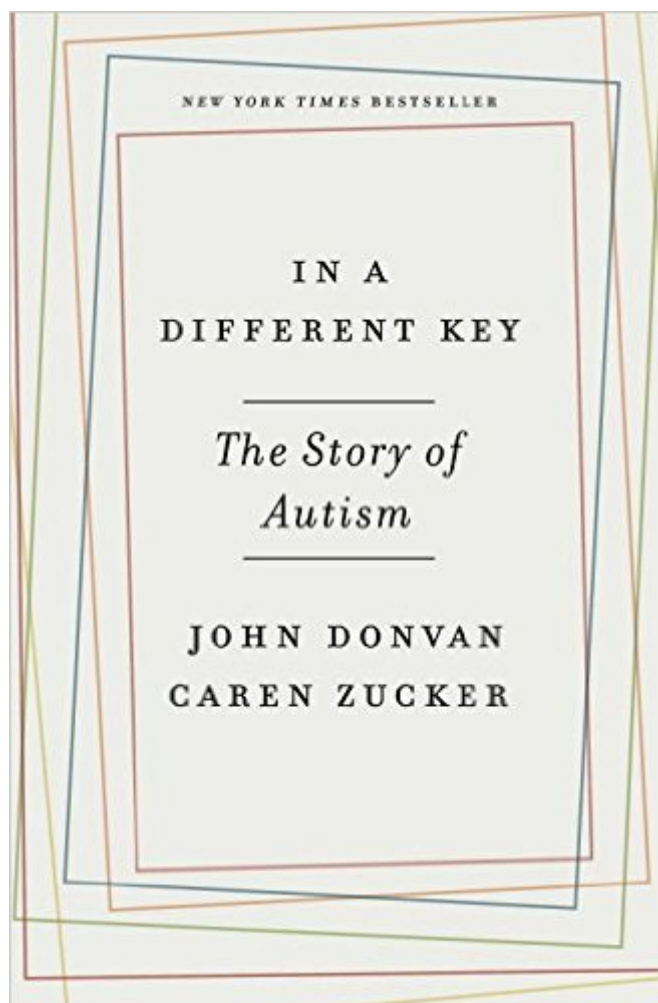


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In A Different Key: The Story Of Autism



Synopsis

An extraordinary narrative history of autism: the riveting story of parents fighting for their children's civil rights; of doctors struggling to define autism; of ingenuity, self-advocacy, and profound social change. Nearly seventy-five years ago, Donald Triplett of Forest, Mississippi, became the first child diagnosed with autism. Beginning with his family's odyssey, *In a Different Key* tells the extraordinary story of this often misunderstood condition, and of the civil rights battles waged by the families of those who have it. Unfolding over decades, it is a beautifully rendered history of ordinary people determined to secure a place in the world for those with autism—by liberating children from dank institutions, campaigning for their right to go to school, challenging expert opinion on what it means to have autism, and persuading society to accept those who are different. It is the story of women like Ruth Sullivan, who rebelled against a medical establishment that blamed cold and rejecting refrigerator mothers for causing autism; and of fathers who pushed scientists to dig harder for treatments. Many others played starring roles too: doctors like Leo Kanner, who pioneered our understanding of autism; lawyers like Tom Gilhool, who took the families' battle for education to the courtroom; scientists who sparred over how to treat autism; and those with autism, like Temple Grandin, Alex Plank, and Ari Ne'eman, who explained their inner worlds and championed the philosophy of neurodiversity. This is also a story of fierce controversies—from the question of whether there is truly an autism epidemic, and whether vaccines played a part in it; to scandals involving facilitated communication, one of many treatments that have proved to be blind alleys; to stark disagreements about whether scientists should pursue a cure for autism. There are dark turns too: we learn about experimenters feeding LSD to children with autism, or shocking them with electricity to change their behavior; and the authors reveal compelling evidence that Hans Asperger, discoverer of the syndrome named after him, participated in the Nazi program that consigned disabled children to death. By turns intimate and panoramic, *In a Different Key* takes us on a journey from an era when families were shamed and children were condemned to institutions to one in which a cadre of people with autism push not simply for inclusion, but for a new understanding of autism: as difference rather than disability.

