

FUNNY, YOU DON'T LOOK AUTISTIC

A COMEDIAN'S GUIDE TO LIFE ON THE SPECTRUM

by Michael McCreary

Educator's guide written by Antonia Banyard, with assistance from Autism Ontario and Amanda Millette, ASD self-advocate

Genre: Young adult non-fiction

Themes: autism; family; determination; self-acceptance; comedy; coming of age; memoir

Suitable for: Grades 7+

Guided Reading Level: Z

Lexile Measure: 900L

Common Core standards: W.7.2,3,4,6,7,8,9,10
RI.7.1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10
L.7.3,3a,4,4a,5,5a,5b,5c,6
SL.7.1,1c,1d,2,3,4,5,6

Summary

Like many others on the autism spectrum, stand-up comic Michael McCreary has been told by more than a few well-meaning folks that he doesn't "look" autistic. But, as he's quick to point out in this memoir, autism "looks" different for just about everyone with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD).

Diagnosed with ASD at age five, McCreary got hit with the performance bug not much later. During a difficult time in junior high, he started journaling, eventually turning his pain into something empowering—and funny. He scored his first stand-up gig at age 14, and hasn't looked back.

This unique and hilarious memoir breaks down what it's like to live with autism for readers on and off the spectrum. Candid scenes from McCreary's life are broken up with funny visuals and factual asides. *Funny, You Don't Look Autistic* is an invaluable and compelling read for young readers with ASD looking for voices to relate to, as well as readers hoping to broaden their understanding of ASD.

BEFORE STARTING THE BOOK

These activities build the context and introduce the topic of the book, and establish prior knowledge and interest.

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a disorder of the development of the nervous system that has an impact on brain development. Individuals with ASD experience symptoms that can include communication problems, difficulty with social interactions, a tendency to repeat specific behaviors, and restricted interests.

Early symptoms may vary, and children might only experience some of them. Toddlers with ASD might begin to learn language and then lose it, or not learn at all. They might be unable or uninterested in interacting with other people or appear deaf, have difficulty with transitions, have trouble sleeping, or experience chronic gastrointestinal problems.

Every person with ASD is different and their abilities and challenges vary. People with ASD can excel in reading, music, computer skills, memory, drawing, motor skills, non-verbal reasoning, and other areas. They may also face challenges such as difficulties in forming relationships, dependence on routine, an unusually high or unusually low sensitivity to sensory stimulation, or difficulty communicating. They may also experience other medical conditions, such as autoimmune disorders, asthma, recurring infections, or seizures

Notable people with ASD include animal scientist Temple Grandin, disability and civil rights activist Amy Sequenzia, comedian Dan Aykroyd, actress Daryl Hannah, co-founder and former CEO of Apple Inc. Steve Jobs, 16-year-old environmental activist Greta Thunberg—and comedian Michael McCreary.

1. Before reading, *Funny, You Don't Look Autistic*, discuss with the class what you know about ASD, and where that knowledge comes from.
2. Working in pairs, research one aspect of autism:
 - What is ASD?
 - Early signs
 - Characteristics (challenges and strengths)
 - Notable people with ASD

You can start by using the web resources listed on p 169 of *Funny, You Don't Look Autistic*.

Other resources include:

<https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/materials/index.html>

<https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/kids/autism.html>

<http://learning.autismontario.com>

<https://kidshealth.org/en/kids/autism.html>

Organize your research in a PowerPoint presentation or a short video and present it to the class or a small group. Offer an evaluation about whether your research has changed your perception of people with ASD or not.

3. Have you seen people with ASD in the media (movies, television, advertisements, etc.)? How does the media portray people with ASD? Do you think these portrayals are accurate based on research you've done on ASD?
4. What kind of person do you think Michael McCreary is, just by looking at his photo on the front cover of the book?
5. Have you ever read a memoir before? How would you define a memoir? How is it different from a biography or a journal/diary?

