Staging Neurodiverse Sibling Relationships

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Abstract

This thesis combines critical disability and practice-research methodologies to investigate how sibling relationships involving autism are, and might be, rehearsed and represented through drama. Drawing on frameworks from sociologist Ariella Meltzer's sibling-disability research, it aims to honour the ways that neurodiversity shapes, and sometimes complicates, our sibling relationships, without, as Meltzer says, 'resorting to a framework that "blames" disability for disrupting normative relations' (2018: 1218). Written from a non-autistic sibling perspective, the thesis blends autobiographical fiction with interview-inspired playwriting techniques and input from neurodivergent artists—recognising the danger of speaking over autistic voices, but also the need for nondisabled family to have, as Mark Osteen says, 'a location from which to comment' (2008: 7). In doing so, it proposes a reflexive, auto/ethnographic methodology for investigating neurodiverse and other disabled relationships, from a perspective where the author is inside the relationship but outside the experience of the disability itself.

This practice-research thesis is divided into two parts: a critical thesis and a full-length play-text. The play-text is titled *Two Truths* and tells a fictional story about the interactions between two autistic–nonautistic sibling dyads (a brother-sister and a sister-sister pair). The critical thesis begins with a Literature Review (Chapter 1), situating the work at a nexus of disability theatre, neurodiversity criticism, and sibling studies. Chapter 2 establishes a methodology and highlights how the concepts of embodied knowledge and interdependence resonate between the frameworks of critical disability studies and theatrical practice-research. The third chapter, or 'Practice Review', examines existing depictions of neurodiverse siblinghood to identify some of the cultural narratives, formal techniques, and other dramaturgical approaches that *Two Truths* seeks to emulate or avoid. Chapter 4 provides a dramaturgical analysis of *Two Truths*, reflecting on the process of writing and workshopping the play-text and the insights this process revealed. The Conclusion looks beyond *Two Truths* itself to propose an auto/ethnographic methodology for examining disability-adjacent and other complex relationships.

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Accompanying Material

This thesis also includes a play-text for *Two Truths*, as a separate document.

The underlying interview data, additional participant paperwork, and records of the July 2025 play-reading have been deposited to the University of Glasgow's Enlighten data repository: Library Ref 2158, DOI 10.5525/gla.researchdata.2158

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An earlier reading, of the play's first two scenes, was supported by Under the Rug Theatre, at their November 2024 Scratch Night. The cast were: Anna Anning, Rachael Campbell, Alex Paton, Chris Veteri, and Lewie Watson.

Author's Declaration

I declare that, except where explicit reference is made to the contribution of others, that this dissertation is the result of my own work and has not been submitted for any other degree at the University of Glasgow or any other institution.

Emma Ettinger

Introduction

I'll never forget the first time I saw my sibling relationship reflected in a piece of theatre. It was 2014, and I'd just had a conversation with my parents about planning for the future when I saw a production of *The Glass Menagerie* (Williams, 1945). Sitting in that darkened theatre, as Tom and his mother spoke about making 'plans and provisions' (34) for his sister Laura, I had a sudden realisation: 'Oh shit. I think I'm Tom'. Although Laura is described in the play only as 'terribly shy' and 'peculiar' (47–48), my own brother is on the autism spectrum, and at the time, I hadn't had many opportunities to interact with other siblings in a similar situation. I had read a few children's books about growing up with a learning-disabled sibling, but my only exposures to neurodiverse adult siblinghood were *The Glass Menagerie* and a plot-line in the film *Love Actually* (2003), where Sarah, whose brother is institutionalised, is constantly setting aside her own life to answer his calls. Later on, I made connections with other real-life siblings, but at the time, the characters of Tom and Sarah did a lot to make me feel seen. Unfortunately, they also reinforced some of the guilt I was already feeling. Both stories seemed to suggest that a good person would sacrifice their own desires for the sake of a more vulnerable sibling: Sarah is a good sibling because she drops everything to answer phone calls from her brother's psychiatric institution, and Tom is a bad one because he abandons Laura to chase his 'selfish pleasure' in the Merchant Marine.

In her book *Extraordinary Bodies* (1997), Rosemarie Garland Thompson asserts that 'If we accept the convention that fiction has some mimetic relation to life'—that theatre can 'hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature' (Shakespeare, *Hamlet*: ll. 3.2.21–22)—then 'we grant it power to further shape our perceptions of the world'. We apply the semiotic codes and other lessons of fiction to our daily lives, particularly to 'situations about which we have little direct knowledge' (Garland-Thomson, 1997: 10). Garland Thompson explains that this means literature shapes not only able-bodied, neurotypical people's assumptions about disability but also those of many disabled people, who have been raised in primarily nondisabled communities and lack exposure to other body-minds that look or think like them (15). When narratives present us with a singular or stereotyped representation from a minority group, like the autism community,

there is a cultural temptation, unless we know other real-life autistic people, to ascribe that character's behaviours and experiences to the group as a whole.

While Garland Thompson's work focuses on representations of the disability community, this thesis begins from the premise that her observations might be similarly applied to *sibling* experiences of disability and neurodivergence. Although siblings, like myself, may not directly experience disability and neurodivergence, David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder remind us that disability has 'profound impact[s]' on the entire family, 'rerout[ing] the circuitry of partners and children, friends and family in ways that can be described as anything but individual' (2000: xiii). If our social circle does not include other siblings with experience of those impacts, and we only encounter one version of a sibling-disability narrative, then siblings may likewise be in danger of assuming that there is only one 'right' way to be a brother or sister to someone neurodivergent or disabled.

Looking specifically at the realm of siblings and autism, this thesis asks:

- How might auto-fictional and interview-inspired playwriting techniques be combined to create nuanced, contemporary representations of autistic–nonautistic adult sibling relationships?

In order to answer this core research question, I will also ask:

  - How are autistic–nonautistic or neurodivergent–neurotypical sibling relationships represented in existing drama, from *The Glass Menagerie* (1945) to the present?

  - How do contemporary autistic and non-autistic adult siblings describe their relationships with each other?

Although this thesis will not offer a comprehensive answer to either of the latter two questions, it will explore them as a means to enrich the project's playwriting practice. The insights from both have been combined with reflections on my personal experience to generate the script for a five-character

play titled *Two Truths*. That play-text represents half of this practice-research thesis and can (for formatting reasons) be found as a separate document.

Autism has been chosen as a subcategory of neurodivergence (and broader disability) in order to focus the research most effectively on a specific set of sibling experiences, including the researcher's own. Although autism itself encompasses a broad spectrum of diagnostic profiles and experiences, not all of which can be sufficiently addressed in this thesis, it has been useful as an umbrella-term to define the research parameters. There remain other stories to be told about siblings and autism—as well as other forms of neurodivergence and disability—and I hope this thesis provides a useful model for how telling such stories might be approached.

Before I begin outlining that approach, however, I will use this introduction to clarify the use of language in the thesis, offering definitions and distinctions in terminology related to autism, neurodivergence, and broader disability. I'll then provide some background, explaining how the 'profound impacts' of autism on family systems have (and have not) been represented so far. This will include a discussion of parents' and siblings' 'disability adjacent' positionality, addressing the ethical concerns this raises but also explaining how and why such perspectives remain valid and necessary. The chapter will conclude by outlining the structure of the thesis and how its research questions will be addressed.

0.1 Terminology: Disability, Autism, and Neurodivergence

Beginning at the broader end of terminology, this thesis will use 'disability' as an umbrella term to discuss the variety of shared and specific obstacles that are associated with navigating the world in, as, or with a non-normative body-mind. The social model of disability, which emerged from the disability activism of the late twentieth century, distinguishes between an individual's physical, neurological, or sensory differences—termed 'impairments'—and their socially-constructed 'disability', which comes from the interactions between an unwelcoming society and an atypical body-mind (Shakespeare, 2021: 18–19). The social model is crucial to the foundations of critical disability studies, but its ideas have also been adapted by later scholars to examine more nuanced interplays between socially constructed disability and individual impairment.

This thesis will follow the 'cultural model' by using 'disability' in a broader sense that includes impairment and embodied experience alongside issues of accessibility, stigma, and group identity (Hobgood and Wood, 2013: 5–6).

Disabled and disability-adjacent communities have fiercely debated the use of person-first versus identity-first terminology to describe people with disabilities/disabled people. This thesis will move between the two, aiming to follow individuals' stated preferences. For groups, or where personal preference is unknown, identity-first language (i.e. disabled artists) will generally be used to describe those who actively identify with the disability community. Person-first language (i.e. artists with disabilities) will act as a broader umbrella term for those who might be considered to have some form of disability. This rhetorical distinction borrows from scholarship on d/Deafness, where the lower case 'd' is used to indicate a diagnosis of hearing impairment, while the upper case 'D' denotes belonging to Deaf culture. Similarly, not everyone with a legally protected disability identifies as d/Disabled. People with invisible disabilities and chronic illnesses may not feel 'disabled enough' to claim the identity (Wendell, 2021), while others actively resist the word's pathologisation: some in the Deaf community prefer to identify as a linguistic minority instead (Davidson, 2008: 9).

Debate over language has been particularly heated in the autism community, where the phrase 'person with autism' is strongly associated with parent-advocates and a cure-centred model (Loftis, 2015: 6; Ortega, 2009: 427, 433). This thesis acknowledges that identity-first language is generally preferred by autistic self-advocates, but it also recognises that not everyone with an autism diagnosis has positive feelings about the label 'autistic'. My own brother is in the latter category, and at least one of the project's interviewees prefers to identify as 'neurodivergent' instead. Where not guided by individual preference, this thesis will therefore follow the models of Stuart Murray's *Representing Autism* (2008: 24) and Sonya Freeman Loftis's *Imagining Autism* (2015: 6) in varying usage between different terms. As with the Deaf community, some autistic people also reject the pathology of the label disability, preferring to identify as a cognitive or cultural minority (Loftis, 2015: 5). This thesis, however, includes autism when it uses 'disability' as an umbrella term.

The neurodiversity movement is aligned with but may also be considered distinct from wider disability activism and scholarship. The term is believed to have been coined in the late 1990s by Judy Singer, whose 1999 essay on familial autism lays out 'a politics of neurological diversity, or neurodiversity', framing neurological difference as a marginalised political and identity category akin to those based on class, race, or gender (64). Singer's essay centres particularly on the diagnostic profile then known as Aspergers, positing that 'Aspie' or autistic ways of being and seeing might be advantageous in an increasingly digital world. Although autism spectrum identities remain the flagship of the neurodiversity paradigm (Stenning and Bertilsdotter-Rosqvist, 2021: 1532), neurodivergence includes a broad range of 'atypical cognitive, emotional and perceptual experiences' (Bergenmar et al., 2025: 2), which Singer terms 'autistics and cousins' (1999: 64). Offering a list of diagnoses feels somewhat ironic, given the movement's resistance to diagnostic pathologisation, but other forms of neurodivergence might include ADHD, dyslexia, dyspraxia, epilepsy, Tourette's, OCD, and other mental health conditions. A further discussion of critical neurodiversity studies, as it is linked to but also distinct from critical disability studies, will be offered in the next chapter's Literature Review.

'Neurodiversity', according to its root words, refers to groups that include multiple neurological types (or neurotypes). An individual cannot be neurodiverse, but a neurodiverse group can include individuals with both normative and non-normative cognition styles. Together, a pair of autistic and non-autistic siblings, then, are neurodiverse. 'Neurodivergence', on the other hand, refers to deviations from a neurological norm, so both individuals and groups may be neurodivergent. The term's converse is 'neurotypical': adhering (more or less) to cultural norms of neurology and cognition. Although 'neurodivergent' is sometimes used more narrowly as a synonym for autistic, and 'neurotypical' as a synonym for non-autistic (Loftis, 2015: 8), this thesis will treat the two as nested categories. Autism is a subtype of neurodivergence, which may co-occur with other cognitive, emotional and perceptual atypicalities. Non-autistic siblings may also be neurodivergent in other ways, so the binaries of autistic–nonautistic and neurodivergent–neurotypical are not entirely stable. The title 'Staging Neurodiverse Sibling Relationships' consciously

leaves room for families where neurodivergence is experienced by multiple siblings at the same time.

0.2 Writing About Disability in Family Systems

In disability studies, it is often assumed that researchers will have (and disclose) some personal relationship to disability, motivating or perhaps legitimising their attention to the topic (Schaap Williams, 2021: 221). While many critical disability scholars are themselves disabled, writing on autism and learning disability has historically been approached from primarily parental perspectives. (The emerging field of critical neurodiversity studies is only now beginning to redress that balance.) In 'Allyship in Disability Arts' (2020), scholar Bree Hadley problematises such 'disability adjacent' or 'proxy' perspectives, noting the dominance of narratives by 'parents, partners, children, or carers' over those with actual lived experience of disability (182).[1] She has real reason to be wary. Perhaps, as Mark Osteen suggests, in an effort to make sense of stories that resist linear narrativisation, parental memoirs of autism tend to conform to either 'cure' or 'moral growth' narratives (2008: 16–22), framing autism as a source of familial suffering and a challenge to overcome. These narratives, in turn, can have dangerous real-world consequences, being reproduced, as Loftis and Murray observe, in numerous news stories garnering sympathy for the perpetrators of autistic filicide (Loftis, 2015: 62–66; Murray, 2008: 168–171).

This does not mean, however, that all narratives from a parent or family perspective are necessarily dangerous. Hadley takes issue, in particular, with allies who conflate their experience living *alongside* disability with others' embodied experience *of* disability (2020: 182). Those of us who live our lives in proximity to disability, and recognise that positionality, can still, as Osteen says, seek an empathetic location from which to comment (2008: 7–9). Drawing on sociologist Ariella Meltzer's approach to studying 'Siblinghood Through Disability Studies Perspectives' (Meltzer and Kramer, 2016), this thesis will propose an

[1] Hadley also, more problematically, critiques the position of those with less-visible physical or mental health challenges, who can seem to exist in a borderland between 'disabled' and not.

auto/ethnographic methodology for writing about one's own experience *in relation* to more marginalised groups.

In an essay on Samuel Beckett's plays, Michael Davidson identifies interdependence as a central component of disability aesthetics. 'Persons with disabilities,' he observes, 'depend on others in ways that challenge post-Enlightenment ideals of autonomy and independence' (2016: 113). Where neoliberal politics frame dependency as alien and pitiable, disability aesthetics instead invite us to reflect on and value the complex, interdependent relationships that are present in all our lives. That means making space for the perspectives of both disabled people and their loved ones or carers. Disability scholars Carrie Sandahl (2008) and Ann M. Fox (2018), for example, praise playwrights John Belluso and Martyna Majok for their reflections, in *Pyretown* (Belluso, 2005) and *Cost of Living* (Majok, 2019), on the profound, intimate, and reciprocal impacts of care relationships on their characters. The plays address how such relationships can ameliorate but are also compromised by the demands of an ableist, capitalist society.

In order to 'be granted fully human status by normates', Rosemarie Garland-Thompson observes that disabled people must become 'supplicants and minstrels', learning to 'use charm, intimidation, ardor, deference, humor, or entertainment' to neutralise the stigma of disability and 'relieve nondisabled people of their discomfort' (1997: 13). In her essay 'Out There I Have to Smile' (2021), mother Heather Lanier identifies how this social demand also shapes the lives of parents and carers:

> What I didn't realize until having Fiona is that if a person is intellectually disabled, a parent's feelings often become a barometer for their kid's worth. What my friend and I have known, without ever *knowing* we've known, is that our culture judges the worth of our kids by judging our contentment. […] along with all the obstacles to surmount or circumnavigate or abandon, [the world] *out there* obliges us to offer our cheer. Are we happy? If so, then maybe the lives of our children aren't tragic. *Out there I have to smile*.

Like the performances required of disabled people themselves, this constant smiling is exhausting. It seriously limits when and where parents like Lanier can acknowledge the difficulties of their experience. While she is hesitant to

contribute to narratives of parental suffering, Lanier poses creative nonfiction—like her own memoir and blogposts—as a space where such parents can find community and support.

As a sibling, I've often felt similarly. Growing up in a small town and attending the same school system as my brother, I didn't want my words to impact how other people saw him. At university, I would listen to my classmates brag about their siblings' SAT scores or lead roles in the school play, wondering, 'If I tell a story about my brother, are they going to judge him? Are they going to judge me?'. Watching my brother's meltdowns could be scary or upsetting, but without wanting to put more stress on my parents, I often lacked an outlet to discuss them. Other siblings, taking part in various research studies, have reported a similar sense of isolation, lacking community connections both to other siblings and to the wider disability-support sector (see Arnold et al., 2012; also Heller and Arnold, 2010: 24; Meltzer and Kramer, 2016: 24–25). Organisations like the UK charity Sibs offer wonderful peer-support resources, but to access them, siblings must first know that they exist. Lee and Burke (2021) report that their recent pilot study on future planning resources brought together a group of siblings who had never previously 'received support from other siblings', and many afterwards went on to join other sibling groups (77). I myself had a similar experience, seeking out online support groups only after I worked on a production of Scott Aeillo's sibling-disability play, *Bernie and Mikey's Trip to the Moon* (2018).

0.3 Autism-Sibling Representation

This thesis proposes that my own and Aiello's playwriting, like Lanier's nonfiction writing, offers an opportunity to foster what James McGrath terms an 'imagined community' (2025) of siblings. Formed when people recognise themselves in a story or narrative—even if those people never actually interact with each other—imagined communities are more abstract than the virtual communities of autism message boards or online sibling support groups. Still, they represent a step in the same direction. Imagined communities, like those McGrath traces in 'AutisTime' (2025), offer individuals the reassurance that they are not alone in their experiences, which in turn opens the door to finding community in more concrete forms.

As a young adult, I felt that sense of recognition when I watched Tom and Laura's relationship in *The Glass Menagerie*. Although 'autism' is never named in Tennessee Williams's 1944/1945 drama,[2] scholars Clay Morton and Sonya Freeman Loftis have offered convincing arguments for reading the shy, 'peculiar' Laura—and her real-life counterpart, the playwright's sister, Rose Williams—as autistic. *The Glass Menagerie* has long been a subject of disability criticism on account of Laura's limp, but re-reading the character as neurodivergent also invites a reconsideration of Laura and Tom's sibling relationship. Disabled scholar Deborah Kent says, she 'could have lived with [the 'terribly shy' and unambitious] Laura, in those crucial growing up years if only I hadn't felt doomed to follow the road she travelled. But literature and life hadn't offered many alternatives' (1988: 98). As an artist with an autistic sibling, I felt much the same about Tom, who cannot be content staying at home with his mother and sister but also cannot forgive himself for leaving them behind. The play is coloured by the author's own guilt—as Rose Williams was institutionalised and lobotomised around the time her brother left home to pursue a playwriting career—and obscures the possibility of alternative futures for either sibling. Charlie Babbit, from the iconic film *Rain Man* (1988) was no better a model: while the character reforms by the film's conclusion, the plot revolves around the selfish Charlie kidnapping his autistic brother Raymond in an attempt to steal his inheritance.

This project, then, is an attempt to add to and highlight within the theatrical repertoire alternative models for neurodiverse sibling relationships. Explicit theatrical representations of siblings and autism are limited: the most famous autistic stage character, Christopher Boone, is an only child in *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (Haddon and Stephens, 2012), and the same is true of Laurence, the controversial puppet-character in Alex Oates' play *All in a Row* (2019). Since siblinghood evokes both kinship and forced proximity, this lack of siblings—particularly in *The Curious Incident* and other millennial autism representations—may reflect the widespread use of autism as a 'disease

[2] *The Glass Menagerie* premiered in Chicago in December of 1944, although the play-text (cited 1945 in this thesis) was not published until after its New York premiere the following year.

metaphor' for isolation in the post-9/11 and internet age (see Singer, 1999: 66; Loftis, 2015: 12–13, 108–129).

It's also worth noting, however, that Christopher is never explicitly named in his text as autistic (Loftis, 2015: 109, 131). In fact, most of the autistic characters in the novels and plays analysed by Loftis (2015) and Marla Carlson (2018)—whose work will be discussed in the following chapters—are only 'autistic-coded' or implied. Some of this diagnostic ambiguity predates widespread recognition of autism, but it also continues into the present. Plays where a sibling-character *might* be interpreted as autistic include not only *The Glass Menagerie* but also Brian Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990)—where the second-youngest sister, Rose, is described only as 'simple'—and Lyle Kessler's *Orphans* (1985), where 'Wild Child', Phillip, is less a party animal than one of Bruno Bettelheim's 'feral children' (1967: 343–382). The word itself is also missing from Mike Kenny's play *Boo* (2009), which transposes Harper Lee's novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) to contemporary Northern England and interprets the narrator's mysterious neighbour, Boo Radley, as an autistic man.