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Customer Reviews

It would be difficult for me to give this incredible accumulation of information any rating other than five stars. Autism has only touched my family in ways which haven't helped me understand what it truly entailed. One of my daughters is a school teacher and the other works with juveniles involved in the court system so I've heard their experiences with children with autism and yet even that didn't give me the full background I was searching for. This book does. Taking on the story of autism has to have been a daunting experience for John Donvan and Caren Zucker because, as shown by the facts in this book, the facts have been a long time in getting to the knowledge we have today about the condition. Simply reading this book requires a commitment from the reader because even though it is well presented, it is still not an easy story to tell. Beginning in the 1930s and continuing to the present I found out the history of autism itself while still not understanding exactly what it is. That single element in the way this story is told gave me just a tiny glimpse into how frustrated and bewildered parents must have been to see their child exhibit signs of something being profoundly wrong. We tend to expect medical miracles to be pulled out of hats. Not only were there no miracles for families with autistic children but there were also very few people who were trying to find answers to questions concerning the disorder. One of the things most impressive to me was the decision of the authors to keep the autism story centered on people instead of making it about statistics and numbers and graphs and charts. Often those elements have a tendency to dehumanize whatever subject is being discussed.

There are no superlatives adequate to share my enthusiasm for this treasure trove of a book. Suffice it to say that despite its extreme physical weight – it is comprised of over 650 pages on high-quality paper, a real challenge for my arthritic hands – I was enthralled by every page. The narrative is thorough and detailed, but utterly fascinating. Of those many pages, over 100 of them

are devoted to notes, bibliography and index. Although the uncorrected proof provided to me as a reviewer did not have all these references available, it is easy to see from those which WERE provided that this book, besides being intriguing to interested non-academics like me, will be incredibly valuable for the true student of this subject. Also extremely valuable is the "Autism Timeline" the authors provide, which, as they say, is actually two timelines, one of which is made up of political, scientific and other public milestones. The other, in italics, shows the personal milestones in the lives of specific autism-affected families that are profiled in detail in the narrative. I will admit that I began the somewhat daunting task of reading this book because of personal interest; autism has recently been diagnosed in one of my own young relatives, a grandnephew, and others of my immediate family have exhibited other neurological and learning-deficit-related conditions. As a high school teacher for almost 20 years, I encountered a number of students who might possibly have fit into some of the autism spectrum categories. Also, it is my daily habit to visit the "GreaterGood Network" site, an umbrella charity which includes autism research as one of its component groups.

The first thing you need to know about this book is that it's huge. At over 600 pages, it's by far the fattest tome I've read in years, maybe since my college days. I didn't know this when I said yes to reading it "not that it would have changed my mind. I wanted to read this book, for the same reason you'll want to: because autism is a here-and-now topic that affects each and every one of us to large or small degree. I'm confident there's not one among you who is not touched by autism in some way, whether is because someone in your family is affected by it, or you know someone who is. Myself, I have a brother with autism, plus several dear friends who have children with autism, and we are all in the trenches. So, the chance to understand something of autism's story? Yes, please. I'm in. I did wonder, at first, whether all of these pages were necessary. Because of its size, it's not the kind of book you can casually slip into your purse for pulling out while waiting for your dental appointment. But as soon as I began to read I realized: yes, these pages are necessary, every single one of them. There is no wasted word here, no throwaway anecdote. And altogether? Powerful. Informing. Fascinating. The size of *In a Different Key* makes it intimidating, but it is actually completely accessible. Is it for the casual reader? No, despite its accessibility, probably not, but I would put it as recommended reading for anyone intimately affected by the condition. It is well-paced and meticulously researched with an eye not only for detail but for the thread of *story* woven throughout its relatively brief history (or, at least, of having a name attached to it). The authors pull no punches but tell it like it is, without embellishment yet without

flinching at the more repugnant sequences.

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