WHILE READING THE BOOK

These activities check on comprehension, stimulate interest, involve readers in reflection as they read, and encourage consideration of other readers' reactions.

AUTISM

1. Watch Michael's video, "Autism: See the Potential." You can access it from his website: <https://www.aspiecomic.com> or here: <https://vimeo.com/144769608>. Pair up with another student. Tell your partner one thing that you learned about people with autism, and one strategy to help them to feel more comfortable.
2. Some people on the autism spectrum, like Michael's brother Matty, are unable to communicate verbally, but find other ways to communicate. Imagine you can't communicate using words but you need to give the class a message about your home situation, or a recent trip, or any other message you can imagine. How can you communicate your message without using words? Student volunteers can take turns communicating their message to the class. How long does it take the class to understand?

COMEDY

3. How does Michael use wordplay for humor? Give five examples from the text and explain how he uses language for comedic effect.
4. Michael uses humor as a way to talk about the challenges he faces with autism and difficult times he's had. Write a monologue (1-5 minutes long) about a challenge or difficulty that you've experienced. It could be a small challenge, such as a bad day or a competition you entered, or a larger challenge.

The monologue you write could be as simple as one anecdote about a funny thing that happened to you or a bad day. To do this, think about what made it funny to you. Did things turn out unexpectedly? Write out your anecdote ahead of time. One page of writing takes about one or two minutes to read out loud, depending on your delivery (for example, if you pause before the punch line).

Here are a few more tips for writing your monologue:

- Come up with a funny concept based on something you have experienced yourself or have observed. If you laugh when you think about it, that's a good sign.
- Make a list of any important characteristics or funny elements connected to your concept. It's important to not make fun of other people here, but to brainstorm about your own experience, your own point of view, your own responses.
- If you have a notebook, collect ideas ahead of time. Write down anything about your concept or idea that seems funny or odd to you. Then, when you sit down to write, you won't have to start from scratch, or stare at a blank page for hours.
- With your concept and your list in mind, write a rough draft of your monologue.
- Put your rough draft away for a few days or even weeks. Then read it again. Does it still make you laugh? If any line or point doesn't seem funny to you anymore, then cut it. Have you thought of anything new to add since you wrote the first draft?
- Once you have a draft that you're happy with, practice saying (or reading) it out loud with a partner. Then perform your routine, either for a small group, for the class, or for a "Comedy Night" for students and families depending on how brave you feel.

COMING OF AGE

5. In Part One, Michael describes how being diagnosed as autistic changed his life, even though he didn't realize it at the time. Think back to your pre-school or elementary school life. Can you think of a life-changing moment or experience that you've had? How did this experience change you? The change could be big or small. Write a short essay describing the moment or incident. Include a description of the impact this realization had on your life.

AFTER READING THE BOOK

These activities inspire continued reflection and response to the text, bring conclusion to the experience of reading this text, and stimulate further extensions.

MEMOIR

1. In *Funny, You Don't Look Autistic*, Michael chooses to write about autism in a memoir—through his own personal story—rather than in an essay, reference manual, or self-help book. Do you think that was a good choice or not? Write a one-page persuasive argument explaining your choice. Give at least 3 reasons for your opinion.
2. “In some ways, writing a memoir is knocking yourself out with your own fist, if it's done right.”
— Mary Karr, *The Art of Memoir*
Consider the quotation above and ask yourself whether Michael has “knocked himself out.” What does the quotation above mean to you? Share as a class discussion.

MAKING CONNECTIONS: PIVOTAL MOMENTS

3. Michael tells several stories about moments or events where he has learned something about himself. Which story impressed you the most? Pair up with another student. Taking turns, describe the story you've chosen and explain why you feel it is important.

Next, remember another story you have read about a pivotal moment in someone's life. This could be from a book or a magazine article.

Create a compare and contrast chart about the two pivotal moments you've chosen.