In *Affect, Animals, and Autists* (2018), Marla Carlson characterises both implicit and explicit autism representation, in plays from the early twenty-first century, along similar lines to parental 'cure' and 'moral growth' narratives in other media. Following the conventions of a post-Ibsen domestic drama, these 'Autism Family Dramas' frame the diagnosis and its impacts as a problem, which it is the nuclear family's responsibility to resolve (2018: 51–54). Most of Carlson's examples focus on the stories of parents and their autistic sons, although Mike Leigh's *Two Thousand Years* (for the National Theatre, 2006) and Deanna Jent's *Falling* (off-Broadway, 2013) do also include non-autistic siblings. Leigh's Asperger-y math-wiz, Josh, confuses his parents and sister Tammy with his newfound fervour for religion, while the frequent meltdowns of Jent's more high-support-needs character (also called Josh) have just about driven his teenage sister Lisa from the family home. The latter play Carlson celebrates for subverting generic conventions, with a focus on how wider social and governmental frameworks fail to adequately support autistic people and their families.

Oscar Cabrera's unproduced play, *Through Andrew's Eyes* (2016), tells a similar story from a sibling perspective but has, unfortunately, never had a fully realised production like *Falling*'s. Three other sibling-disability plays have premiered off-Broadway in the last decade, but *Bernie and Mikey's Trip to the Moon* (Aiello, 2018), *Amy and the Orphans* (Ferrentino, 2019), and *Corsicana* (Arbery, 2022) are each explicitly about a disability other than autism. Still, they offer useful points of reference. For more explicit and wider-reaching sibling-autism representation, this thesis will also turn to television, particularly the BBC programmes *There She Goes* (2018–2023), *Dinosaur* (2024), and *A Kind of Spark* (2023–2024).

0.4 Thesis Structure

The creative element of this practice-research thesis is a full-length play-script, titled *Two Truths*, which (for formatting reasons) can be found as separate document. The remainder of this document, on the other hand, will serve as the critical thesis, offering context and reflections on the process of writing that play. It will be structured as follows:

Chapter 1 will be a **Literature Review**, situating the thesis at a nexus of disability theatre, autism or neurodiversity criticism, and sibling studies. I will identify a research gap in the lack of literary and cultural analysis of sibling-disability representation and will look to recent approaches in the social sciences as a model for exploring neurodiverse sibling relationships through drama. **Chapter 2** focuses on **Methodology**, considering the resonances between critical disability studies and theatrical practice-research. Here, I will lay out the methodological context of an 'auto/ethnographic' playwriting practice, which combines elements of autobiographical (or auto-fictional) writing with interview-inspired techniques that draw on both verbatim theatre and social sciences research. I will consider ethical concerns relevant to each of these approaches—as they intersect with concerns about autism representation—and lay out the methods, demographics, and findings of the project's research interviews. **Chapter 3** comprises a '**Practice Review**' (see Nelson, 2022: 49–50), which examines existing depictions of neurodiverse siblinghood to identify some of the cultural narratives, formal techniques, and other dramaturgical approaches that my playwriting practice aims to emulate or avoid. This chapter

takes Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie* as its chronological starting point, because the play's late-1944 premiere roughly coincides with the debut of autism as a diagnostic category, in publications by psychologists Leo Kanner and Hans Asperger in 1943 and 1944.

Chapter 4 is a **Dramaturgical Analysis** of *Two Truths* and its playwriting process. This offers a part-linear, part-circular dramaturgy of autistic siblinghood, characterised by overlapping scenes, partial perspectives, and mutual missteps. The playwriting process also serves as a methodological enquiry into *how* writing about sibling and other disability-adjacent relationships might be approached from *in*side the relationship but *out*side the experience of disability. The **Conclusion** in **Chapter 5** will use the specific example of *Two Truths* to propose an adaptable, auto/ethnographic methodology for both creative practice and more traditional research. Designed to address disabled or neurodiverse interrelationships, its methodological orientation is both inward- and outward-looking, combining reflexive autobiographical and ethnographic interview-based techniques.

Chapter 1 Literature Review

In one of the cornerstone texts of literary and cultural disability studies, David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder coin the phrase 'narrative prosthesis' to describe the use of disability as a metaphorical 'crutch upon which literary narratives lean for their representational power' (2000: 49). Throughout literature and popular culture, Mitchell and Snyder observe that disability has served as a plot-mobilising disruption from normal as well as a metaphor for less tangible social concerns. What makes the usage 'prosthetic', in their ironic metaphor, is when stories rely or lean on an idea of disability as a metaphorical crutch, without investing, in turn, in the lived particularities of disabled body-minds. Without such investment, fictional narratives repackage existing tropes—from earlier fiction but also scientific, religious, and political discourses—reinforcing real-world stereotypes that make it harder for disabled individuals to move through the world. 'If we accept the convention that fiction has some mimetic relation to life', as Rosemarie Garland-Thomson says in *Extraordinary Bodies*, then 'we grant it power to further shape our perceptions of the world' (1997: 10).

Much early disability criticism focuses on identifying and critiquing stereotyped rhetoric and imagery (see Gartner and Joe, 1987). In *Narrative Prosthesis*, however, Mitchell and Snyder also offer the potential for 'disability counternarratives': fictional representations that reappropriate conventionally prosthetic narratives to challenge the ideal of normalcy or expose readers and audiences to the specifics of disabled experience (2000: 164). Rather than sorting fiction into categories of 'positive' and 'negative' disability representation, Mitchell and Snyder recognise that what we take away from such texts depends on the perspective from which we approach them. They advocate for 'reading [and writing] practices that embrace, transform, and reckon with our inherited disability storylines' in a more nuanced fashion (163), pointing in particular to the way that Lord Byron 'refashion[s]' the reductive disability stereotypes of Shakespeare's *Richard III*, into a nuanced 'matter of cosmic, social, and personal identity' in his closet drama *The Deformed Transformed* (1824).

This thesis's first two research questions both aim to apply Mitchell and Snyder's counternarrative directive to sibling relationships involving autism. Asking how

neurodiverse sibling relationships are represented in existing drama, Chapter 3's 'Practice Review' will re-interpret existing plays, like *The Glass Menagerie*, in ways that complicate assumptions about neurodiverse sibling characters and their relationships. Through its experiment with auto-fictional and interview-inspired playwriting techniques, the thesis's creative component, *Two Truths*, likewise tries to move beyond stereotypes and reflect the complex ways, as Ariella Meltzer says, that 'lived experience of disability [or neurodivergence] plays out between people, within relationships and within the sometimes-exciting but often repetitious and mundane ways that life is lived with others on an everyday basis' (2018: 1217).

In order to lay out the project's theoretical context, this chapter will begin by examining how critical disability concepts are applied to theatrical texts and performances—both recognising distinctions and drawing connections between the approaches associated with disability arts and mainstream drama. It will next situate work on autism within the larger fields of disability and neurodiversity criticism, highlighting key observations by scholars working on this historically under-explored topic. Finally, it will move to a discussion of sibling narratives involving autism and disability. Family narratives are prevalent in autism literature and sibling-disability experiences are a growing area of social sciences research, but very little work examines such sibling relationships in a literary context. Looking ahead to the following chapter, on Methodology, I will propose that recent shifts towards more nuanced sibling-disability research narratives in the social sciences offer a fertile model for exploring neurodiverse sibling relationships through drama as well.

1.1 Disability (in) Theatre Criticism

In an article for *The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance*, Bree Hadley distinguishes between '"disability arts" practice' led *by* disabled artists, 'ally-led "arts and disability" practice' run *for* disabled artists, and 'mainstream arts practice' on the subject of disability, which may or may not include disabled artists (2020: 180). In *Disability Theatre and Modern Drama*, Kirsty Johnston further distinguishes between '*artists with disabilities*' and 'the more politically charged category of *disability artists*' (2016: 23, referencing Paul Anthony Darke). In her terms, 'disability theatre', then, is not merely that which features

disabled performers or characters, but that which 'is both activist and artistic in orientation' (15)—drawing politically and aesthetically 'from disability culture's challenges to ableism' (26).

At the same time, Johnston proposes that we can apply 'a critical disability studies and disability arts perspective' to our analysis of more mainstream drama (6). This approach aligns with that of literary and filmic disability criticism, and it echoes calls by Ann M. Fox and Carrie Sandahl to re-examine uses of disability across the dramatic canon (Fox, 2011; 2016a; 2016b; Sandahl, 2018). If fiction, as Garland-Thomson argues, is particularly powerful in 'situations about which we have little direct knowledge' (1997: 10), then it is in mainstream or canonical works that nondisabled audience members are most likely to encounter stories about disability. Exploring the different ways that disability arts and mainstream drama each position collaborative work involving neurodiversity or disability, this section argues that by drawing on both approaches, theatre can offer a particularly fertile space for reading and then performing disability counternarratives for mainstream audiences.

In *Theatres of Learning Disability*, Matt Hargrave explains that as a form of 'outsider art', disability theatre tends to value a constructed idea of autonomous and uncorrupted 'authenticity' (2015: 115–119). This means that projects which involve nondisabled facilitators or collaborators occupy an uneasy position, often dismissed as non-authentic and exploitative (35–38) or assessed as a form of 'advocacy or therapy' rather than 'evaluated and appreciated as art' (6). This critical coupling of authenticity and autonomy, however, discounts the possibility of any real collaboration between disabled and nondisabled stakeholders (8), running counter to Michael Davidson's assertions that interdependence is central to disability aesthetics (2016). If disabled–nondisabled or neurodivergent–neurotypical collaboration is viewed as suspect, then how can the complexities of real-life interrelationships, like those between disabled people and their carers or autistic people and their siblings, ever truly be represented onstage?

Hargrave also highlights a debate about disability arts' intended audience: are disability arts solely an in-group artform to be shared amongst disabled communities, or do they include work presented to a more mainstream audience

that works to challenge a culture of ableism (2015: 40)? The former has an important role in cultivating a sense of community away from normative standards, but the latter also offers opportunities to more widely disseminate counternarratives in place of stereotypes. Victoria Ann Lewis observes that disability is 'over-represented' in mainstream drama, since disability tropes offer familiar plot structures and a convenient visual shorthand to provoke pity or fear (1998: ¶3). Disability scholars and practitioners often critique the way that nondisabled actors are lauded for the 'challenge' of playing stereotyped disabled characters (see Van Sickel, 2015; Schaap Williams, 2021: 7), but Fox and Sandahl also argue that drama can be a fertile ground for subversive disability representation. Theatre presents 'a particular and unique opportunity', they argue, 'for carefully shaped narratives to intersect with embodied performance' in ways that force us to reckon with the actual experiences of disabled body-minds (2018: 121). We might extend Fox and Sandahl's reasoning to argue that drama is also a particularly fertile ground for disability *criticism*, since each production of a play presents its own embodied interpretation. Once counternarratives have been read in a text, they can also be performed, and I hope that the case study of *The Glass Menagerie*, in Chapter 3 of this thesis, will suggest possibilities for neuro-queer future stagings of Tom and Laura's sibling relationship.

Lewis's article focuses on promoting work by disabled writers, but Fox also spotlights the importance of casting disabled actors in mainstream and canonical drama. In 'Reclaiming the Ordinary Extraordinary Body', Fox acknowledges that *The Glass Menagerie* presents 'ample opportunity to play [the limping Laura] as a stock-in-trade disability stereotype' (2016b: 133), but she also highlights counternarratives that are revealed through performances by two physically disabled actresses in the role. Shortly after Fox's essay was published, discomforted reactions to the 2017 Broadway production—in which Madison Ferris performed as a wheel-chair-using Laura (see Reed, 2017; Rothstein, 2017)—also showcase how visibly disabled actors might problematise the conventions by which disability accrues its symbolic meaning. Linked to a real-life body, rather than a costume or acting choice, the logic of our stereotyped judgements becomes uncomfortable, prompting outraged reviews. Such stagings, Allison Hobgood says, 'ask[] spectators to recognize', and perhaps even

confront, 'their investment in making disability signify' (2021: 75). They also challenge our western idealisation of the 'neutral' actor, who is presumably straight, white, able-bodied, neurotypical, and male (Sandahl, 2005; Schaap Williams, 2021: 7–8).

In an article from 1989, Harry Newman of the Non-Traditional Casting Project argues that normative and stereotyped casting practices 'reinforc[e] a view of a homogenous American society that has never been more than a fantasy' (23). In 'The Welcome Table' (2013), Daniel Banks extends this argument to assert that, far from being 'non-traditional', diverse or 'representative' casting is in fact a truer reflection of most contemporary and historical societies. While Banks is focused on a broader social picture, actress Regan Linton echoes his claims on a more individual scale. She proposes that the insights from disabled actors' lived experience are a necessary corrective to inaccurate cultural ideas:

> In order to achieve Laura's 'disability' identity, I think many actresses often feel the need to effect an altered physical and cognitive state that gets at the IDEA of disability. Which, in itself, is a construct…Laura is therefore constructed based on a PERCEPTION of what it is to be disabled—which is often flawed from the outset—as opposed to a realistic experience. (quoted in Fox, 2016b: 149)

Projects that are not prepared to cast autistic actors, such the film *Rain Man* (1988) or the National Theatre's adaptation of *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (Haddon and Stephens, 2012)[3], sometimes attempt to bridge that authenticity gap by employing autistic consultants. Although this practice has received mixed feedback (see Silberman, 2016: 403–407; Carlson, 2018: 159), it perhaps suggests that disabled and neurodivergent actors ought to receive additional compensation—like that earned by a dance or fight captain, under Equity contracts—for their roles as disability experts in the rehearsal room.

Sandahl cautions, on the other hand, that participation is an unreliable metric for authenticity, which may lend credibility to productions that continue to reinforce harmful stereotypes (Sandahl, 2018: 141; Fox and Sandahl, 2018: 123).

[3] The first openly autistic actor to play the role of Christopher professionally was Mickey Rowe, in a 2017 US production at Indiana Repertory and Syracuse Stage. Marla Carlson notes, however, that some autistic actors may not be publicly 'out' about their diagnoses (2018: 158–159).

If, as Hargrave argues, collaboration with nondisabled artists does not inherently undercut disabled agency, neither, as a disability-arts position argues, does disabled involvement necessarily mean equal agency and collaborative equity. Bree Hadley notes that within traditional theatrical hierarchies, the writer or director's authority to make aesthetic decisions usually supersedes actors' individual suggestions, and without proper interrogation these habits may be used to over-ride a disabled performer's expertise from lived experience (2020: 187–188). As will be discussed in the chapters on Methodology (Chapter 2) and Dramaturgical Analysis (Chapter 4), I have tried to remain conscious of my own positionality and place in this power structure, as a non-autistic playwright working with a neurodiverse group of actors to workshop the thesis's play-text.

My playwriting practice, in this thesis, sits somewhere on the border between mainstream drama and disability arts practice. Although I am writing from a non-autistic sibling perspective, and in conversation with a series of relatively conventional sibling-disability dramas, it has been my aim to draw politically and aesthetically 'from disability culture's challenges to ableism' (Johnston, 2016: 26), in particular its recognition and celebration of interdependent bonds. The critical thesis will therefore engage reflexively with my own role as a non-autistic playwright, in collaboration with a neurodiverse group of artists and interview participants, much as the play itself reflects on the characters' enactment of siblinghood in relation to autism. Before laying out my methodological approach in the following chapter, however, I will first situate the thesis in relation to critical autism and neurodiversity studies, looking to the work of both autistic scholars and autism-parents, as well as the narratives posed by social sciences sibling-disability research.

1.2 Analysing Autism Representation

Hargrave, writing just over a decade ago in 2015, laments that there are very few critical analyses exploring work by learning-disabled or autistic artists. A decade before that, the same might have been said of works *about* autism and learning disability as well. In *Representing Autism* (2008), Stuart Murray observes 'that the emerging field of disability studies […] has next to nothing to say about autism' (8), focusing primarily on physical and sensory impairments instead. While Murray and others have since made significant contributions to

that critical conversation, autism remains an under-represented topic in literary and cultural disability studies—and particularly in theatrical and filmic criticism (Loftis, 2015: 153). This section will explore some of the reasons for that lack of literature while highlighting key analyses from the last two decades. Like clinical autism research, at least in the anglophone sphere (see Grinker, 2007: 10), most of this writing hails from either the United Kingdom or United States.

Victoria Ann Lewis, in 'The Dramaturgy of Disability' (1998), identifies that disability is frequently used as visual cue to convey a character's moral standing. In semiotic terms, the 'natural sign' of bodily variation accrues and conveys symbolic meaning when it is intentionally, or 'iconically', reproduced in an actor's performance (Esslin, 1988). Although this moral coding of difference is not exclusive to visual media—it is equally present, for example, in Victorian novels (see Holmes, 2017)—it continues to invoke largely visual imagery. It might seem natural, then, for a critical framework based around visual signs to dismiss neurodiversity as less 'markedly visible' (Murray, 2008: 9; Hargrave, 2015: 123), but atypical behaviour is also stigmatically coded (see Loftis, 2015: 8). In *Staring: How We Look* (2009), Garland-Thomson explores not only how 'normates' stare at atypical bodies, but also how the 'improper looking' of distractibility, 'blank stares', and lack of eye-contact are highly stigmatised and 'draw interrogative stares' themselves (2009: 23).

From a critical perspective, however, neurobehavioral differences may be more difficult to catalogue and trace through a cultural history. While Hargrave analyses the paradoxical, or oxymoronic, role of the wise fool in early modern English drama (2015: 129–131), the era's vocabulary makes it difficult to pin down any specific forms of neurodivergence. As Murray observes, autistic traits have 'always been part of human diversity' (2008: 11), but distinct terms for intellectual impairment only began to gain currency around the mid-nineteenth century (67), and autism's use as a diagnostic category is only about a century old. The term 'Autism' gradually emerged from schizophrenia-associated diagnoses around the mid-twentieth century, and most of the general public had no awareness of autism until the late 1980s or early 1990s, with the release of the film *Rain Man* (1988) and the nonfiction writings of Temple Grandin (*Emergence*, 1986; *Thinking in Pictures*, 1995) and Oliver Sacks ('An

Anthropologist on Mars', 1993; see discussion in Silberman, 2016: 411; Murray, 2008: 12–13).

At the turn of the twenty-first century, US and UK media both described autism in epidemic terms, as rising case numbers—due to a project of diagnostic expansion led by British researcher Lorna Wing (see Silberman, 2016: 363–383)—collided with unsubstantiated claims that childhood vaccinations might be at fault (see Murray, 2008: 10–11; Grinker, 2007: 9). It is against this backdrop that the first two book-length studies of autism's cultural representation, Stuart Murray's *Representing Autism* and Mark Osteen's edited collection *Autism and Representation*, were both published in 2008. Between them, the two books explore the cultural positioning of autism not only in novels and on film, but also in memoirs or life writing, news media, and marketing campaigns. Both examine—as Elena Semino does on a more limited scale in the article 'Pragmatic Failure, Mind Style and Characterisation in Fiction about Autism' (2014)—how ideas from the medical community are distributed through cultural materials to shape public understanding. I will build on their work in my analysis of sibling-disability plays in Chapter 3.

Murray offers particular insight into the evolution of autism parenting narratives. While the Austrian Hans Asperger intuited a genetic explanation for the similarities between parents and their autistic children in 1944 (84–87), the American Leo Kanner offered a hunch—soon popularised by Bruno Bettelheim's *The Empty Fortress* (1967)—blaming 'parental coldness, obsessiveness, and a mechanical […] attention to material needs' (Kanner, 1949: 425). In scientific research, this psychoanalytic 'refrigerator mother' theory has since been replaced by biological explanations, but Murray observes that any shift towards a more 'positive notion of [autism] parenting' has, in fact, only moved from implicating parents as the *cause* of autism to implicating them in its *outcomes* (2008: 192). With enough love and dedication—as well as knowledge and money—various guidebooks and pedagogies seem to promise that parents can mitigate autism's impacts on their children's later lives. The unspoken implication, of course, is that if a child remains impaired or neurodivergent, their parents have not done or loved them enough. Cure-centred narratives and approaches have traditionally been more prominent in US than UK contexts (see Silberman, 2016:

375), but Murray's book offers evidence that by the height of the vaccination panic, the American model and its associated guilt were being exported across the Atlantic wholesale.

