to romantic comedy, children's film and science fiction.

Where the films come from has changed too. Of the films made before 2000, 89% are North American. After that the share stays around 45%, with the rest coming from Europe (about 30%), Asia (about 20%) and other parts of the world, such as Latin America, Australia, the Middle East and Africa. That affects what you get to see. European films in this list, for example, are far less often a thriller or action film (9%) than North American ones (24%). And Asian films a little more often put the family at the center: how parents deal with a diagnosis, with shame, and with what the people around them expect of their child.

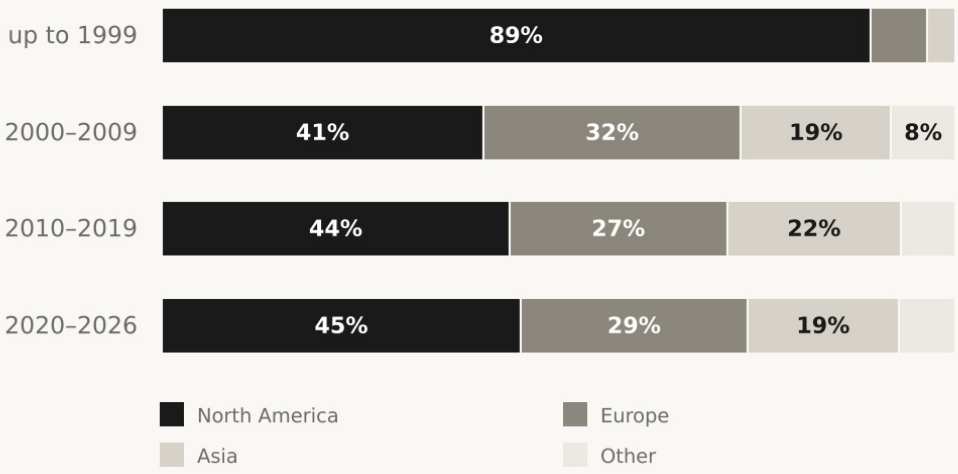


Figure 1. Which region do the films come from? Share per period.

In the full e-book this chapter continues, with seven figures in all. It covers, among other things, why the autistic genius is rarer than you think, who gets to tell the story, how non-speaking characters are portrayed, how autistic women appear on screen, and how autistic actors and filmmakers are increasingly involved.

Want to read on?

This was a free sample. In the full e-book Autism in Fiction Film you will find:

- all 180 fiction films with an autistic character, from 1969 to 2026, each with a short description and an info line giving country, genre and type of film;
- a content note for films that may be harmful or distressing;
- a clickable IMDb link for every film;
- the complete chapter 'What this list shows', with seven figures on how the portrayal of autism has changed over more than fifty years.

The e-book is available in English and in Dutch.

About me and a-typist.nl

This filmography was compiled by Anne van de Beek, an autistic film and television scholar with a long-standing focus on autism representation in fiction film and television. I write about this and related autism topics at a-typist.nl.

If you spot a film that's missing, or have thoughts on any of the descriptions, I'd genuinely like to hear from you at info@a-typist.nl.

Colophon

This document was designed with sensory-friendly reading in mind. A widely available sans-serif typeface with wide, evenly spaced letterforms was chosen over a more decorative or serif typeface, since plainer letter shapes are easier for many readers to process at a glance. That same thinking shaped the rest of the layout too: softened contrast (dark gray rather than pure black, on a warm off-white background), and no justified text. These choices were made deliberately, for the same reason the filmography itself exists: how information is presented can matter as much as the information itself.

A note on AI

This filmography was compiled by Anne van de Beek. The descriptions were produced with the help of AI, under the editorial review of Anne van de Beek.

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