Writing as a UK parent of autistic children, Murray acknowledges that 'much of the emerging work on autism in the humanities […] comes from scholars who have a personal connection to the condition, usually as parents of a child or children with autism' (2008: 18). A personal connection is common in disability studies, where it is often assumed there will be some 'correspondence between an author's identity and critical project' (Schaap Williams, 2021: 221), but scholars of autism and learning disability are most likely to be, in Hadley's terms, 'disability adjacent' (2020: 182). Siblings, parents, partners, children, and carers can occupy an ambiguous position in disability scholarship and are urged not to speak for or over those with lived experience of disability. 'Nothing about us without us' is a core slogan of the disability rights movement, after all.

Scholars with physical experiences of disability may feel unqualified to write about neurodiversity for similar reasons, not wanting to speak for or over neurodivergent voices. As Mitchell and Snyder observe, however, people with physical disabilities have also 'historically disassociated themselves', consciously or otherwise, from those with intellectual disabilities out of self-preservation:

> From the segregation of special education classrooms to the systematic murder of people with cognitive disabilities in Nazi Germany, the fate of people with physical disabilities has often depended upon their ability to distance themselves from their cognitively disabled peers. (2000: 3)

At the same time, there are frequent barriers to neurodivergent engagement with academia (Fassett and Morella, 2008). In a recent edited collection, Jenny Bergenmar, Louise Creechan, and Anna Stenning note that the emerging field of critical neurodiversity studies is largely 'led by early career researchers who struggle to find support in scholarly contexts' (2025: 5). Autistic individuals have offered cultural commentary in a variety of online spaces and self-published books—like Julia Bascomb's edited collection, *Loud Hands: Autistic People, Speaking* (2012)—but Sonya Freeman Loftis's *Imagining Autism* (2015) was the

first book-length scholarly examination of autism's cultural presence by an openly autistic academic.

Loftis begins her exploration in autism's pre-history, beginning with Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes (1887) and moving through major works of the modern and postmodern literary cannon to end with contemporary best sellers like *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (Haddon, 2004). It is worth noting that none of the characters she discusses are explicitly defined in their texts as autistic: *Curious Incident*'s Christopher has 'Behavioural Problems' (Haddon, 2004: 59), Oskar from *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (Foer, 2005) has some form of communication disorder, and Lisbeth from *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (Larsson, 2005) resists diagnosis in what Loftis calls an 'indictment of the mental health care system' (2015: 109, 131). Nonetheless, Loftis argues that all of them, from the eccentric genius Sherlock Holmes to the nonverbal Benjy Compson (*The Sound and the Fury*, Faulkner, 1929) are positioned as enigmatic and autistically-coded outsiders, used to metaphorise or comment on cultural discourses and anxieties. Three plays are included in Loftis's literary analysis—Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie* (1945) and George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* (1913) and *Saint Joan* (1923)—but all of the novels she discusses also have stage and/or screen adaptations, some of which have been reviewed by other scholars. Hargrave (2015) has discussed Mind the Gap's adaptions of *To Kill a Mockingbird* (*Boo*, Kenny, 2009) and *Of Mice and Men* (Kenny, 2000), while Marla Carlson (2018: 84–89) and Leon Hilton (2018) offer analyses of Elevator Repair Service's take on *The Sound and the Fury* (2008; 2015).

Loftis and Murray's writing laid the foundations for a field now referred to as critical autism studies, which examines representation across various cultural contexts. This includes work like M. Remi Yergeau's *Authoring Autism* (2018) and Julia Miele Rodas's *Autistic Disturbances* (2018), which use autism as an analytical lens to consider language and rhetoric (see discussion in Bergenmar et al., 2025: 6, 9-10). Yergeau's book explores how autism is narrativised by neuro-normative and heteronormative authorities. It reclaims autistic rhetoricity (or demi-rhetoricity) as full of queer potential, rather than a deficit. Rodas likewise challenges deficit readings of autistic communication, observing how the same

verbal patterns diagnosed as problems in autistic patients are also celebrated as stylistic choices in literary texts. More recently, these critical examinations have fallen under the wider umbrella—and emerging discipline—of critical neurodiversity studies, which looks beyond specific diagnoses to find neurodiverse and neuroqueer kinship between various 'neurominorities' (ibid.: 2; citing Walker, 2021). Autistic modes of being and of reading are frequently considered for their generative authorial and critical potential in Bergenmar, Creechan, and Stenning's edited volume, *Critical Neurodiversity Studies* (2025). In the book's singular foray into drama, Laura Seymour reads an 'autistic utopia' in the eccentric domesticity of Ben Jonson's Jacobean comedy *Epicoene* (1609).

Marla Carlson's 2018 monograph *Affect, Animals, and Autists* more specifically theorises about theatrical stagings of autism, particularly the genre she terms 'Autism Family Drama'. As another parent of an autistic child, Carlson criticises the ways that generic conventions solidify the neo-liberal ideal of a 'happy'—meaning cohesive and self-sufficient—family unit (51–54). Where Murray praises *Curious Incident* for resisting narratives in which addressing the 'problem' of autism brings a family together (2008: 162), Carlson criticises the stage adaptation for locating its 'scope of concern and responsibility' inside the bounds of the nuclear family (2018: 59). Instead, she suggests that autism family counternarratives should model a broader web of interdependence, calling attention to the ways that wider social systems fail to provide autistic people and their families with adequate support. When the grandmother in Deana Jent's *Falling* (2013), for example, offers prayers of strength to parents Bill and Tami, they tell her to pray instead: 'for programs and housing options and staff for people like Josh. […] Pray that [Josh's sister] Lisa won't hate us forever. Pray that our marriage won't fall apart. Pray that people will stop just praying and take some action' (37). Both Jent and Carlson advocate for a sense of collective social responsibility, denying audiences the impulse to distance ourselves from the 'problem' of autism by refusing to situate it comfortably within the bounds of *other people's* families.

While Carlson and Murray's monographs are both written from 'disability adjacent', parental perspectives, I would argue that their work still fits within the emerging ethos of critical neurodiversity studies. This is because they each

acknowledge and address their positionality, offering insights into autism parenting narratives and the ways that these shape the lives not only of parents but of autistic people as well. Rather than speaking over autistic voices, both scholars offer a model for writing about autism from family perspectives while embracing the paradigms of critical disability and neurodiversity studies. As there is no existing literary and cultural analysis—at least that I am aware of—that does the same from a sibling perspective, the final section of this chapter will instead survey research narratives about siblings and autism/disability, looking to recent sociology research that approaches 'Siblinghood Through Disability Studies Perspectives' (Meltzer and Kramer, 2016).

1.3 Sibling Research

When Carlson and Murray each discuss autism family narratives, most of their focus is on the relationships between autistic individuals and their parents. 'Family' commonly has a 'parent-centric' definition in autism- and disability-related services (Meltzer, 2021: 3), and this carries over to associated literature. Murray observes that '[a]t specialist publishers such as Jessica Kingsley, the number of books devoted to autism as seen through the eyes of parents or siblings, or volumes that are intended to aid families […] form a significant part of the catalogue' (2008: 170). While he is correct that a preponderance of the 319 titles in Jessica Kingsley's autism category by the end of 2007 were family-centred, a look through the associated marketing summaries reveals that only five of these specifically included sibling perspectives or were sibling-centred in topic/audience. A further three summaries used 'family' in an ambiguous sense or included a mention of the memoir author's non-autistic children (www.jkp.com/catalogue/index.php/cat/autism via Archive.org, [27 December 2007]). As of December 2022, the company's autism-related offerings had more than doubled to approximately 675.[4] While the proportion of books written from an autistic perspective or for autistic audiences had substantially increased, the percentage of titles involving siblings remained consistent at a generous 2.5% or a conservative 1.5%: six books were written specifically by or for siblings, another four included some sibling perspectives, and an additional eight had

[4] Titles were displayed within subcategories, and some repetitions between them may have been missed in the total.

blurbs which either used ‘family’ ambiguously or mentioned the memoir author’s non-autistic children/siblings (https://uk.jkp.com/pages/category-browser, 22 December 2022). Although siblings and parents are, in Hadley’s terms, a similar degree of ‘disability adjacent’ (2020: 182), their needs and experiences may vary significantly, as there are ‘often crucial differences ascribed to the[ir] roles’ (Murray, 2008: 178). As such, this section will summarise key research on siblings and disability from the social sciences, suggesting how ideas from this field can be applied in relation to fiction.

According to the UK-based charity Sibs, there are ‘at least 1.7 million adult siblings in the UK, who have grown up with a disabled brother or sister’ (Sibs, 2026). In a recent review of research on the adult siblings of people with intellectual or developmental disabilities, Nikita Hayden et al., observe ‘mixed findings’ as to the impact this siblinghood has on both ‘psychological outcomes and relationships’ (2022: 1). They note that many of the existing studies of adult siblings are small-scale, using convenience-based sampling techniques. As Saxena and Adamsons note, it is also difficult to draw comparisons between sibling studies, since their sampling parameters, interview questions, and life outcomes are inconsistently defined (2013: 300). More qualitative research, however, suggests not only that there is variability among different siblings’ experiences—which Avieli et al. (2019) attempt to categorise into five key relationship patterns—but also that individuals often identify a combination of positive and negative impacts on their lives (Meltzer, 2018: 1227; Pavlopoulou et al., 2022).

In ‘Siblinghood Through Disability Studies Perspectives’, Ariella Meltzer and John Kramer outline the evolution of sibling research over the past century. When institutionalisation was the norm, doctors and researchers presumed that the presence of a disabled sibling at home would negatively impact more typically developing children, and sibling research has historically centred such individualised impacts on nondisabled siblings (2016: 18–21). Even as the exploratory lens has broadened to include a focus on more positive outcomes (see Heller and Arnold, 2010: 16; Roberts, 2021: 155), it is only in the last decade or so that sibling researchers have begun to consider the experiences of

disabled siblings as well (Meltzer and Kramer, 2016: 21; see also Petalas et al., 2015; Giesbers et al., 2020; Rossetti et al., 2020).[5]

Most sibling-disability research, including my own, has been focused in the United States, Western Europe, and Australia, although more recently work by Bhattashali et al. (2018), Paul et al. (2022), and others has called attention to the experiences of siblings in the Global South. Research has also historically focused on children (Hayden et al., 2022: 2; Hastings, 2014: 10), but there is increasing awareness that sibling relationships are lifelong and adult siblings are likely to take on caring responsibilities as their parents age. Several studies have therefore looked specifically at the experiences of sibling-carers or at families' future-planning preparedness (see Lee and Burke, 2018; 2020; Davys et al., 2011). Another strand of research aims to identify predictive risk factors for negative psycho-social outcomes and more effectively direct supports to both adult and child siblings (see Orsmond and Seltzer, 2007; O'Neill and Murray, 2016; Hayden et al., 2019; Rixon et al., 2021).

Reviews by Levante et al. (2025), Caroline Roberts (2021), Saxena and Adamsons (2013: 305), and Orsmond and Seltzer (2007) compare sibling research involving different disability diagnoses. On the whole, siblings of individuals with autism appear more likely than those with other forms of intellectual/developmental disability to experience negative psycho-social outcomes and less likely to express closeness in their sibling relationships (see also Tomeny et al., 2017). Various studies' findings are still mixed, however (see Leedham et al., 2020),[6] and other factors may complicate the correlation. Louise Rixon et al. demonstrate that sibling experiences are not consistent across the autism spectrum (2021; 2025), and broader learning disability research may not include families where autism is present without other intellectual impairment.

The two largest diagnostic groups in such research are usually autism and Down Syndrome, and researchers have observed a 'Down syndrome advantage' in

[5] There is a longer history of studies which consider the impacts for autistic children of involving siblings in delivering intervention therapies (Shivers and Plavnick, 2015).

[6] Leedham et al. (2020) is a literature review, highlighting mixed findings across different studies. For more recent studies that highlight mixed impacts on *individual* autism-sibling experiences, see also Burnham Riosa et al. (2023) and Trew (2025).

parents, who tend to 'report less stress and a more rewarding experience than parents of children with other disabilities' (Roberts, 2021: 180). Sibling experiences of Down Syndrome similarly appear to be more positive, with adult siblings reporting 'more reciprocal sibling relationships, more frequent contact, and a wider range of shared activities' compared to sibling relationships involving autism (Rossetti et al., 2020: 5). This might be explained, in part, by the differences in parental experience. 'Family systems' theory suggests that overstressed parents are more likely to raise overstressed children, because of the ways that 'family members […] exert a reciprocal, continuous influence on one another' (Hayden et al., 2022: 1). We might, however, also look to genetic explanations for the differences in both sibling and parent experiences. Down Syndrome is caused by a distinct chromosomal mutation, not present in other relatives, but research into the broad[er] autism phenotype suggests that social and emotional difficulties may also stem from family members' genetic predisposition towards having autism-like traits themselves (see Saxena and Adamsons, 2013: 305–306; Hastings and Petalas, 2014: 837; Orsmond and Seltzer, 2007: 693).

Where nondisabled sibling research explores sibling pairs' mutual experiences, dependencies, and relationship dynamics, Meltzer and Kramer observe that sibling-disability research has tended to focus on the individual psychology of nondisabled, neurotypical siblings, missing a wider 'range of ideas of what disability or siblinghood may mean in the lives of' disabled–nondisabled sibling pairs (2016: 18). Hayden et al. note that some of the negative experiences mentioned in their review 'are also found amongst siblings where neither is disabled' (2022: 6), and Petalas et al. conclude that autistic adolescents largely view their sibling relationships as typical—even as they recognise the specific impacts of autism on their daily interactions (2015). Meltzer agrees that while disability shapes the specifics of siblings' day-to-day interactions, disabled-nondisabled sibling relationships still follow many of the same patterns as those of their able-bodied neurotypical peers (2018: 1221–1222; 2017: 1017).

Instead of measuring against a normative construct of what sibling relationships 'should' be, Meltzer suggests examining 'the minutiae of how siblings talk to, act with, perceive and feel about each other *with* disability as a *part of* their

relationship' in order to illuminate 'alternative ways of being siblings', which 'can and should be recognised and valued' (2018: 1229). If, as Carlson argues, Autism Family Drama 'shor[es] up' an idealised vision of the nuclear family (2018: 52), then autism sibling narratives, in both research and fiction, have the potential either to reinforce or challenge our normative constructs of sibling relationships. I concur with Meltzer that there is rich material to be uncovered in the relationships between autistic individuals and their siblings, and I propose that the collaborative process of theatre is particularly suited to such exploration. Theatre allows us to enact and re-enact interdependencies both on and off stage, and the critical disability framework that Meltzer applies within the social sciences can likewise be used to guide creative endeavours. The following chapter, then, will lay out a methodology for experimentation through the reflexive and collaborative process of writing and workshopping a partly interview-inspired and partly autofictional, auto/ethnographic play.

Chapter 2 Methodology

When David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, as discussed in the previous chapter, advocate for counternarrative 'reading practices that embrace, transform, and reckon with our inherited disability storylines' (2000: 163), they point not to other works of literary criticism, but to a play-text by Lord Byron as their exemplar. This choice highlights the intertwined nature of critical and creative engagement with disability narratives: the former allows us to evaluate how current representations interact with social systems, while the latter offers space, as Matt Hargrave says, to 'invent and re-invent other' and better 'life scripts' (2015: 138). Although it is the *product* of Byron's creative practice that serves as inspiration for Mitchell and Snyder's scholarship, Melissa Trimingham argues that the creative *process* can be equally generative, allowing for a spiral-like 'hermeneutic-interpretive' methodology in which artistic practice and academic research questions repeatedly shape and refine each other (2002: 56). She names this cycle 'practice as research', which I'll use interchangeably with the more recent term 'practice-research'.[7]

This chapter will lay out a practice-research methodology that is auto/ethnographic, combining analysis of existing drama with a partly autofictional, partly interview-inspired playwriting practice to investigate how sibling relationships involving autism *are* and *might be* represented in drama. Since Ann M. Fox and Carrie Sandahl note that theatre and disability are both grounded in material embodiment (2018: 121), I'll begin by looking at how disability and practice-research theory dovetail in centring embodied knowledge—presenting both challenges and opportunities in their attempts to articulate it. The next three sections will discuss the ethics and logistics of autofictional and interview-inspired playwriting—explaining how this combination constitutes an auto/ethnographic practice and discussing the theatrical and research traditions on which each of them draw. Section 2.2 will focus on the links between disability life writing and autoethnography, drawing on G. Thomas Couser's analysis of disability family narratives to propose a

[7] In a 2018 article for the *Journal of Research Practice*, Helen Phelan and Mary Nunan advocate for '*arts practice research*' as a term that is less prescriptive of the 'specific relationship between "practice" and "research"' in a given project, avoiding various qualifiers like '*based*, *as*, *led*, and *through*' in use over last few decades (2).

hybridised approach which I term auto/ethnography. Sections 2.3 and 2.4 will describe the methods, demographics, and findings of the project's interviews, while Section 2.5 will contextualise the project within the field of interview-inspired theatre practice, explaining how the use of interviews might echo, balance, and complicate the ethical questions raised by autofictional writing. This last section will also discuss the key role of dramatic collaboration in exploring disabled and neurodiverse interrelationships simultaneously on- and off-stage.

2.1 Articulating Embodied Knowledge

In *The Prosthetic Pedagogy of Art*, Charles Garoian proposes that creative practice serves as a 'prosthetic' space through which artists 'suggest and inspire new and renewed possibilities for interpretation and understanding' of the world around us (2013: 9). In the book's early chapters, he argues not necessarily for practice as a method of academic research, like Trimingham, but for the arts as a way of knowing about the world—a form of embodied knowledge in which creative practice is a 'prosthetic' tool mediating between an inquisitive body-mind and the world around it. Drawing links between the physical/aesthetic roles of medical prostheses and the mental/emotional roles of artistic practice in attempting to reconcile bodies and societies with the aftermath of traumatic events (23–40), Garoian hints at parallels between theories of disability and of practice-research. This section will explore the two fields' shared emphasis on embodied knowledge, the difficulty of communicating that knowledge to a wider audience, and the new insights that such articulation may produce.

Garoian frames arts practice as a tool to investigate the ways that social space, according to Henri Lefevbre, subconsciously 'precedes, prescribes, and proscribes the body's activity' and experiences (Garoian, 2013: 7; referencing Lefebvre, 1991: 143). This concept of prescriptive social space aligns with the social model of disability, which argues that people are disabled not by innate bodily impairments but by their interactions with an unaccommodating society (Shakespeare, 2021: 18). Building on Lefebvre's idea that social space can only be interpreted after its subconscious dictates have been experienced, Garoian argues for arts practice as an exploratory or 'representational' space, allowing us to view our own actions and responses at a distance and begin making sense

of our social environment. Mirroring Trimingham's hermeneutic spiral, he describes such creative practice as 'a reciprocal, rhythmic oscillation' between 'disembodiment', or reflective evaluation, and 're-embodiment', or exploration through doing (2013: 9). This concept of embodied knowledge, fostered by a reflexive cycle of doing and thinking, is central to the case for practice-research methodologies (see Thomson, 2003; Nelson, 2013; 2022).

Similarly, Clare Barker and Stuart Murray observe that the field of literary and cultural disability studies aims to 'recognize and validate the embodied and emotional aspects […] of disability experience' (2017: 6). Here, embodied knowledge is that gained through lived experience in/as a disabled or neurodivergent body-mind (Johnston, 2016: 19). 'When the limping [Oedipus]', as Mitchell and Snyder observe, 'overcomes the Sphinx['s riddle …], we must assume that his own disability served as an experiential source for this insight' (2000: 61). The mythical hero can identify man as the four-, then two-, then three-legged creature, they argue, precisely because he has needed a cane—or prosthetic third leg—himself. There is a sense that this knowledge can only be truly understood through first-hand experience: that those of us who do not need mobility aids can learn the riddle's answer in theory but cannot truly know it in our bones. Accordingly, Bree Hadley reminds disability-adjacent artists and advocates, who 'do not have embodied knowledge of disability', not to raise their (or our) voices over those of people who do (2020: 182). Mark Osteen (2008: 7) and Simi Linton (2005: 520), on the other hand, advocate that even without this embodied knowledge, nondisabled people need opportunities to recognise and address their own position in relation to disability.

The question of how, and to what degree, embodied knowledge can be transmitted remains a contentious one. In the field of disability arts, as Matt Hargrave has noted, work made with nondisabled collaborators or for nondisabled audiences is often treated as suspect or inauthentic (2015: 21–46). Meanwhile, the formalisation of practice-research as an academic framework, in the 1990s and early 2000s, has raised questions about whether it is valid or necessary to verbalise artistic knowledge. A common metaphor in the latter debate is that of riding a bicycle, a skill which must be learned in the body and cannot necessarily be articulated. To get anywhere on a bicycle, the scientist

Hans Dieter Huber argues, one needs implicit or embodied knowledge—*knowing how* to ride it—but also the explicit or theoretical knowledge—*knowing that*—of what route to take (2015: 36, as translated in Sinapius, 2018: 32). In artistic practice, however, Peter Sinapius counters that the goal is not always a predetermined or hypothesised destination that requires a concrete roadmap (2018: 33). Knowledge may instead be evidenced through some combination of artistic performance or product—the act of 'riding the bicycle'—and theoretical writing on one's route or technique.[8]

Garoian and Sinapius seem to concur with Ross Prior that '[a]ll creative acts essentially involve the formation of meaning' (2018: 43) or are at least 'an opportunity to appropriate the world through an additional form of knowledge' (Sinapius, 2018: 33). Not all artistic practice, however, qualifies as academic research. Practice as research, per Robin Nelson, must be 'innovative and investigative', offering substantial insights to the field, usually based around experiments with composition, technology, performance quality, experience, or concept (2022: 39, 41). Trimingham adds that these research outcomes must be translated 'into analytical language […] to share with others the insight and understanding' reached through practice (2002: 55). While the critical component of this thesis represents such an analytical translation, there are other artists who contend that this dilutes knowledge better conveyed through practice alone (see Thomson, 2003).

If *'I know that…'* is an expression of traditional academic knowledge—the scientific method, quantifiable data, and critical theory—and *'I know how…'* represents the enigmatic, embodied knowledge of carrying out practice, then Nelson proposes that the reflexive work of practice-research lies in the phrase *'I know what…'*. By reflecting on the creative process—identifying what works or doesn't and what impact our choices have on the creative product—we can begin to articulate and question the tacit assumptions wrapped into *knowing-how* (2013: 37–46; 2022: 46–54). This critical reflexivity can be developed and matured by 'looking at other people's work in addition to [our] own' (Prior, 2018: 52). Accordingly, Chapter 3 of this thesis will serve as what Nelson terms a

[8] For other uses of the bicycle metaphor, see Nelson (2013: 9) and Franc Chamberlain in Thomson (2003: 171).

'practice review' (2022: 49–50), asking how autistic–nonautistic or neurodiverse sibling relationships have been represented in existing drama, from *The Glass Menagerie* (Williams, 1945) through today. Placing the thesis in a lineage of dramatic literature, it adds to the body of disability criticism discussed in the literature review while also serving as a reference point for my own writing choices—identifying both *what* they suggest about neurodiverse siblinghood and *how* they do so.

Trimingham reminds us that an 'understanding of history is also part of the spiral', and just as these textual predecessors inform my own writing, 'the insight [creative] practice gives us into what performance is, or can be, or could have been' feeds back into more traditional academic inquiry, 'revealing the prejudice and unspoken assumptions clustering around accepted historical interpretations' (2002: 56, 58). Dramatic texts present an opportunity in their many layers of meaning and interpretation, and by returning to these plays at different phases in my own creative process, I've discovered counternarrative readings that I might not have found at first.

2.2 Auto/ethnography and Autofiction

Nelson's concept of *knowing-what*, which articulates and interrogates the *knowing-how* of creative practice, is equally useful in examining other forms of meaning-making and the knowledge they produce. Because I have a sibling on the autism spectrum, personal experience is a key source of knowledge in this thesis—one that deeply influences my playwriting and must be acknowledged and interrogated, in the critical thesis, for the ways it shapes my perspective throughout. Such reflexive approaches are increasingly common across disciplines, as scholars reject the pretence of objectivity in favour of identifying their own subjective positionality (Nelson, 2022: 47). Autoethnography, in particular, was developed as a post-colonial response to outsider-penned anthropological studies and seeks to replace the 'objective' observation of an othered group with a subjective, insider perspective (Couser, 2005). Although this is traditionally associated with writing from a marginalised experience, Helen Phelan and Mary Nunan also draw links between autoethnographic techniques, as used in ethnomusicology, and the writing that practice-researchers do, to 'shine[] a light on the detail of the creative process',

particularly when creating autobiographical or autofictional work (2018: 7). This section will, therefore, examine autoethnography—and its hybrid form, auto/ethnography—as a form of *knowing-what* at the heart of my creative and critical practice.

Disability writing and performance, with its emphasis on embodied experience, often includes elements of autobiography,[9] which G. Thomas Couser calls 'a sort of a threshold genre for […] marginalized groups'. Autobiography seems more accessible than other forms of writing and offers the 'potential to counter stigmatizing or patronizing portrayals' through self-representation (2001: 78). For this reason, Couser proposes that much disability life writing can also be read as autoethnographic, offering an insider's perspective on disability communities and the social systems that surround them (2005: 124–125, 129–130). He even extends this potential to familial memoirs of disability, noting that 'auto-ethnography' can refer either to autobiographies that define the writer's own 'subjective ethnicity' in the original, post-colonial sense (126; citing Lionnet, 1989: 99) or to confessional outsider ethnographies, which 'explicitly address and analyze [the author's] personal relations with the natives [or othered groups] they are writing about' (126). Couser places sibling memoirs, like Rachel Simon's *Riding the Bus with My Sister* (2002), largely within the latter category—which he terms (auto)ethnography—focusing on the ethics of Simon's relationship to disability and the related issues of privacy and consent (134–136).

Each of us perceive and narrate events from our own individual perspectives (Belmonte, 2008), and we remember them selectively, retelling constructed, partial versions of our stories and ourselves (Heddon, 2008: 26–27). Because each of our stories is intertwined with our interpersonal relationships, Deirdre Heddon observes that all forms of autobiography raise questions about how to balance the author's right to self-representation with others' rights to privacy and to shape the narrative themselves (124–127). The authority of personal accounts can either subvert or enforce established narratives, so it's important to consider whose perspective we are hearing, especially when there are complex power-dynamics in play (31–37). As Hadley observes, parent and caregiver narratives

[9] See Couser (2001); Murray (2008: 27–64); Hargrave (2015: 137–168); and Sandahl (2003).

still dominate the autism conversation (2020: 182), and stories that present autism as a source of familial suffering can have dangerous real-world consequences, reinforcing negative stereotypes that authorise discrimination and devalue autistic lives (see Murray, 2008: 168–171; Loftis, 2015: 62–66).

Philippe Lejeune may define autobiography as '[r]etrospective prose narrative written by a real person […] where the focus is *his individual life*' (1988: 4, emphasis mine), but no one's story can truly be told in isolation. To highlight the complex negotiation between self-representation and others' privacy, Heddon examines a series of autobiographical plays about intergenerational trauma, where the playwrights' stories are necessarily entangled with those of their parents (2008: 145–150). There is simply no way to separate them, and a similar dynamic is at play in *Riding the Bus with My Sister*. Couser acknowledges that Simon's memoir represents not only a near-outsider's perspective on learning disability, but also an *insider* 'ethnographic memoir' of the author's own experience 'with a sibling whose disability sets [the author] apart and shapes the family history in significant ways' (133). Borrowing a spelling from Deborah Reed-Danahay (1997), I will use the term 'auto/ethnography' for this hybrid form of insider-outsider ethnographic work.

As Lennard Davis argues in response to the film *CODA* (2021), family members of those with disabilities constitute our own unique constituencies, with reasons of our own to crave accurate representation (Davis, 2022). As a Child of Deaf Adults (or CODA, as the film's title refers to), Davis belongs to one such constituency, while as siblings of people with learning disabilities, Simon and I belong to another. Davis is also an influential disability scholar, and following his example, I try to hold an awareness of my outsider's neurotypical privilege, in representing autism *but also* a responsibility to represent the very real challenges experienced by siblings like myself. Navigating the dual responsibilities of this insider-outsider perspective will be further explored in Chapter 4 of this thesis, as I reflect on the characters Jackie and David as fictionalised representations of my own sibling relationship in *Two Truths*.

Like many of the plays that will be discussed in Chapter 3 of this thesis, *Two Truths* can be described as at least partly autobiographical. Unlike the written memoirs and autobiographical performances which Couser and Heddon

reference, however, it departs from Lejeune's criteria that 'the *author*, the *narrator*, and the *protagonist* must be identical' (1988: 5, emphasis original). Instead of 'autobiographies', Lejeune refers to texts that assign the protagonist a fictional name as 'autobiographical novel[s]' (13), and it is in this sense that critics use the term to describe plays like Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie* (1945) and Brian Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990) (see Parker, 1982; Mac Suibhne, 2020). To avoid confusion between autobiographical fiction and performed autobiography, this thesis will use the term 'autofictional' to describe drama that maps a version of the playwright's experiences onto a set of fictional characters, as I do in *Two Truths*.

An autofictional approach might be assumed to protect the author and their family's privacy, providing a cover of plausible deniability: the audience cannot know for certain which things are true and which are made up. In practice, however, this offers very little control over public assumption. Tennessee Williams's mother felt the need to respond to *The Glass Menagerie* in her own memoir, *Remember Me to Tom* (Williams and Freeman, 1964), and Eugene O'Neill was so worried about his family legacy that he tried to forbid the release of *Long Day's Journey into Night* (1956) until 25 years after his death.[10] Drawing a direct contrast to O'Neill, per a personal conversation, playwright Scott Aiello deliberately consulted his family in the process of workshopping the sibling-disability drama, *Bernie and Mikey's Trip to the Moon* (2018).[11] Other plays, like Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa* and Lindsey Ferrentino's *Amy and the Orphans* (2018), carry less weight of personal authority, since they are more 'loosely' inspired by the authors' extended families, rather than drawing directly on their own personal experience.

In the case of *Two Truths*, my own experiences are merged not only with fiction, but also with information gathered through a series of research interviews, the ethnographic component of the project's auto/ethnographic technique. I'd originally hoped that this would alleviate privacy concerns, disguising my own experiences among those of anonymous participants. While I've met others with

[10] O'Neill's widow, Carlotta Montery, instead published the play shortly after his funeral, arguing that all those whose reputations might be injured were already deceased (King, 2014).

[11] The researcher was a production assistant on the play's world premiere, in 2018.

similar experiences through sibling support groups, however, many of the project's interviews described relationships that were very different from my own. Because I wanted to capture the dynamics of my own relationship, Jackie and David's story remains largely autofictional, and it felt important to reflect on—and thereby identify—that in the critical reflection. Kate and Anna's stories, by contrast, are inspired mostly by interviews, which will be discussed in the following sections and again in part 3 of the Dramaturgical Analysis in Chapter 4.

2.3 Interview Recruitment and Demographics

While the impetus for this thesis lay very much in my personal sibling experience, I knew that my own perspective could not represent *all* neurodiverse siblings. This project's research questions ask not merely what *my* sibling experience looks like, but what autistic–nonautistic sibling relationships, more generally, do and can look like. To answer this, I drew on a body of sibling-disability research in the social sciences (laid out in the previous chapter) as well as a series of thirteen interviews conducted between late July and December of 2023. I have also had the opportunity to connect with a wider community of siblings through the UK charity Sibs, which I volunteer with. Although I will offer some reflections on the latter as a rewarding personal experience, the stories of siblings I encountered through the charity will be kept confidential and only cited where they are publicly available on the organisation's website. While I will go into more depth as to how each of these sources influenced my playwrighting choices, in Chapter 4, the next two sections will lay out my interview methods and methodology, beginning with recruitment strategies and demographics, then moving on to discuss the interview questions and findings. After that, I will go on to explore different models for interview-inspired drama and explain how the use of interviews might echo, balance, and complicate the ethical questions raised by autofictional writing, as discussed above.

In preparing to conduct interviews for this project, I was particularly influenced by the approach of sociologist Ariella Meltzer. As discussed in the Literature Review, her work both highlights and resists the ways that neurotypical sibling experiences, like my own, have traditionally been prioritised over those of disabled and neurodivergent siblings. Across three papers published between

2017 and 2021, Meltzer describes a qualitative interview project that engages with both disabled and nondisabled siblings, emphasising the importance of valuing or validating both perspectives on the relationship (2017; 2018; Meltzer and Muir, 2021). Although I was unable to recruit any sibling pairs from within the same family, as in Meltzer's work, I tried to follow her example in achieving a rough balance between autistic and non-autistic sibling perspectives in my recruitment pool. This meant advertising the project through a local self-advocacy group—the Scottish Women's Autism Network—as well as two international Facebook groups facilitated by the Sibling Support Project. I also drew on my own and my supervisors' personal and professional contacts as an additional strategy. Following this recruitment, a total of twenty-one individuals completed the online interest form, leading to a series of four in-person, seven video, and two written interviews between late July and December of 2023. Although these thirteen interviews were fewer than my initial goal, they offered a useful variety of autistic and sibling experiences, achieving data saturation within—as will be discussed shortly—my recruitment method's unintentional demographic constraints.

In Meltzer's research, participants were invited to take part either independently or in sibling pairs, in formats adjusted to match their communication abilities and comfort levels. Conscious of the ways that a live interview might be anxiety-inducing for some people on the autism spectrum, my own project offered three modes of participation: an in-person interview, a video interview, and a written questionnaire. Two of the thirteen participants selected the written option, and all—whether autistic or not—were offered the opportunity to view the interview questions in advance. Video interviews not only expanded my geographic reach but also allowed interviewees to control their own environments. In person, I tried to create seating arrangements that didn't imply the expectation of eye contact—placing chairs around the corner of a table rather facing each other directly across it.

All participant paperwork, beginning with the online interest form, was made available to interviewees in both standard text-based and illustrated Easy Read formats. Because I did not directly target Easy-Read users in my recruitment, however, only the Easy Read Privacy Notice for non-interviewed siblings (see

Appendix 6) saw measurable use. I likewise did not specifically target non- or minimally verbal interview participants and therefore did not wind up conducting any interviews using augmentative and alternative communication techniques. Although a few interviewees discussed their siblings who are high support needs and non- or minimally verbal, this meant that I only heard one side of those relationships. While it is important that autistic people with profound communication and/or intellectual impairments have their experiences represented in drama and other fiction, there is also a real danger of misrepresentation in such portrayals. Playwright Alex Oates and director Dominic Shaw, for example, were much criticised for the choice to have the autistic character, Laurence, portrayed by a puppet in *All in a Row* (2019; see Hadley, 2020: 182), and even writers who have a close relationship with high-support needs individuals can make choices that age poorly. In *Through Andrew's Eyes*, Oscar Cabrerra casts one actor to physically represent Andrew, a 'Twenty two year old young man with the mind of a three year old', and another to voice 'The Image of Andrew's Potential' (2016: Cast of Characters). Because I did not interview nor am I intimately acquainted with any non- or minimally-verbal autistic people, I felt I lacked the depth of knowledge to do such a representation justice in this play.

This was not the only way in which the demographics of my interview pool—and lack of targeted recruitment, except to the Scottish *Women's* Autism Network—would shape my playwrighting. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given my online recruitment methods, all the interviewees were young adults, in their twenties or early thirties, with families based in the United Kingdom or United States. Although there was some variety in their financial backgrounds, practically all were white or white-passing, which makes sense as white families and those with higher socioeconomic status are most likely to have access to autism diagnoses and resources (Aylward et al., 2021). This does, however, mean that my own playwriting reaffirms (if unintentionally) the tendency to imagine autism as white and middle class. While I did not specifically gather race or ethnicity data, both sibling-disability and autism research trend very white in general, and studies looking to redress that bias—such as Richardson and Stoneman's work with Black families in the United States (2019) or Sangha et al.'s work with Black and Asian immigrant families in the UK (2023)—have usually involved targeted

outreach to specific, local communities with which the researchers have existing relationships. I do not have these connections or belong to such a community, but if I were to expand the project, I would seek to partner with artists, researchers, and/or organisations who do.[12]

Because studies focused on neurotypical siblings have tended to exclude relationships where more than one sibling identifies as neurodivergent (Pavlopoulou, 2024), my recruitment materials consciously used phrasing to include autistic or neurodivergent people *with* autistic or neurodivergent siblings. The poster and advertising blurb for the project both invited 'Autistic Adults who have Siblings *and/or* Adults who have Autistic Siblings' to be interviewed for 'a new play about sibling relationships involving autism'. While just over half of the project's thirteen interviewees and just under half of their twenty-three collective siblings had an autism or autism-spectrum diagnosis, approximately three-quarters—85% percent of participants and 70% of their collective siblings—experienced *some form* of neurodivergence (although this was not always formally diagnosed). In eight of the thirteen relationships, both the participant and at least one sibling were neurodivergent, and several expressed that this helped generate a sense of understanding or empathy between them, even if they did not share an autism diagnosis. Another participant expressed some doubt: 'I was really surprised to find out that [my sibling's] got ADHD. […] Because I normally get on with people who've got ADHD' [but the two of them did not]. Different siblings' needs and habits also sometimes conflicted when it came to sleep schedules, dietary habits or restrictions, and sensory stimulation or sensitivity.

Surprisingly for autism research, although not for sibling-disability research, about three quarters of the interviewees and half of their non-interviewed siblings were women. The enthusiasm of the Scottish Women's Autism Network helped correct (or perhaps-overcorrect) the typical prevalence of men in autism research and representation (Murray, 2008: 164). Although there are far more men with autism diagnoses than women, researchers have argued that autistic

[12] In the last few years, NeuroNoir CIC and Neurodiverse Connection have launched affinity groups for Black autistic and neurodivergent people in the UK. The US-based Sibling Support Project also runs a Spanish-language online sibling support group and facilitated a series of BIPOC sibling roundtables in 2021.

women are likely to be vastly under-diagnosed (Hull et al., 2020). Female sampling bias is common, on the other hand, in adult sibling-disability research, where women are more likely to be involved in sibling support organisations and therefore in recruitment pools.[13] My experience tracked with this, as all the non-autistic interviewees were female or femme aligned. Strangely, however, this too corrects an onstage representation bias: while sisters seem to be the primary writer-performers of autobiographical sibling solo-shows,[14] most of the multi-character, fictional sibling plays explored in this thesis have been written by and/or about neurotypical brothers. Brian Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa* is one of the few theatrical exceptions, alongside the BBC's recent television programmes *Dinosaur* (2024) and *A Kind of Spark* (2023–2024), which will be discussed in Chapter 3. Given the prevalence of sisters in my research interviews, it therefore seemed obvious that the second set of siblings in my playwriting ought to be a sister-sister pair.

2.4 Interview Methods and Findings

Meltzer's 2017 article, 'I Couldn't Just Entirely Be Her Sister' was especially influential as I was formulating my interview questions. The article highlights some of the myriad ways that disabled and nondisabled siblings provide care and support for each other, but it also shows how the language of interview questions can shape the types of care and support that researchers hear about. Meltzer notes that while support for siblings is often offered under the umbrella of 'young carers', many are resistant to describe themselves as such (1018). When asked about 'actions siblings take for each other', her interviewees tended to use the word 'care' only to describe more intensive, one-sided responsibilities and the word 'help' for more informal and reciprocal 'acts of assistance offered by both siblings to each other' (1021). To elicit a picture of

[13] More than 80% of the sibling studies in Levante et al.'s literature review had a female sampling bias (2025: 245), and Lee and Burke found 13 studies in which 80% of the participants were female (2018: 242). Meltzer identifies that white women are demographically dominant in sibling support organisations (2021: 7), and Arnold, Heller, and Kramer (2012) note how convenience-based sampling through these organisations shapes their data pool (380–381).

[14] Solo-shows by sisters include Grania Pickard's *He Ain't Heavy* (2017–2018), Christina Murdock's *Dangerous Giant Animals* (2019), Rachel Hammond's autofictional *Joshua (and Me)* (2022), Emily Potter's *Sophie* (2023), Holly Gifford's *Big Little Sister* (2025), and Caroline McEvoy's *Train Man* (2025). Among solo-shows, Lewis Ian Bray's *Cartoonopolis* (2025, 2015) is a rare exception written and performed from a brother's perspective.

siblings' reciprocal contributions in my own research, I therefore asked participants how they and their siblings each 'help or care' for each other. Partway through the process, I expanded this to 'help or care, or *show that* [they] care', since some participants—whose relationships involved more conflict or higher support needs—had difficulty identifying ways their sibling had materially 'helped or cared' for them.

To ensure that I engaged with both autistic and non-autistic siblings as equal narrators of their relationships, and to minimise the influence of my own assumptions, I chose to use the same set of interview questions for all participants. After being asked about their own and their siblings' diagnoses, both autistic and non-autistic interviewees were asked to share an interesting fact about their siblings and about themselves, to tell me a bit about growing up together, to reflect on their relationship now, and to share some hopes for themselves and their siblings in the future. I also asked each participant for a funny story with or about their sibling(s), a time they enjoyed spending together, a time they were frustrated with their sibling(s), and a time they were worried for or about them. This memory-sharing made for some of the most vivid and memorable parts of our discussions, but many of the memories were drawn from participants' childhoods. This did provide useful creative fodder and context for the siblings' adult relationships, but the specific aims of my playwriting project might have been better served by questions with a clearer focus on adult experiences.

In conducting, and later transcribing, the interviews, I was frequently reminded of Meltzer's observation that 'disability is embodied and enacted in interactions that are [otherwise] typical of many sibling relationships' (2018: 1221). As in other families, the participants and their siblings offered each other various combinations of support, conflict, and friendly teasing, although the specifics of these interactions were sometimes coloured by neurodivergence. Participants told me stories about having food stolen by their siblings and about light-hearted, mutual teasing—including, sometimes, about a sibling's disability. 'I do tease her', said one participant, whose sister has a water-phobic skin condition, 'and say, like, if she ever annoys me, I'll get a spray bottle and spray her like a cat'. Crucially, however her sister fights back: 'She is viciously smart and has

the most cutting words ever'. In fact, the participant jokingly argued, 'She bullies me more than I bully her'. Another offered: 'My family's very sarcastic, and we get into these, like, snark-off battles. And you think [my autistic sister's] not paying attention, but she wins them. At the very end, she'll say like one line, and it's done'.

Others, however, spoke about how their siblings' diagnoses made typical sibling anger and conflict feel forbidden. Two described frustration in childhood or adolescence, after their siblings had accidentally destroyed some of their possessions. 'I know that [he] can't help it', said one, 'But this is important to me. But I *know* [he] can't help it. And you get into that kind of loop-cycle, like, "I need to be patient, but I'm angry", you know what I mean?'. Another laughed at the memory of turning the dolls her sibling broke into an amputee ward: 'Half my dolls have no legs anymore. The game is changed. I mean, I'm pretty sure I was super annoyed at the time. But I had to get over it'. An autistic interviewee also spoke about how differing neurotypes might complicate otherwise-typical sibling roughhousing. One sibling preferred tickling but the speaker liked being squished in a duvet: 'Now looking back, I don't think [my sister] enjoyed [being squished in return]. But I didn't *know* she didn't enjoy it, because she didn't say the word[s] that I knew meant, "This is the thing we stop"'.

As in other families, some of the project participants were closer to their siblings than others. Some bonded with their siblings over shared interests—or by engaging with their sibling's special interest—while others with differing interests felt their relationships were cordial but not close. Several of the participants hoped to live very near their siblings and families in the future, while others relished or looked forward to gaining some independence by moving away. One person who had been a young carer felt this role made them closer with their siblings, having been almost a third parent, while another felt this created a sort of distance—still feeling like a parent rather than 'one of the siblings' as an adult. Two of the autistic participants shared that they were not on speaking terms with one of their siblings: one had been bullied by the sibling and wished to avoid contact, while the other had been aggressive in an emotionally charged moment, and their sibling had cut off contact with them.

Because all the interviews were audio-recorded, to be transcribed later, I kept my focus in the interviews on establishing rapport with the participants. I wanted to encourage the interviewees to feel comfortable sharing stories and following tangents, using my list of questions as a starting point for conversation rather than a rigid guide. As such, the length of interviews varied significantly: from less than half an hour, moving briskly through the prepared questions, to more than an hour and half and, in one case, had to be cut short before making our way through the entire list. In many of the interviews, I responded to participants' stories with some of my own, establishing a more back-and-forth conversation. This encouraged further sharing but, I acknowledge, may have also shaped the themes we discussed. I was conscious that, as Lee, Burke, and Stelter note in one of their own studies (2019: 120), my insider sibling status probably helped to establish rapport with other non-autistic participants. I worried that it might also hurt my rapport with autistic siblings, although that did not appear to be the case: the two participants who disclosed the most conflict and negativity in their relationships were both autistic with non-autistic siblings.

2.5 Interview-Inspired and Interdependent Theatre Practice

Deirdre Heddon identifies interview-based theatre processes as an extension of 'auto/biography', in that each participant narrates a life story, or autobiography, for the writer-researcher(s). In this way, any interview-based project combines the subjectivity of autobiography—with a narrator who chooses what version of the story to present to this specific audience—with the subjectivity of the writer-researcher's decisions about who to interview, what questions to ask, and which answers to include in the final text (2008: 127–130). In Chapter 4, I'll examine my own decisions about what material from the interviews to include in my playwriting practice. First, however, the following section will reflect on interview-based theatre practice more broadly, including some of the forms it may take and the ethical questions that it entails.

In the UK, documentary and interview-inspired theatre are associated with 'verbatim theatre' practice, which can either be used as a 'portmanteau term' for drama that 'owes its origins to spoken text' (Anderson and Wilkinson, 2007: 154), or more specifically for work where:

> The words of real people are recorded or transcribed […] or are appropriated from existing records such as the transcripts of an official enquiry. They are then edited, arranged or recontextualised to form a dramatic presentation, in which actors take on the characters of the real individuals whose words are being used.
> (Hammond and Steward, 2012: 7)

This form of drama invites ready comparison to oral history projects, especially to exhibits or papers that present curated selections from the total archive of material collected (Heddon, 2008: 127; see also Pollock, 2005). Some theatre projects, like Graham Miller's audio-walk *Linked* (2003), have even incorporated public archiving of their interview recordings, to make stories that were not included in the performance piece available for future listeners (Heddon, 2008: 142). Unfortunately, due to privacy concerns for participant's families, and the sensitive nature of stories discussed, such public access is not possible with this project, although redacted transcripts of most recordings, with interviewees' permission, will be made available for future research.

If autobiography seems to 'guarantee[] "truth" because it is admittedly close' to its subject, then verbatim or documentary theatre seems to do so by assuming an 'objective' or distanced location (Heddon, 2008: 28). Much as traditional ethnography obscures the biases of the outsider-researcher, generic conventions obscure the ways that documentary, whether on stage or film, is always viewed through a constructed lens. Even where verbatim works include self-reflexive reference to the author(s), this convention has a tendency, as Heddon observes, to obscure rather than illuminate authorial selections (131–133), bolstering the sense that the writer's outsider status 'translates into being able to take a different, and arguably more distanced, objective perspective on an event' (137). This section will give an overview of different types of interview-based theatre practice and address strategies for countering the pretence of objectivity. Although *Two Truths* draws authority from my *insider* perspective on neurodiverse siblinghood, I have also tried to acknowledge my lack of authority as an *outsider* to autistic experience, referencing and collaborating with autistic writers and performers to correct for my knowledge gaps. With resources for a fuller production of the play-text, I would expand on this last element, continuing to develop the script based on further feedback in the rehearsal room.

Patrick Duggan differentiates between true-verbatim and 'proto-verbatim' or interview-inspired theatre, like *Two Truths*, which 'although making use of "real words" gathered from those being represented' does not confine itself to the words of its participants and makes 'no claim of exact truthfulness' (2013: 149). Even an inexact claim to truthfulness, however, leads audiences to 'approach the play not just as a play but also', as Will Hammond and Dan Steward argue, 'as an accurate source of information. […] When this claim is made, theatre and journalism overlap, and like the journalist [or researcher], the dramatist must abide by some sort of ethical code' (2012: 8). Hammond and Steward apply this code to both verbatim theatre, which 'acknowledges, and often draws attention to, its roots in real life', and other drama 'adapting or repackaging experiences or observations within a fictional dramatic situation' (7).

Models for the latter sort of practice can be seen in David Hare's National Theatre Trilogy—*Racing Demon* (1990), *Murmuring Judges* (1991), and *The Absence of War* (1993a)—or Lynn Nottage's *Ruined* (2009), *Sweat* (2017), and *Clyde's* (2023). Looking closely at these models highlights just how murky the line between factual and fictional theatre can be. Offering background on his National Theatre Trilogy, Hare declares, 'the plays which flowed from [this research] are, in so far as anything is, pure works of fiction' (1993b: ¶6.8), but critics regularly categorise the plays within the UK's tradition of documentary and verbatim theatre (see Soans, 2005: 118–122; Hammond and Steward, 2012: 43–78). Nottage's interview-inspired playwriting, by contrast, has been framed mostly as an extension of the 'intensive ethnographic and historiographic research' of her earlier historical plays (Buckner, 2016: 7). Still, a monologue from *Ruined* was presented as part of US Senate committee hearings on violence against women in conflict zones (Healy, 2009). As David Román says of *Sweat*, 'While we know that the characters are not actually living people—this is not documentary theatre—we are manipulated by all elements of the production to see them as believable' (Mohler et al., 2016: 91), and that belief has persuasive power.

Like Nottage (see interview in Murphy, 2013), I approached the playwriting process intuitively, working from impressions (and, in my case, notes) of what stood out to me from conducting (and later transcribing) the interviews. I knew

my goals were not suited to a true verbatim piece, because I wanted to *show* interpersonal interactions, rather than hear siblings *tell* the audience about them. Honouring Meltzer's observation—and my own—that 'disability is embodied and enacted in interactions that are [otherwise] typical of many sibling relationships' (2018: 1221), I also wanted the play to feel like a family dramedy, rather than a piece of info-tainment, as some verbatim pieces tend towards. Unlike Nottage, however I did go back and transcribe the interviews, so that they would be available for future researchers to conduct a formal thematic analysis. Because I spread this work out across the playwriting process, this also meant that I re-encountered each of the interviews at various stages, while both drafting and revising the text. As in Trimingham's spiral-like practice-research cycle (2002: 56), this iterative process allowed me to discover new insights into and prompted by the interviews over time. While I did not often use the specifics of stories shared by the interviewees (or, indeed, from my own life), I was really conscious of trying to capture the sentiments and sibling dynamics that I heard from them: the ways that, as discussed in the previous section, siblings teased and were frustrated by but also deeply cared for each other.

I have already identified auto/ethnographic reflexivity as essential to navigating my insider-outsider status, as an autobiographical playwright, and this is equally applicable to the project's interview-inspired strands. It is only one element, however, of a necessarily multi-pronged approach. The social scientists cited earlier in this chapter and in the Literature Review refer to peer debriefing and validity checks as important tools in their qualitative research (see Lee et al., 2019: 201), and in a similar fashion, I have relied on my artistic collaborators and feedback from audiences to act as checks on my subjective perspective. While playwriting might seem, at some stages, to be a relatively solitary project—undertaken at my desk and on my laptop—Heddon reminds us that '[t]he vast majority' even of solo writer-performers 'work with producers, directors, designers and production managers', not to mention early audiences, 'using feedback to revise and develop' their work (2008: 9). This collaborative element of the playwriting process both parallels and, in turn, offers insight into the interdependencies of disabled and neurodivergent relationships.

I looked to Martyna Majok's play *Cost of Living* (2019) as a model for such collaboration. Telling the stories of two physically disabled characters and their caregivers, the play explores the complex intimacies and transactions inherent in both formal (paid) and informal (unpaid or familial) care relationships. Both are complex because they are reciprocal, with the two nondisabled characters, Jess and Eddie, dependent financially and/or emotionally on the wheelchair-using John and Ani. Although it is neither truly autobiographical nor interview-inspired, the play can be considered auto/ethnographic in that it draws on both Majok's own experience working as a low-income paid carer and on the lived experiences of the disabled actors who originated John and Ani's roles (see Tran, 2022). Majok's collaborative relationship with Katy Sullivan, who played the quadriplegic Ani, grew close enough that she was asked to officiate the actor's wedding in 2023 (Scheps, 2023), and Ann M. Fox praises the play for its suggestion that the overarching problem is 'human isolation', which can only be 'explored and addressed in ways specifically informed by the knowledge and experiences of disabled people' (2018: 146). Majok asserts that embodied knowledge of disability has something to teach us all.

Garoian's description of arts practice as a prosthesis, mediating between body-minds and social spaces (2013: 26), draws on Donna Haraway's idea of the human-as-cyborg (1991), but it also calls to mind Lennard Davis's concept of 'dismodernism'. As Davis observes, we all rely on relationships with a variety of human and non-human others, exchanging goods or services and using tools or technologies (both concrete and theoretical) to live our seemingly independent lives. Through this lens, all of us might be seen as 'disabled, only completed by technology and by interventions' (Davis, 2002: 30), but some of us are dependent in more obvious ways. Michael Davidson argues that art and aesthetics based on the more visible dependence of disabled embodiment invite us to rethink our presumptive 'ideals of autonomy and independence', finding value in our 'dependent and contingent relations with others' instead (2016: 113–114).

Matt Hargrave, for example, highlights how anxieties about authorship and agency in learning-disabled solo performance reveal—as Heddon does above—that any pretence of autonomous performance obscures a wealth of dependent

and contingent interrelationships crossing between onstage, backstage, and front of house (2015: 147–154). Building on this, we can extend Fox and Sandahl's assertion, from the previous chapter, that theatre and disability are both grounded in material embodiment (2018: 121), to argue that the two are grounded more specifically in interactions *between* bodies, within social space. The collaborative nature of drama, then, presents an opportunity to explore interdependent relationships simultaneously on- and off-stage, where, as Hargrave proposes, artistic collaboration might free us 'from preordained socially scripted identities' around disability, empowering us 'to invent and reinvent other life scripts […] that proceed from inter-subjectivity and co-authorship' (Hargrave, 2015: 138).

The advantages of casting disabled actors in disabled roles were discussed in the previous chapter, along with the caveat that merely casting actors of marginalised identities does not guarantee they will have genuine power to shape decision-making in the rehearsal room. Offstage as well as onstage, interdependent relationships are often asymmetrical, as we re-inscribe power imbalances, subconsciously 'act[ing] out rituals of deference and leadership, support and authority, without,' as Davidson observes, interrogating 'why' (2016: 113–114). Nonetheless, representative casting is a crucial first step, and I felt it was essential that I had an opportunity to workshop a draft of *Two Truths* with autistic artists playing autistic roles. This workshop took place in July 2025 and culminated in a public playreading, where an audience of about 30 people, including both autistic people and siblings, were invited to respond to the text.[15] A group of four interview participants (about half autistic and half with autistic siblings) also joined me on a Zoom call to watch and respond to a recording of the event. Both actor and audience feedback shaped later revisions to the play-text, some of which will be discussed in Chapter 4.

If, as Nelson suggests, successful practice-research follows not necessarily a unifying research question but a guiding thread—or 'clew' (2013: 10–11), then the central thread of this thesis is about investigating relationships: between

[15] About half of the in-person audience remained for the talkback. While I did not collect demographic information from these audience members, several commentors self-identified as autistic, and others I knew were siblings and/or were not autistic through personal/professional acquaintance.

siblings, but also within the artistic process, between collaborators, and between a writer and their sources. If the arts equip us to understand and navigate social spaces (Garoian, 2013: 7–10), then these spaces include not only architectural and physical features but also the people and ideas we interact with. Meltzer uses the concepts of embodiment and enactment to explain how disability shapes siblings' experience of identity—their embodiment—and their presentation, or enactment, of that identity in relationship to each other (2018: 1216–1218). Combining this with the disembodied reflection and re-embodied action of Garoian's artistic feedback cycle (2013: 9), the creative component of this thesis uses a fictional medium to experiment with variations on the ways that siblings embody and enact their relationships to each other and to autism, while the critical component reflects on the roles and relationships that I am embodying and enacting, as an auto/ethnographic, non-autistic sibling-playwright. Both these relationships—between siblings and collaborators—are imperfect processes of trial and error, but I hope that I am moving towards, as Hargrave says, 'invent[ing] and re-invent[ing] other' and better 'life scripts' (2015: 138).

The next chapter will examine how neurodiverse sibling relationships have been—and continue to be—enacted and re-enacted through existing plays and television programmes. It will trace how theories about autism and conventions of family responsibility are embodied in various examples, as well as how more recent plays and media work to subvert popular and longstanding assumptions. Having drawn on these models in my creative practice, I will then examine my own playwriting in Chapter 4, offering an analysis of dramaturgical choices in *Two Truths* and reflecting more specifically on my auto/ethnographic methods in practice. Finally, in the Conclusion, I will return to a methodological focus, extrapolating from the example of *Two Truths* to propose auto/ethnography as an orientation for others in disability-adjacent or similar positions to investigate and represent their relationships.

Chapter 3 Practice Review

Robin Nelson and Ross Prior both argue that the examination of existing artwork is an essential component of practice-research. It not only establishes the context in which the researcher's practice sits but also offers an opportunity to identify what works or doesn't in others' practice and apply this to one's own (Nelson, 2022: 49–50; Prior, 2018: 52). In preparing for my playwriting practice, I looked at a variety of plays and other media which centre families and neurodivergence. This chapter will reflect on the lessons I learned from those texts, and how they have been applicable to my own work in writing *Two Truths*. At the same time, I will offer an argument for how a neurodiverse sibling lens might recontextualise existing plays.

As discussed in the Introduction, there are very few plays that explicitly address autistic siblinghood. Although the film *Rain Man* (1988), which introduced much of the English-speaking public to the concept of autism, follows an autistic man and his younger brother on a road trip, the most famous autistic stage character, Christopher Boone, is an only child. Since siblinghood evokes both kinship and forced proximity, the lack of siblings in *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (Haddon and Stephens, 2012) and other millennial representations may reflect the widespread use of autism as a 'disease metaphor' for isolation in the post-9/11 and internet age (see Singer, 1999: 66; Loftis, 2015: 12–13, 108–129). It's also worth noting, however, that Christopher and many of the other autistic characters examined by Sonya Freeman Loftis (2015) and Marla Carlson (2018) are never explicitly named in their texts as autistic.[16] They are only 'autistic-coded' or implied: enigmatic outsiders, usually with some form of learning disability and/or savant skills, who have niche interests, repetitive rituals, and difficulty interpreting social cues.

Some of this diagnostic ambiguity, of course, predates widespread recognition of autism, but it also continues into the present. Authors may resist naming autism to bypass questions about whether the character is 'a correct representation of someone with the condition'(Haddon, 2015) or so that the story feels more

[16] Neither the novel nor the stage adaptation of *The Curious Incident* ever uses the word 'autism' specifically (Sandahl, 2018: 139). While the creators have used this to defend against accusations of inaccuracy, their marketing materials have rarely shied away from the term.

approachable as a metaphor for nondisabled audiences (Sandahl, 2018: 139). Following Loftis and Carlson's examples, this chapter will consider not only explicit representations of autism, but also plays where a sibling-character, already marked as different in the play-text, might be interpreted as autistic. This applies, as will be discussed shortly, to Laura Wingfield from *The Glass Menagerie* (Williams, 1945), who Loftis and Clay Morton interpret as autistic by re-evaluating the schizophrenia diagnosis of the playwright's sister, Rose. Particularly in plays set before autism was widely recognised, this opens to the door to considering characters with unspecified learning disabilities or mental health diagnoses, like the 'simple' Rose in Brian Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990), 'wild child' Phillip in Lyle Kessler's *Orphans* (1985), or the formerly institutionalised Aston in Harold Pinter's *The Caretaker* (1960).

Section 3.1 will consider *The Glass Menagerie* as a prototype for both sibling-autism and wider sibling-disability plays, tracing how its narratives reverberate through Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990) and Will Arbery's *Corsicana* (2022) but also how they are challenged in Lindsey Ferrentino's *Amy and the Orphans* (2019) and Scott Aiello's *Bernie and Mikey's Trip to the Moon* (2018). In considering these more recent plays, I will also offer a counter-reading of *The Glass Menagerie* itself, which rejects both Tom and the playwright's guilt in favour of recognising the parallels between Tom's queer experience and Laura's neurodivergent one. Section 3.2 will shift focus to a trio of plays about neurodivergent brotherhood and unsuccessful caregiving, spanning fifty years from *The Caretaker* in 1960 to Mike Kenny's *Boo* in 2009. I will consider the three plays in conversation with scientific autism narratives of the mid-to-late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, which present both the autistic characters and their relatives as mutually dysfunctional. This section will end with a reflection on how *Boo* subverts some of those generic conventions by centring Boo's autistic perspective and offering a comparison to the play's neurotypical sibling pair.

Section 3.3 will offer a brief overview of more contemporary sibling representation, in autism family dramas of the twenty-first century. It will draw on Marla Carlson's analysis of autistic (and autistic-coded) families in *Affect, Animals, and Autists* (2018) as well as two lesser-known, sibling-authored plays.

The section's primary focus, however, will be on the BBC television series *There She Goes* (2018–2023), which subverts the individualist conventions Carlson identifies of Autism Family Drama through the generic lens of a half-hour family comedy. Offering opportunities to both laugh and cry at some of the highs, lows, and absurdities of parenting—or being a sibling to—a child with a rare chromosomal disorder linked to autism, the programme serves as a key attitudinal model for my own writing in *Two Truths*. Since *Two Truths* features not only a brother-sister but also a sister-sister pair, Section 3.4 will continue in the televisual realm, examining portrayals of neurodiverse sisterhood in two recent programmes written from female, autistic perspectives: BBC's *Dinosaur* (2024) and CBBC's *A Kind of Spark* (2023–2024).

3.1 Guilt and Kinship in *The Glass Menagerie*

Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie* is a 'memory play' (1945: 5), in which the narrator Tom Wingfield—a thinly-veiled stand-in for author Tom Dakin (later Tennessee) Williams—recounts his final weeks sharing a home in St. Louis with his mother and sister, before abandoning familial responsibility for the lure of greener pastures and a commission in the Merchant Marine. The play premiered in December 1944, making it roughly contemporary with the term 'autism'.[17] Although this is not a diagnosis that would have been applied to an adult woman in the 1940s, Sonya Freeman Loftis (2015: 91–100) and Clay Morton (2012) both propose that autism-like traits can nonetheless be read into descriptions of the character Laura Wingfield and her real-life counterpart, Williams's sister Rose. While Laura is famous in disability criticism for her limp, the real Rose was set apart by neurodivergence, diagnosed as 'dementia praecox' or schizophrenia at the time (Fox, 2004: 236–237; Morton, 2012). Retrospective (re)diagnosis of both fictional and historical figures is, rightly, a contested project, but the diagnostic history of autism and schizophrenia in the period is deeply intertwined. Autism gradually emerged from under the umbrellas of childhood schizophrenia and schizoid personality disorder in the mid-twentieth century (Morton, 2012: ¶3)[18], and contemporary accounts describe behaviour from Rose that might now be

[17] Variants on the term were introduced in Leo Kanner's 'Autistic Disturbances of Affective Contact' (1943) and 'Early Infantile Autism' (1944) and simultaneously in Hans Asperger's 'Die "Autistischen Psychopathen" im Kindesalter' or '"Autistic Psychopathy" in Childhood' (1944).

[18] See also Carlson (2018: 134); Manouilenko and Bejerot (2015)

viewed as autistic. Loftis, in particular, notes her repetition of phrases, or echolalia, and fervent adherence to routines (2015: 92).

Whatever Rose and/or Laura's diagnosis, the Williams siblings' experiences offer an opportunity to explore the fictional Wingfields' relationship through a neurodiverse sibling lens. This section will present a brief case for Laura's autism, then analyse how Williams's depiction of the character relates to his own sibling relationship, including how *The Glass Menagerie* is shaped by the emotional aftermath of Rose's lobotomy. Drawing comparisons between *The Glass Menagerie* and more recent sibling plays, I will set Tennessee Williams's guilt aside to propose a counter-reading that finds sibling solidarity in the parallel exclusions of Laura's neurodivergence and Tom's queerness. I'll conclude by looking ahead to the ways that Williams, and the plays that echo or allude to him, have informed my own writing, in *Two Truths*.

Tom, *The Glass Menagerie*'s narrator, describes his sister Laura as 'peculiar', someone who 'lives in a world of her own' (1945: 48). Taken together with Rose Williams's diagnosis, this description echoes the origins of the word 'autistic'—from the Greek '*autos*' or 'self'—as an early twentieth century descriptor for schizophrenic patients' 'idiosyncratic, self-centred withdrawal into an active fantasy life' (Schreibman, 2005: 54; citing Bleuler, 1908). While definitions and understandings of autism have evolved considerably over the past century, this image of self-isolation remains potent, if not entirely accurate, and Laura seems to retreat, per longstanding autism stereotypes, into her special interests of phonograph records and glass figurines (Loftis, 2015: 95). Loftis critiques this neurotypical interpretation of autistic behaviour as shortsighted and reductive (96), but she also notes that Williams's stage directions demonstrate a real awareness of sensory sensitivities. Laura often responds to loud sounds by 'screaming or huddling in the fetal position on the sofa' (ibid.: 93) and should be spotlighted in distress at the sound of Tom and their mother, Amanda, arguing (Williams, 1945: 20).

Loftis notes that this sensitivity is particularly present in Williams's instructions for projected titles and images, preserved in the play-text but unrealised in the original and most subsequent productions. When the siblings' mother, Amanda, confronts Laura about abandoning her typing class, for instance, Williams calls

for ‘a swarm of typewriters’ to appear on the projection screen (1945: 13). More poetic than prescriptive, this rarely implemented stage direction invokes a clear sense that Laura has been overwhelmed by the horde of clacking machines and their operators. In doing so, it anticipates by more than six decades the use of projection, video, and sound effects to convey an autistic experience in more recent productions like Mind the Gap’s *Boo* (Kenny, 2009)—which will be discussed later in this chapter—and the National Theatre’s award-winning adaptation of *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (Haddon and Stephens, 2012).

These stage directions offer insight not only into Laura’s perspective but also her brother’s. If the play represents Tom’s memories, that suggests that Tennessee and his narrator have paid enough attention to notice when Laura and/or Rose are distressed. Members of an adult sibling group, run by the UK charity Sibs, say they feel particularly attuned to—or have a ‘6th sense’ for—the needs of their neurodivergent brothers and sisters, anticipating situations that are likely to be overstimulating and noticing warning signs of a meltdown, sometimes long before their parents do (National Adult Sibling Group, 2023). The idea of an extra-sensitive sibling connection was reiterated in several of this project’s interviews, especially by neurodivergent participants with neurodivergent siblings. They described a special bond fostered by shared differences and struggles: ‘my sister is the only person I can near fully unmask and be my autistic self around and I know she feels the same’. Williams, although not autistic, was marked as other by his queer sexuality and describes a similar emotional intimacy between himself and Rose, a love that ‘was, and is, the deepest in our lives’ (1975: 120).

If *The Glass Menagerie* suggests Tennessee’s awareness of Rose’s sensitivities, then his *Memoirs* make clear that this intimacy was reciprocal, identifying Rose’s bedroom as a safe space ‘where I [Tennessee] felt most at home’ (ibid.). To depict that reciprocity onstage might help counter the perception that Laura is, as Deborah Kent argues, a non-agential disability stereotype: ‘dependent, a perennial child’ (Kent, 1988: 96). In the text, Laura does attempt to check-in on her brother when he returns from a night out at the top of Scene 4, although Tom is not very receptive. Their mother then uses that concern to characterise

Laura as vulnerable and remind Tom of his responsibilities (Williams, 1945: 26–27, 32–33). It is worth remembering that while the playwright's *Memoirs*, which acknowledge Rose's reciprocal role, are written with more than 30 years of hindsight, *The Glass Menagerie* itself premiered less than two years after Williams learned of his sister's lobotomy. The play is coloured by his guilt for 'failing to properly observe' signs of Rose's distress (1975: 121) in the lead-up to the breakdown that saw her institutionalised in 1937 and lobotomised, while the playwright was living away from home, in January 1943.

Williams's response to the latter is documented in a March journal entry, which broods on his physical distance and inaction:

> A cord breaking.
> 1000 miles away.
> Rose. Her head cut open.
> A knife thrust in her brain.
> Me. Here. Smoking.
> My father, mean as a devil, snoring. 1000 miles away.
> (Williams, 2006)

Two months later, Williams would begin drafting ideas that evolved into *The Glass Menagerie* (see Parker, 1982: 411). As Morton observes, the play closes on 'imagery that bitterly indicts' the playwright's namesake for 'abandon[ing] the family for a life of travel and adventure' (2012: ¶13), returning to the earlier poem's distance-centred guilt. Tom's mother tells him to 'Go to the moon—you selfish dreamer!', but as he tells the audience, he 'went much further', following in the footsteps of an absent father as he 'descend[s] the steps of this fire escape for the last time' (Williams, 1945: 96–97).

Lindsey Ferrentino's 2019 play *Amy and the Orphans*, captures similar feelings of guilt in siblings Maggie and Jacob. It is only after their parents' deaths that the two realise their sister Amy, who has Down Syndrome, is both a ward of the state and a survivor of Long Island's infamously abusive Willowbrook State School. (The inhumane practices of this real-life institution were revealed to the American public in a 1972 television expose.)[19] Unlike *The Glass Menagerie*, however, Ferrentino's play ends not with Maggie and Jacob's guilt—which care-

[19] Willowbrook: The Last Great Disgrace (1972) aired on New York's WABC-TV Chanel 7 on 2 February 1972.

worker Kathy dismisses as pointless and unproductive—but with a monologue from Amy herself. Composed of Amy's favourite film quotes, it begins with a line from Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire*: 'I have always depended on the kindness of strangers. But no more' (Ferrentino, 2019: 80). Here, Amy refuses the role envisioned for Laura Wingfield of 'little birdlike women, without any nest', vulnerably 'living upon the grudging patronage of sister's husband or brother's wife' (Williams, 1945: 16). Instead, Amy insists:

> *You* can't handle the truth.
> Nobody puts baby in the corner.
> […]
> I'm a human being, goddammit.
> MY LIFE HAS VALUE.
> You don't understand.
> I coulda been a contender.
> I coulda been somebody.
> I coulda been somebody.
> I coulda been somebody.
> *I coulda been somebody*.
> …
> …
> Go ahead.
> *Make*.
> *My*.
> *Day*.
> (Ferrentino, 2019: 80–81).

If, as Kent contends, Laura Wingfield's tragedy feels almost inevitable (1988: 98), Amy's does not. The character speaks for herself, making it clear that she 'coulda been somebody' not if she had been born without Down Syndrome but if she had been treated with respect instead of abuse. The blame, in Amy's case, is both far more specific and far more general than in *The Glass Menagerie*. The pointed '*you*' in her monologue speaks not only to her family, but to the audience, in a society that allowed the abuses of Willowbrook in New York, Lennox Castle in Scotland (slowly decommissioned in the 1990s)[20], Winterbourne View in England (exposed on BBC's *Panorama* in 2011),[21] and similar institutions to happen. It demands that we prevent them from happening again.

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[20] The BBC Scotland retrospective *Beyond the Asylum* (2018) features footage from earlier BBC News broadcasts in 1989, critiquing institutional conditions at Lennox Castle as 'inhuman and degrading' (6:52), and in 2000, looking ahead to the hospital's closure in 2002 (7:23–7:53).

[21] Undercover Care: The Abuse Exposed (2011) aired on BBC One's *Panorama* on 31 May 2011.

Other sibling plays offer inversions of but not necessarily counternarratives to *The Glass Menagerie*. In Brian Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990), Agnes runs away *with*, rather than *from*, her sister Rose, sparing the rest of the family the financial burden of a woman too 'simple' to get work at the new factory when their more accessible, home-knitting income dries up. With clear allusions to Williams's autofictional memory play, Friel hardly refutes Loftis's allegations that characters like Laura and Rose are presented as 'burdens' on their family, unable to exist in the modern world (2015: 95, 92). More recently, Will Arbery's play *Corsicana* (2022) and the short film *An Irish Goodbye* (2022) might be said to affirm *The Glass Menagerie*'s guilt complex by celebrating characters who make the opposite decision to Tom's. Much as Sarah, in *Love Actually (2003)*, keeps putting her life on hold to answer calls about her brother, the protagonists in *Coriscana* and *An Irish Goodbye* each uproot themselves to move home and care for siblings with Down Syndrome in their rural hometowns. Arbery's *Corsicana*, at least, focuses on the difficulty of that transition, for both filmmaker Christopher and his older sister Ginny. *An Irish Goodbye*, however, frames it as a 'happy' resolution that Turlough will leave his job in London to join his brother on a family farm in Northern Ireland, which neither man appears to have the slightest idea of how to run.

Both stories reinforce what, for many, is an unspoken assumption that siblings will someday assume their parents' care responsibilities: 'It was just never spoken about', said one participant in an Irish study, 'But I felt a duty' (Leane, 2020: 956). Between Tom's guilt over leaving and Christopher or Turlough's self-sacrifice, there is little representation of the middle-ground reality, for many siblings, of 'caring at a distance', living anywhere from fifteen minutes to many hours away. While definitions of sibling caregiving are ambiguous and inconsistent across studies, most siblings are *not* long-term primary caregivers. Instead, they take on various roles like decision-making, financial management, advocacy, companionship and overseeing care providers (Davys et al., 2011). In my own play, *Two Truths*, Jackie navigates performing some of these roles for her brother, David, although their parents are still living. Kate, in the play's other sibling pair, requires less day-to-day support, but her storyline—as will be discussed in Chapter 4—joins *Corsicana* in delving into the relational implications of siblings both providing and receiving care.

When Amanda tells Tom to 'Go to the moon' at the end of *The Glass Menagerie* (Williams, 1945: 96), it is a castigation. In *Bernie and Mikey's Trip to the Moon* (Aiello, 2018), however, that phrase becomes an order. Scott Aiello's 2018 play is a coming-of-age story for both Bernie, who has a learning disability, and her brother Mikey, who does not. In the first act, Mikey asks Bernie how she would feel about him 'going away…for a while', and since Mikey has no definitive plans, she suggests he go to the moon (39). Later, Mikey joins a family argument over Bernie's capacity to consent to a relationship with a young man from her day programme. Fed up with people talking over her, Bernie demands, 'YOU GO TO DE MOON, MIKEY!!! […] GO TO DE MOON!' (97). Later, their mother reassures him that Bernie didn't really mean anything by it, and Mikey replies, 'Nah, you're wrong. I actually think it might mean *everything*' (103). 'Go to the moon' is Bernie's way of telling her brother that both of them need space, a blessing for Mikey to go out and find himself and the kick in the butt that he needs to make it happen. When I first read the script, as an intern on the show's production, that position felt radical: that in order to be a good sibling to Bernie, Mikey needs to sort out a plan for his own life first, without feeling guilty about it. The play offers a reminder that neither Mikey nor Tom, who the invocation of the moon alludes to, can pour for his sister from an empty cup.

Rather than wallowing in Williams's guilt, then, I want to return to *The Glass Menagerie* and offer a counternarrative reading that lingers on the more-than-literal kinship between the Wingfield siblings, drawing parallels between Tom's experience of queerness and Laura's of neurodivergence. Nick Walker and others have coined the term 'neuroqueer' to describe 'the practice of queering (subverting, defying, disrupting, liberating oneself from) neuronormativity and heteronormativity simultaneously' (Walker, 2021: 122), and while *The Glass Menagerie* falls short of achieving true liberation from either, I hope, in the following paragraphs, to offer a neuroqueer reading of the piece. Both Tom and Laura are described as 'unusual' (Williams, 1945: 31), distinctly *other* in ways that, as Ann M. Fox diagnoses, 'violate economies of gender' and capitalism (2004: 235). Neither seems likely to acquire a spouse and children, and Tom is as unsuited for life as a human cog at Continental Shoemakers as Laura is for her typing course and a secretarial career. Laura wanders the park and seems to retreat into her special interests, while Tom is an insomniac dreamer, staying

out late and writing poems in the washroom at work. Both siblings' differences are talked around, rather than named explicitly, and in comparing Laura's verbally-acknowledged limp to her unspoken neurodivergence, Loftis refers to the latter as 'a disability that cannot be named, spoken about, or rendered visible' (2015: 96). This invites a comparison to the silence of the 'love which dare not speak its name'.

In the play's final scenes, Williams offers a contrast to the Wingfield siblings in their gentleman caller, 'an emissary from the world of reality that we were somehow set apart from' (Williams, 1945: 5). Jim O'Connor is 'the only one at the warehouse with whom [Tom is] on friendly terms' (Williams, 1945: 50), and his goodwill protects Tom, marking him as a benign oddity rather than a threat. While Jim tries to be empathetic, however, he never really understands either of the Wingfield siblings. His perspective and experiences are too far removed from their own. Jim tries to sell both siblings on self-improvement programmes, like a public speaking course, insisting that with a bit more polish or confidence, Tom and Laura could make their way more smoothly through the world. 'I understand it because I had it, too', he tells Laura, diagnosing her with an inferiority complex, 'Although my case was not so aggravated as yours seems to be' (1945: 80–81). This misplaced empathy imposes Jim's worldview onto an imagining of Laura's inner life, minimising, as Loftis observes, the character's very real struggles: if Jim can overcome his anxieties to advance in the world, he seems to ask why Laura cannot do the same (2015: 99–100).

Loftis seems torn as to whether this sequence mocks Jim's popular psychology—'Such words come across as naïve and ironic […] since the audience has already seen the true depth of Laura's social terror' (99)—or agrees with him, blaming Laura for her own tragedy (100). If the latter, Williams would seem to side with Ole Ivan Lovaas, the psychologist who developed Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA) therapy to modify the behaviours of autistic children in the 1960s and applied those same techniques to police queerness in the 'Feminine Boy Project' a decade later. Jim's self-improvement programmes seem to assume 'the same fundamental view' as both of those projects: 'that it's easier to change [an individual's] behavior than it is to destigmatize that behavior in society' (Silberman, 2016: 349). It is entirely possible that Williams was as ambivalent

about Rose/Laura's neurodivergence as his own sexuality. As Fox notes, he underwent a psychoanalytic version of conversion therapy while writing *Suddenly Last Summer* (1958), 'a curious corollary to the attempts' by that play's characters 'to erase queerness through Catherine's proposed lobotomy' (Fox, 2004: 237).

As our culture has evolved to embrace Tom and Williams's queerness, however, I wonder whether *The Glass Menagerie* might also offer an invitation to question why Laura's neurodivergence remains so excluded—why, as in the play's final image, *her* candles are blown out. In a later essay, Fox observes that Tom's poetic dreamings have earned him the nickname 'Shakespeare', making Laura, on two occasions, 'Shakespeare's Sister'. This is potentially an allusion to Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (2015 [1929]). While *The Glass Menagerie* certainly mourns the author/narrator's sister, Woolf's manifesto, like Ferrentino's *Amy and the Orphans*: 'pulls us back from the myth of the romantic, tragic individual, a myth that would allow us simply to sentimentalize this tragic figure'. Instead, Woolf 'pushes us […] to consider what it might take to really render' an aspiring authoress, like 'Shakespeare's sister visible and functioning in the world' (Fox, 2016b: 143).

If Williams fails to offer the concrete solutions that Woolf does—for authors like herself and her imagined female Shakespeare—I'm not sure we can fault him for lacking that foresight. *The Glass Menagerie* was written before the advent of disability benefits,[22] and even eight decades later, plays like *Falling* (Jent, 2013), *Through Andrew's Eyes* (Cabrera, 2016), and *Cartoonopolis* (Bray, 2025 & 2015) still ask questions about how our society can better support our disabled loved ones to live fulfilling lives. What Williams does do is to place Laura's tragedy within the 'social background' of the Great Depression, as fingers are 'pressed forcibly down on the fiery Braille alphabet of a dissolving economy' with insufficient social safety nets (1945: 5). He draws connections between Laura's difference and her brother's, identifying that the system of familial

[22] Although disability assistance was discussed by the planners of the Social Security Administration as early as 1936, its earliest drafts 'specified that no benefits were to be paid to those with mental disabilities.' Aid to the Blind was the only federal public assistance programme reaching people with disabilities in the United States until 1950, and Social Security Disability Insurance only became law in 1956 (Berkowitz, 2000).

charity—with Laura dependent 'upon the grudging [and heteronormative] patronage of sister's husband or brother's wife' (16)—is not working for either of them. Like Amy's '*I could been somebody*' (Ferrentino, 2019: 80), I therefore propose that Williams's final image of a snuffed-out Laura ought to haunt the audience, not only Tom himself: we have *chosen*, or blindly stumbled our way into, a world 'lit by lighting' (Williams, 1945: 97), without the necessary fuel for neurodivergent women like Rose Williams or Laura to thrive.

Although I soundly reject the individual guilt of Tom Wingfield, there are other elements I want to take forward from *The Glass Menagerie*. One is Williams's sensitivity, particularly in his stage directions, to Laura's experience of the world. Tennessee may not always understand his sister—Loftis certainly takes issue with his portrait of Laura's special interests (2015: 95–96)—but he pays attention to and tries to render her perspective. In drawing parallels between the Wingfield siblings, the play encourages me to find elements of autistic experiences I can empathise with, but it also cautions me not to assume I understand, like the over-enthusiastic Jim. Finally, Williams's history and *The Glass Menagerie* challenge me to acknowledge that individual expressions of love and understanding are not a panacea. In a world that does not offer sufficient options for either sibling, Tom can deeply love his sister and also accidentally hurt her—as he does when he throws his coat off in frustration and unintentionally strikes Laura's glass collection at the end of Scene 3.

3.2 Dysfunctional Brotherhood in *The Caretaker*, *Orphans*, and *Boo*

My reading of *The Glass Menagerie* interprets the Wingfield and Williams siblings' similarities in a positive, neuro- and queer-affirming context. Such familial resemblances, however, are more often framed as maladaptive. Research into the broad[er] autism phenotype recognises but also threatens to pathologise the presence of autism-like traits in family members of those with the diagnosis (see Petalas et al., 2012; Bertelli et al., 2025), and autistic characters serve not only as catalysts but also yardsticks for the moral growth of their non-autistic counterparts. As Stuart Murray observes of *Rain Man* (1988), it may be Raymond Babbitt who 'has the diagnosed neurological condition', but

the film's narrative suggests that his brother Charlie is impaired in similar ways. Parallels between the characters, including their speech patterns:

> are meant to be obvious. Charlie's self-absorption, seen as the personification of a 1980s excess, is characterized by a range of behaviours that, in a different form, fall within the diagnostic criteria used to identify autism. As the narrative proceeds, it is precisely the interaction with Raymond's humanity that will be the catalyst for Charlie's 'overcoming' of his own impairments. When he rejects Bruner's cheque near the end of the film […] the audience can feel satisfied that he has learned an appropriate lesson in human worth. (Murray, 2008: 87–88).

In a later chapter, analysing the novels *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (Haddon, 2004), *About a Boy* (Hornby, 1998) and *Little Green Man* (Armitage, 2001), Murray links such character development to Simon Baron-Cohen's gender-essentialist 'extreme male brain' theory of autism. This suggests that autism amplifies 'masculine' traits geared at 'understanding and building systems' while dampening the 'feminine' impulse to empathy (Baron-Cohen, 2003: 1; cited in Murray, 2008: 155). By learning to care for an autistic child, the novels' father-figures, much like Charlie Babbit, recover from their own deficits in empathy, engagement, and consideration (Murray, 2008: 155–163), learning to be less masculine and therefore less autistic, in Baron-Cohen's terms.

The trio of plays that will be discussed in this section all resonate with such hyper-masculine stereotypes of autism. When viewed in conversation with Baron-Cohen and earlier autism theorists, they present dramaturgies of dysfunctional autistic brotherhood, in which impaired communication and other maladaptive behaviours are either contagious or a familial trait. As in *Rain Man*, autism-like traits are shared between the brothers of Harold Pinter's *The Caretaker* (1960), Lyle Kessler's *Orphans* (1985), and Mike Kenny's *Boo* (2009), with one sibling, in each case, taking on a caregiving role. The brothers' communication in each is sparse, stilted, and largely unsuccessful, aligning with the masculine dialogue conventions of Pinter and other 'angry young men' playwrights of the 1950s and 1960s. Where Charlie, in the film *Rain Man*, is reformed by his newfound relationship with Raymond, longstanding care obligations in all three plays are a source of frustration rather than growth. These maladaptive relationships are interrupted and further strained by outside interlopers, in two of the three cases ending in tragedy. After comparing similar

dramaturgies of dysfunctional brotherhood across the three plays, this section will conclude with a focus on how *Boo* (Kenny, 2009) complicates such dynamics, offering insights into the title character's autistic perspective and an alternative comparison between the play's neurodiverse brothers and its more neurotypical sibling pair.

Although Pinter's *The Caretaker* (1960) makes no obvious allusions to autism, the character Aston is certainly neurodivergent, and his story offers similarities to Tennessee Williams's sister, Rose. About halfway through the play, Aston reveals that he was institutionalised with an unspecified psychiatric diagnosis, due to socially off-putting behaviour, and he was then subjected to violent 'treatment' in the form of electroconvulsive therapy. In an essay on disability in drama, Lionel Warner says that Aston's unspecified 'condition is represented mainly by means of his halting and somewhat disconnected speeches'—a trait that I will argue Aston shares with his brother—as well as 'his unproductive fiddling with a plug and a toaster, his reiterated [but unfulfilled] desire to build a shed' and his hoarding tendencies (2011: 373). Aston's 'junk-filled room' (ibid.) serves as the play's set, and although Aston is nominally the caretaker for the building, this is revealed to be a form of sheltered employment. His brother Mick owns the property and holds onto it primarily to provide Aston with a home and sense of purpose (Pinter, 1960: 119–120). When Mick interviews the play's third character, Davies, as an alternate caretaker for the building, it is implied that what he really wants is someone to help 'look after' Aston himself.

Mick and Aston each converse primarily with Davies, but they do speak to each other for about two pages in the middle of the play. Their conversation begins almost as small talk, with Mick remarking, 'You still got that leak' as one might comment on the weather. It seems the only subject he knows how to converse about with his brother is the house. Even this 'safe' topic, however, is not very successful:

Silence.

MICK: You still got that leak.

ASTON: Yes.

Pause.

It's coming from the roof.

MICK: From the roof, eh?

ASTON: Yes.

Pause.

I'll have to tar it over.

MICK: You're going to tar it over?

ASTON: Yes.

MICK: What?

ASTON: The cracks.

Pause.

MICK: You'll be tarring over the cracks on the roof.

ASTON: Yes.

Pause.

MICK: Think that'll do it?

ASTON: It'll do it, for the time being.

MICK: Uh.

Pause.

(Pinter, 1960: 55–56)

As is typical of Pinter, the brothers' dialogue is characterised by pauses and repetition. Aston repeats the speech pattern of 'Yes', *pause*, elaboration, while Mick rephrases his brother's statements in a questioning tone. It is unclear whether Mick's goal is to guide Aston's repair attempt or simply prompt further conversation. Either way, his 'Uh' followed by a pause, as the exchange peters out, suggests giving up the attempt as a lost cause. The character does similarly at the end of the play, declaring, '[Aston]'s got his own ideas. Let him have

them. I'm going to chuck it in' (120). When Aston makes his final entrance, a beat later, Mick smiles 'faintly' at his brother, then begins another halting overture ('Look… uh…') before reconsidering and making his final exit from the room.

When Kessler's *Orphans* (1985) arrived in London, a quarter-century later, the *Gay Times* described it as 'sinister school-of-Pinter play' with 'strong echoes of *The Caretaker*' (Burton, 1986). Kessler's kidnapped businessman, Harold, takes on the disruptive role of Pinter's vagrant Davies, while older brother Treat is an even more menacing—and far more controlling—variation on Aston's younger brother and caretaker Mick. Kessler describes Treat as 'violent' with 'supressed emotion', and although the author never uses the word 'autistic', he describes Treat's younger brother, Phillip, as 'A Wild Child who has never ventured from his house' (1985: 5). Since the house-bound Phillip is no party animal, Kessler's phrasing seems to invoke the figure of 'wild' or 'feral children', like the wolf girls of Midnapore who Bruno Bettelheim retrospectively diagnoses as autistic in his 1967 bestseller *The Empty Fortress* (343–382). Much as Bettelheim blames autism, including that of the wild 'wolf girls', on the cold, unfeeling parenting of 'refrigerator mothers', Kessler seems to suggest that the overprotective, overbearing Treat is a 'refrigerator brother', stunting Phillip's emotional and intellectual growth.

If Mick and Aston's relationship is dysfunctional in that they can barely speak to each other, Treat and Phillip veer towards the opposite extreme of co-dependency. Where Mick is a somewhat reluctant sibling-carer, Treat seems to thrive on knowing, and reminding Phillip, that his house-bound brother is reliant on him for everything. Swearing that Phillip has a deadly but unspecified allergy, Treat is either wildly over-cautious or manipulative, severely limiting his brother's interactions with the world. Although one stereotype insists that autistic people are unable to lie, another casts them as unreliable narrators (see Yergeau, 2013), and the pair's improbable conversations, about fighting off intruders like Errol Flynn (and other daring deeds), combine outlandish fantasy with outright lies.

Both internal and external threats linger under the surface of *The Caretaker*, in Mick's intimidation of the unemployed squatter Davies and the knowledge of

Aston's institutionalisation. In the final scenes of *Orphans*, however, such threats of violence are fully realised. When Harold convinces Phillip to venture out of the house for the first time, older brother Treat becomes frantic and then angry, nearly strangling Phillip on his return. A page later, the enigmatic Harold returns from his own foray to the outside world with a fatal gunshot wound. Where *The Caretaker* ends with each of its characters in isolation, *Orphans*' final image is of the two brothers cleaving together in grief, the familiar dysfunction of their little family a safe harbour from the unknown dangers of the world outside.

Another quarter-century after *Orphans*, Mike Kenny's *Boo* (2009) continues the conversation with *The Caretaker*. Loosely adapting Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960), the play transposes the novel's action to contemporary Northern England, where the titular Boo—based on the novel's reclusive Boo Radley—is looked after at home by his neurotypical brother Benny. Like Pinter's Aston, Boo tells the audience that he 'used to go out' to the shops—in Aston's case the café down the road—but now lives a much more confined life after a traumatic incident. As a teen, Boo was intimidated by a group of kids shouting 'spacker' and pissing in his shopping bag (Kenny, 2009: 28–29). Unlike Phillip's supposed allergies in *Orphans*, Boo and Aston's fears are grounded in reality: Aston was institutionalised because his behaviour was off-putting to patrons at the café (Pinter, 1960: 89–92) and Boo's apparent strangeness makes him a suspect, at least in the local children's eyes, in a much-publicised missing person's case. That childish prejudice, which mirrors Scout and Jem's in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, has very real consequences. At the end of the play, Boo ventures out again, only to be chased by a mob of accusatory teenagers until he is struck and killed by a car.

Kenny's adaptation was tailor-made for the learning-disabled actors of Bradford-based theatre company Mind the Gap, and although his script never uses the word 'autism', the role of Boo was as written *as autistic*, for autistic company member Jonathan Ide (see Hargrave, 2015: 169–216). Matt Hargrave's *Theatres of Learning Disability* offers an analysis of how the play works to address disability stigma and scapegoating, anticipating Sonya Freeman Loftis's critiques of the original novel in *Imagining Autism* (2015: 85–86). Rather than reiterating

those ideas here, I'll focus on the ways that Kenny fleshes out the relationship between Boo and his older brother, using the nameless figures of 'Girl' and 'Boy' to highlight similarities between neurodiverse and neurotypical sibling pairs.

Boo's brother, Nathan Radley, is only a minor character in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, who protagonists Scout and Jem suspect moved back home to 'keep Boo locked up', although it was more probably, as Loftis observes, 'to help care for his disabled brother' after their father's death (2015: 83). Re-christened as Benny, in Mike Kenny's adaptation he plays a much more significant role. Like Mick in *The Caretaker*, Benny struggles with the inherited responsibility to look after his brother. Boo says, 'You told mum you'd look after me', and Benny replies, 'I am looking after you […] I'm trying to look after you' (Kenny, 2009: 18). Kenny has said that *Boo* is 'a play about caring' or 'who looks after whom' (2008 email, quoted in Hargrave, 2015: 187), and the writer admits that Benny 'conceal[s] and reveal[s]' some of his own 'negative feelings about being a carer' or working in disability arts. Sometimes, he says 'I get just a bit fucked off with having an open door policy all the time. Just occasionally I want to be the one being looked after' instead (interview 2009, quoted in ibid.: 187–188).

Where Kenny says that *Boo* is 'a play about caring', Hargrave more specifically pinpoints it as 'about the *failure* to care […] show[ing] the cracks in that process' (2015: 187). Boo and Benny's strikingly sparse and repetitive, or Pinter-esque, dialogue appears to be one of those cracks. Like Mick and Aston, the brothers never quite seem to know how to converse with each other. When Benny brings home chips for dinner, for example, Boo complains:

BOO: It's chips.

BENNY: I know it's chips

BOO: It's chips.

BENNY: I know it's chips.
I bought them.

BOO: I don't like chips.

BENNY: It's a change.

BOO: I don't like chips.

BENNY: It's a change.

BOO: I don't like change.

BENNY: I'm sick of cooking.
I thought we'd have a change.
So I got chips.

Boo says nothing

BENNY: Eat it.

BOO: I don't like chips.

BENNY: Just eat it.

Boo sits looking at it
Benny pushes his away

BENNY: I'm going out.

(Kenny, 2009: 13–14)

In addition to matching stereotypes of masculine brevity and poor communication, the brothers' conversations are frustratingly circular, echoing and exacerbating Benny's frustration with his brother's repetitive and change-resistant habits. The pair repeat the same phrases because they are talking past each other, hearing words without pausing to understand the intention behind them. This is a frequent pattern for Boo and Benny, which might be interpreted as a mutual failure to apply Baron-Cohen's 'theory of mind' (1995).[23] Rather than recognising that the other person has a different perspective and attempting to understand it, each of the brothers digs his heels in, insisting, 'I don't like chips' and 'It's a change'.

[23] Baron-Cohen's 1995 book, *Mindblindess*, conceives autism as a 'Theory of Mind deficit' on the part of the autistic individual, who cannot accurately imagine the thought processes of other (non-autistic) minds (see Semino, 2014: 143 for an effective summary). Loftis, however, points out that this 'mindblindness' is also an accurate descriptor for neurotypical individuals' difficulty with accurately imagining the thought processes of neurodivergent minds (2015: 6, 9–10).

Throughout the play, Boo and Benny speak mainly in short sentences or sentence fragments, and Kenny uses line breaks in much the same way that Pinter uses pauses to break up the text. Unlike Mick, however, we rarely see Benny in conversation with anyone other than his brother. That makes it difficult to tell whether this repetitive, staccato communication is the character's default or is merely a dysfunctional pattern he has fallen into with Boo. The former would suggest an inherited tendency, along the lines of the broad[er] autism phenotype, while the latter would frame 'autistic' communication as more situationally contagious, a frustrated result of failing to connect with Boo. A third option might be that the characters' brevity is more a practical choice than a stylistic one: since all four actors in Mind the Gap's production were learning disabled, the reason for short sentences and frequent line breaks might simply be that shorter units are easier to read and memorise.

Although disability may prompt siblings—like Mick, Treat, and Benny—to take on support roles that go beyond what one would do for a nondisabled, neurotypical adult (Sibs, 2020: 76–77), Ariella Meltzer reminds us that care is also 'a feature of many sibling relationships irrespective of disability' (2017: 1017). She notes how the specific phrase 'looking after' is used by her interviewees to denote care activities that are unequal or unreciprocated but still fall within expectations for 'typical' older siblings (1021–1022). Boo's autism, then, 'generates interpersonal dynamics' that are 'not so different from those in ordinary families' (Osteen, 2008: 25). The brothers' relationship resembles not only those of Pinter and Kessler's characters, but also that of the play's neurotypical siblings, Boy and Girl—and through them, *To Kill a Mockingbird*'s Jem and Scout Finch. In the opening stage directions, Kenny describes his two sibling pairs as 'two sets of isolated people. They exist in the same space/same community [and] actually have a lot in common but very little connection' (Kenny, 2009: 2). The play is written as a series of relatively short scenes, so our attention jumps back and forth between the pairs, highlighting their similarities.

Like Jem, in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Boy has been tasked with 'looking after' his younger sister during an unsupervised summer vacation. He resents giving up summer fun with his friend Dill for the sake of looking after Girl, but, as with Benny and Boo, it is clear that Boy cares for his sister's welfare all the same. In

light of the missing person's case, Boy warns Girl to stay away from Boo, just as Benny warns his own brother not to court trouble by interacting with the local children. When Boy and Benny catch Girl and Boo in conversation, their worry and frustration boil over in an overlapping, and very similar, exchange:

> *Boy and Benny arrive from opposite directions.*
>
> *The following is overlapping dialogue.*
>
> BENNY: What the hell are you doing? Get away from here. What are you doing? Get back inside. You're asking for trouble. I told you. I told you to keep inside. […]
>
> BOY: What are you doing? I was only gone for a minute. I left you on the playground. What did I say?
>
> [GIRL][24]: He's got our ball. He was going to give me a ball.
>
> BOO: Nothing. I was doing nothing. We were just talking. I was just talking
>
> (Kenny, 2009: 32)

The rhythm of Boy and Girl's dialogue throughout resembles Boo and Benny's: short sentences and always on the edge of an argument. Even if this represents a form of adaptive or accessible writing for the play's learning-disabled actors, the stylistic similarity encourages audiences to see thematic parallels.

Since neither *The Caretaker* nor *Orphans* are explicit in their neurodivergent representation, there have not, to my knowledge, been any calls to cast the roles of Aston or Phillip 'authentically'. Mind the Gap's production, however, consciously placed what one reviewer refers to as 'four Boo Radley's on stage', since each of the play's learning-disabled actors 'will have spent a lifetime experiencing the marginalisation, discrimination and fear that Boo feels' (Verrent, 2009; as quoted in Hargrave, 2015: 207). In addition to that prioritisation of autistic and learning-disabled *presence* on stage, Kenny's text and Tim Wheeler's direction also seem to prioritise Boo's autistic *perspective*.

[24] The dialogue tag in the script reads 'SCOUT' here but refers to the character who was re-named 'GIRL'.

If Tom, as narrator, is the lens through which we view *The Glass Menagerie*, then *Boo* gives that primacy to its title character. While Benny, Boy, and Girl each have moments of direct address at the start and end of the play, only Boo is given the space, across several multi-page monologues to map out his world for the audience: the maisonette he shares with Benny, the rhythms of the post-man, and why he doesn't like to make right turns or leave the house. 'The key difference,' says Hargrave, 'between the original Boo [in Lee's novel] and [actor Jonathan] Ide's copy is that the copy speaks' (2015: 184).

This sense of perspective is not only textual but also supported by production choices. Hargrave describes Ide's performance as 'defined by gaps, pauses, sometimes uncomfortable delays' between 'thought and action, […] gesture and sound, […] script and delivery' (176–177), creating a lurching, autistic aesthetic that was reinforced by the use of projections and video design. In particular, the production's BSL translation videos were largely out-of-sync with the live performers (192–195), and while reviewer Verrent criticises this as an accessibility failure, hampering straightforward intelligibility (2009; as quoted in ibid.: 195), Hargrave proposes that it also accentuated, for BSL users, the text's sense of frustrated communication and a feeling that the audience, like Boo/Ide, were slightly out of step with the rest of the world.

Hargrave complicates, however, any assertions about 'authenticity' in either Ide's autistic presence or Boo's autistic perspective. Much as disabled individuals in real life are compelled to perform (or conform to) expectations of their disability when navigating social situations (Garland-Thomson, 1997: 12–13), Hargrave contends that Ide 'appears to be playing "himself"', making his autism legible through the uncanny space of 'acting and not acting in the same gesture' (2015: 179). If autism, in a sense, only 'exists' as it is defined in a diagnostic manual or the cultural consciousness, then 'Ide plays not just a version of himself or of Boo, but a version of Hoffman in "*that* film"' (the iconic *Rain Man*), playing to our expectations of what autism looks like (178). While Hargrave firmly contests audience members' assumptions that the learning-disabled actors are 'being used' by the nondisabled creative team (202–206), he also reminds us that 'various projections' necessarily '"write onto" Ide' and his performance, particularly those of the author. Limited by his own, neurotypical 'theory of

mind', Kenny must necessarily 'imagin[e] not just Ide as Boo but Boo/Ide as himself: [the writer's] own "imagined autism"' (174). This is an important reminder that, as a playwright, my characters will always be coloured by my own understanding and interpretation of autism or other neurodivergent experiences, although I can work to counterbalance this by researching autistic perspectives and seeking feedback from autistic artists and audiences. Rather than a failure of authenticity, however, Hargrave suggests that this presents a potentially productive, uncanny space in which 'identity in itself [becomes] strange and uncertain' (ibid.: 188); something to be socially negotiated, in collaboration with others, rather than presented in a vacuum.

It is also a good reminder that sibling relationships do not exist in a lab or a vacuum. Baron-Cohen and Bettelheim's autism theories, which I have used to contextualise *Boo*, *Orphans*, and *The Caretaker*, might suggest that the plays' brotherly relationships are *inherently* dysfunctional because they are autistic. I aim to complicate that assumption. Mick's hesitance to interact with Aston and Benny's habit of talking past or over Boo are just as responsible for the plays' communication breakdowns as their brothers' autistic tendencies. (Kessler's *Orphans* seems more inclined to blame the non-autistic Treat for his brother's impairments and is less relevant here.) Although we might read Mick and Benny's failures as stemming from their brothers' autism, we can also view them on a continuum of human (mis)communication. These are far from the only dysfunctional sibling relationships to be found in drama, and the character's sparsely Pinterian speech habits are not uncommon in mid-to-late twentieth-century plays. In the following chapter, I'll explain how my own playwriting draws on these models to contrast communication failures, between siblings David and Jackie in *Two Truths*, with comfortably sparse—but still stereotypically 'masculine' or 'autistic'—dialogue between the character David and one of his friends. What makes sibling relationships or communication habits 'dysfunctional' is not when they tick the box for a list of autism symptoms or stereotypes; it is when they fail to satisfy the needs of the parties involved.

3.3 Autism Family Dramedy in *There She Goes*

In her book *Affect, Animals, and Autists* (2018), Marla Carlson examines plays from about the same period as *Boo* (Kenny, 2009) to define the genre of 'Autism

Family Drama', comparing *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (Haddon and Stephens, 2012) to Annie Baker's *Body Awareness* (2008), Mike Leigh's *Two Thousand Years* (2006), Deanna Jent's *Falling* (2013) and Elevator Repair Service's *The Sound and the Fury* (2008). She notes how, in *Body Awareness*, Baker uses Jared's Aspergers diagnosis to highlight other characters' mind-blindness—the ways their empathy is extended only to their social and political in-groups—while Josh's obsessive, autistic-coded fixation on religion, in *Two Thousand Years*, challenges his parents' and sister's secular Jewish identity (Carlson, 2018: 67, 62). She also observes how nearly all of the plays frame autism as a problem for the nuclear family to solve. At its core, this generic formulation, which she terms 'Autism Family Drama', reinforces an idealised nuclear family unit (51–90), either through the characters' achievement of a happy resolution or through the tragedy of their failure. We might read *The Glass Menagerie* as prototypical of these conventions, focusing on Tom's tragic abandonment of his sister Laura. Jent's play *Falling*, by contrast, serves as an exception to the generic rule.

Jent's characters, as discussed in the Literature Review, push against the assumption that individual families hold sole responsibility for their disabled loved ones' welfare. They advocate instead for a collective sense of social responsibility, criticising insufficient social services for the ways they fail both autistic people *and* their families. The play's eighteen-year-old, minimally verbal character, Josh, is about to lose the supports he has accessed through the public school system, but his frequent meltdowns already leave his parents and sister Lisa at nearly the end of their ropes. *Falling* focuses primarily on the parents, so sixteen-year-old Lisa is a fairly minor character, whose primary role is to highlight the need for change as she threatens to move out and live with her grandmother. Josh's meltdowns can be violent, injuring other family members, but without another 'safe place for him to live', parents Tami and Bill feel they are stuck prioritising Josh's safety above their own (Jent, 2013: 35). The play shows they are caught in an impossible situation and does important work to counter narratives that blame family members when learning-disabled young people fail to achieve normative benchmarks of success.

Lewis Ian Bray's solo-show *Cartoonopolis* (2025; 2015) likewise foregrounds systemic problems in the transition to adult services—this time from both a British and sibling perspective. Bray plays both himself and his brother Jack, mostly centring Jack's perspective, as he navigates the rocky transition from youth to adult services. Bray also makes cameos in the guise of their parents, a social worker, and some of Jack's support staff. The play begins with an entertaining tour of Jack's imaginary safe-haven, Cartoonopolis, but it turns much more serious as Lewis and parents discuss Jack's upcoming care review. Oscar Cabrera's unproduced play-text, *Through Andrew's Eyes* (2016), is also sibling-authored with a systemic focus.[25] The play is rare in being an autism drama written from a non-white and low-income perspective. It highlights the titular Andrew's intersectional vulnerability as a nonverbal, Latinx autistic man, while dramatising the struggle to support Andrew and the rest of the family on a single parent's income after their father's recent death. Like Josh, in *Falling*, Andrew's meltdowns can be violent, and both plays offer hypotheses for what the characters might be like if they were not autistic: in *Falling*, the actor who plays Josh also appears as a neurotypical social worker, in a dream sequence featuring Josh's accidental death, while the nonverbal Andrew's thoughts are voiced by a second actor, representing 'The Image of Andrew's Potential' (Cabrera, 2016: 0).

A more comprehensive study of sibling plays would make space for fuller discussions of both *Cartoonopolis* and *Through Andrew's Eyes*. The core of that analysis, however, would echo much of what Carlson has already written about *Falling* and the ways it works to resist the individualist conventions of Autism Family Drama. Although Carlson is clear that Autism Family Drama can reinforce its individualist norms through both happy resolutions—as in comedy or melodrama—and tragic ones, both *Falling* and the other two plays above are largely serious in tone. I was interested in how (and if) a more comedic text might also resist Autism Family Drama's conventions of individual responsibility, which blame either the parents or the disabled child for the other's failure to meet normative goals. Comedy has traditionally played a role in reinforcing

[25] *Through Andrew's Eyes*, which is available on the New Play Exchange, has been workshoped at several New York institutions but has never had a full production. An online reading and talkback were hosted in partnership with The Balcony and UC David's MIND Institute in 2020.

social norms, making fun of those who flout them, but it can also be a tool for mocking and resisting norms (if usually in favour of 'better' ones; see discussion of Shaw in Loftis, 2015: 50). Although I had difficulty finding a stage example to examine, the generic conventions of Autism Family Drama, which Carlson identifies in *The Curious Incident* and other plays, are equally present in television representations, like BBC's *The A Word* (2016–2020) or Netflix's *Atypical* (2017–2021). I looked, therefore, at the BBC comedy-drama *There She Goes* (2018–2023) as an alternative model for a more a comedic but still counter-narrative approach.

Fictionalising the life of writers Shaun Pye and Sarah Crawford's family, the programme *There She Goes* (2018–2023) follows Simon and Emily Yates as they parent both Rosie, who has a chromosomal disorder linked to autism, and her older brother Ben. Through both laughter and tears, the show 'honours', as Meltzer says, 'the ways disability affects relational experiences without resorting to a framework that "blames" disability for disrupting normative relations' (2018: 1218) or the parents for failing to mitigate Rosie's disability. My analysis below will examine how the programme uses the framework of a family comedy, intercut with more serious flashbacks, to showcase the Yates's life in an unsentimental way. I'll look particularly at Pye's self-deprecating self-portrait in the deeply flawed yet still endearing character of Simon and at how the show portrays the experiences of teenage sibling Ben.

Despite its half-hour comedy format, *There She Goes* doesn't shy away from the frustrations of parenting Rosie. Instead, its unstated maxim seems to be that sometimes 'you've got to laugh or you'll cry'. In the first episode alone, the nine-year-old, nonverbal Rosie runs across the street without looking, hides faeces in her dollhouse, upends a jug of milk on her on head, and makes a hole in her bedroom wall. While any one of these, as the individual centrepiece to an episode, might have been devastating, the rapid-fire incidents are instead played in quick succession and largely for laughs. As one of my interviewees observed, of her own frustrating but funny story, 'I'm pretty sure I was super annoyed at the time. But I had to get over it'. In *There She Goes*, there's simply no time for crying over spilled milk jugs. In fact, that particular disaster comes

almost as a relief, capping a panicked dash to keep Rosie away from the sharp food-processor blade left on the counter beside the milk.

Meanwhile, in a series of more seriously-toned flashbacks,[26] Simon and Emily's marriage flounders during Rosie's infancy. This dual timeline allows the earlier Emily and Simon to voice complex and often negative feelings about raising a child with profound learning disabilities, while also showing that they've moved beyond those emotions to be loving parents in the present-day. Where memoirs and media often centre 'how autism made me a better person' narratives (see Osteen, 2008: 19), *There She Goes* resists that impulse by leaving most of its parental growth offscreen. Simon and Emily's development, like their daughter's, is a years-long process that is ongoing, rather than neatly packaged to fit into a season arc on a television screen.

In the earlier timeline, Simon and Emily are not far off the archetypes of heroic super-mother and detached father that Stuart Murray identifies in early-2000s autism cure-narratives (2008: 179–190). Primary parent Emily is desperate for assistance as she struggles to mourn the child she was expecting and love the one she has; Simon, meanwhile, drinks to ignore the situation; and their extended support network insists that everything is fine. Rather than conforming to narratives in which a mother's will-power defeats, or is defeated by, her child's autism, however, the show makes clear that the Yates achieve their version of normalcy only by locating and accessing effective networks of support. In doing so, it advocates for collective, rather than individual responsibility. Emily's frustration is triggered not merely by Rosie's behaviour but by careless comments from relatives and healthcare professionals, as well as the difficulty of finding appropriate child- and respite-care.

While these struggles are shaped by the specifics of disability stigma and Rosie's difficult-to-predict behaviour, the programme also strives to make them feel relatable, not just, as one reviewer says, to 'parents of disabled children, but [to] any mother who worries she won't bond with her baby, and any father who fears he is not emotionally equipped for the job' (Seale, 2023). As in many other

[26] This tonal difference is both literal and figurative, as the flashback scenes are lit in a much cooler colour palette than the bright contemporary scenes.

'relatable' (or aspirational) middle-class, family comedies, however, *There She Goes* glosses over the Yates family's class and postcode privilege, which allow them to access resources that seem far out of reach to the families of *Falling*, *Cartoonopolis*, or *Through Andrew's Eyes*. Emily's decision to return to work, in the series two flashbacks, is based on personal fulfilment, rather than a cost-benefit analysis of her income compared to nursery fees or how much can be earned before losing access to Carer's Allowance.[27] Likewise, the family clearly have the funds to live in a well-resourced council area: Rosie's special school is nearby, rather than several hours drive away—like the one that Joe attends in *The A Word* (2016–2020)—and one of my interviewees commented, after her interview, that Rosie's social worker was 'unrealistically' helpful and competent. Her own family's experiences have been far less positive.

More successful is the programme's calibration of the writer's autofictional stand-in, Simon. A sort of fumbling everyman, Simon serves as the audience's eyes into the series—asking both the obvious and not-so-obvious questions—but he is not a particularly flattering self-portrait. As Emily shoulders most of the parenting burden, especially in the first series, Simon is the character 'who comes closest to losing our sympathy' (Dowell, 2018). Played with charm by David Tennant, however, he never quite becomes a villain and rides a fine line between endearing and exasperating, which—as will be discussed in the next chapter—I hoped to emulate with Jackie in my own play. In a characteristic exchange from the second season, Simon tells Rosie's new social worker, 'Anything for our little princess. I'd give her my kidney'. After a beat, he can't help but qualify, 'If I had two. And if that were absolutely hypothetical' (episode 2.4, 24:19–24:26). Simon is often politically incorrect and his selfish and altruistic impulses seem constantly at war with each other: push come to shove, he will do just about anything for Rosie, but he will also complain about it the entire time. Writer Shaun Pye says his initial draft, before Crawford's input, wallowed in sympathy for 'this poor bloke who has this learning-disabled daughter' (as quoted in Dowell, 2018), but their final version of the character comes across as muddling along and full of relatable flaws. As will be discussed

[27] The difficulty of staying within the strict income limits of Carers Allowance were highlighted by a series of articles in *The Guardian* beginning in April 2024 and also raised by one of this project's interview participants.

in the next chapter, the primary lesson I took forward from the series was the need to own up to my flaws and laugh at myself, so that my own play's autofictional elements don't slip into a refrain of 'poor me'.

The other character I want to touch on is Rosie's neurotypical older brother, Ben. As a pre-teen in the first season, the character's primary function seems to be puncturing his parents' egos: downplaying accomplishments like getting Rosie out of the bathtub (episode 1.2) and criticising Simon for not doing things the right way 'like mum does' (1.1: 13:15). Ben remains largely in the background even in episode 1.5, which bears his name, perhaps an intentional echo of the way the character is side-lined in his own birthday celebrations. Both the family and episode's focus remain primarily on Rosie, and as I watched Ben's parents and grandparents debate the merits of Pizza Express doughballs (Rosie's favourite) versus a quieter restaurant (less likely to set off a meltdown), the character's lack of input felt eminently relatable. Like the Yates family, mine found one restaurant (relatively quiet, serving brick-oven pizzas) that was successful with my brother, and we held most of our family celebrations there for years.

In the second season, Ben's character is allowed to express some of the same difficult feelings that his parents have wrestled with in the earlier timeline. When Rosie's behaviour disrupts their annual holiday, Ben complains, 'I hate her. She ruins everything. She's ruined my life. I wish I never had to see her again' (episode 2.5: 18:20-18:30). The episode validates Ben's in-the-moment frustration, his mother giving him a hug and responding, 'It's okay. It's okay to say these things' (18:35). Many siblings, however, assume that it is not okay to voice those feelings, even in private and outside our brother or sister's hearing. Like Heather Lanier, from the Introduction, who 'has to smile' (2021), we learn that we aren't allowed to be angry with our disabled brothers and sisters—or at least not to voice that anger in the same way as our peers, who can scream they hate their siblings one day only to hug and make up the next. Talking with interview participants about the advice we'd like to give our younger selves, I had several conversations about how getting upset doesn't make you a bad person, or a bad sibling. As if to prove this, *There She Goes* has Ben back to making Rosie laugh in the pool the very next day.

Ben's conflicted storm of love and frustration is carried through to the 2023 special episode. In a particularly emotional sequence, Rosie, who is experiencing painful menstrual cramps, physically lashes out at herself and her parents. Failing to recognise the seriousness of the situation, Ben is yelled at for refusing to cede control of the television remote and angrily storms from the room (25:55–26:08). Later, however, we see him sitting on the stairs in tears, as he listens to his sister whimpering and his father begging her to 'hurt me instead' (27:10). Pye and Crawford say their son Frank offered input into writing the special episode (British Comedy Guide, 2023), and I think you can see it in this sequence, where the camera pans away to show that Ben is hurting too. In a short article written to accompany the episode's premiere, Frank says '[t]here was a phase when that happened a lot' in their household, and while he understands that 'it's not favouritism or being undervalued' when his sister's needs have to be prioritised, that doesn't mean the experience hasn't been difficult for him too (Pye, 2023). Frank goes on to assure readers that a later scene, where Ben volunteers, over his parents' protests, to look after Rosie in the future, is 'absolutely' how he feels as well.

If there's a contradiction here, between the teenager who is sick of helping out with his sister and the young man who tells his parents, 'She'll come and live with me' (38:30), a few days later, then it's a contradiction we see throughout the programme. Nobody is perfect, but the Yates family all love each other and are trying their best. Although the show glosses over the family's financial privilege, it is raw and honest about the characters' frustrations, in a way that—like Jent's play, *Falling*—reassures those with similar experiences they aren't alone. It also urges others to be more understanding and accommodating of disability. 'Why can't people just cut us some slack, you know?' asks Emily, in the second season, 'The question people should ask every fucking day is what are you doing—what are *you* doing to be good enough for Rosie?' (2.4: 14:54–15:03). As at the end of *Amy and the Orphans* (Ferrentino, 2019), the 'you' here is collective—a question for the world at large, rather than Rosie's immediate family. A scene in the 2023 special, when a mother at the playground tells Emily she's 'doing a really good job' (36:06), shows the audience one small way to offer support.

Another key source of support that the episode depicts is the online community the Yates family join when Rosie is diagnosed with DYRK1A syndrome. Reading Facebook posts from other families—which are similar to those in some of the sibling groups that I belong to—Simon says, 'We're not alone, anymore, Em' (55:55). Television programmes, like *There She Goes*, have a wider reach than many stage plays, and support charities like Mencap and Sibs have used the programme as a conversation starter and outreach tool. Even for families who don't engage with such resources, fictional stories can offer a sense of 'imagined community' (McGrath, 2025) or reassurance that they aren't alone. It was working on the stage-play *Bernie and Mikey's Trip to the Moon* (Aiello, 2018), in the same year as *There She Goes* premiered, that prompted me to seek out and join my first adult sibling support group. I hope that *Two Truths*, in turn, might do the same for someone else.

3.4 Autistic Sisterhood in *Dinosaur* and *A Kind of Spark*

The final section of this chapter will examine two additional television programmes, which differ from the plays and media discussed so far by centring autistic women and their sisters. As previously discussed, autistic women are both under-diagnosed and underrepresented (see Hull et al., 2020; Murray, 2008: 164), and our cultural image of the diagnosis has largely crystalised around a series of socially isolated, mathematically inclined men and boys like Raymond Babbit (*Rain Man*, 1988) and Christopher Boone (*The Curious Incident*, Haddon, 2004; 2012). Only three of the sibling-disability plays I encountered while researching this thesis foreground relationships between sisters: Brian Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa* (Friel, 1990) and the autobiographical solo-shows *Sophie* by Emily Potter (2023) and *Dangerous Giant Animals* by Christina Murdock (2019). Although Rose, in *Lughnasa* is described vaguely enough to be open to an autistic interpretation, Potter and Murdock's sisters have other diagnoses, and none of the three plays is explicitly about autism. The BBC series *Dinosaur* (2024) and CBBC's *A Kind of Spark* (2023–2024), however, are both written by autistic women. The former is co-written by its lead actor, Ashley Storrie, and the latter co-written by Elle McNicoll, based on her novel of the same title (2020). While there is much to be said about the ways the two programmes reshape autism narratives, my analysis in the following section will primarily focus on how each one positions the characters' non-autistic sisters.

Over the course of its six-episode, debut season, the comedy series *Dinosaur* (2024) offers a refreshing counternarrative in which, for once, it is the neurodivergent character who plays the straight-woman to her neurotypical family's mess. A lifelong Glaswegian, Nina is working as a palaeontologist at Kelvingrove Museum, when her flighty sister Evie returns from a weekend in London to announce that she is engaged. Evie has only known her fiancé for six weeks, and the series follows as Nina—the only person to raise any objection to this rush down the aisle—bends over backwards to accommodate her sister's wedding whims. She attends uncomfortable dress fittings (episode 1.3), hides Evie's minor infidelity at the hen do (1.5), and wrangles the whole family to behave themselves in front of Evie's future father-in-law (1.2).

The sisters are close but express much of their love through teasing and sarcasm. In the first episode, Nina reminds Evie, 'You've had thrush that lasted longer than [your current relationship]' (1.1: 03:38), and Nina's autistic traits are equally acceptable fodder for this banter. When Nina threatens to ditch dinner for bowling with her work colleagues, Evie offers a teasing challenge that her sister will never get over her fear of 'putting your fingers in the holes' [on the bowling balls] (16:49). Later in the season, however, Evie crosses a line. The sisters have a falling out after Evie kisses someone at her hen do. Nina argues that Evie needs to confess the incident to her fiancé, so when the truth comes out, Evie accuses Nina of intentionally sabotaging her wedding:

> EVIE: All my life I have bent over backwards to accommodate you. We go to the Zoo but we can't see the penguins because Nina's having a moment.
>
> NINA: It was a meltdown.
>
> EVIE: For forty-five minutes! And when you're finally done kicking off, the penguin feeding experience is done. I didn't get to feed the baby penguins fish, Nina, and they don't let people do that anymore!
>
> Any time you do something annoying I'm not allowed to say anything. I can't react. And now I get my one big moment, where it's all about me for the first time in my life, and you won't let me have it!
>
> (1.5: 20:00–20:30)

Taken out of context, Evie's words—like Ben's in *There She Goes*—resonate for me as a sibling. I too have vivid memories of particular childhood frustrations, which I know are petty in the grand scheme of things but felt enormous at the time. Although I haven't been married myself, I have listened to other siblings discuss the stress of planning around the possibility of wedding-day meltdowns or trying to head-off disability-related emergencies, desperately hoping for that one special day to 'go right'.

Evie expressing her frustration directly at Nina feels far crueller than *There She Goes* (2018–2023), where Ben steps out of the room and vents to a trusted third party, but this too is realistic. Meltzer notes that 'using whatever point of leverage they can to win an argument is a typical sibling relation' (2018: 1222). In other words, siblings irrespective of autism or disability play dirty when they fight. There's an opportunity for both humour and humanisation in showing the characters' rough edges, but the context of this particular fight positions Evie so far in the wrong as to invalidate her frustrations. It is not Evie, after all, but Nina who has been 'ben[ding] over backwards', throughout the season, to accommodate her sister's whims. If Evie had complained that she wanted her 'one big' milestone moment, in a life spent celebrating Nina's graduations and career advancements, that would have captured a relevant sibling dynamic while keeping with the show's reversal of expectations. (As the more academically inclined sibling I sometimes worry about receiving praise and gifts for milestones that have never been and will never be within my brother's reach.) Instead, going off about penguins and meltdowns positions Evie as an immature bully, throwing a far more malicious temper tantrum than the one she accuses the younger Nina of.

The series has no obligation to make Evie as complex and nuanced a character as her sister Nina. Autistic characters have time and again been relegated to two-dimensional, supporting roles in their family member's stories, and turnabout is fair play. Still, it's worth noting how this particular speech, in Episode 5, seems to push Evie from a role as Nina's narrative foil to a full-on antagonist. Without any evidence of the ways that Evie claims to have supported and put up with Nina in turn, it was difficult to tell why Nina remains so invested in preserving their relationship, placating Evie and putting up with being her verbal punching

bag. Of course, sibling relationships can be difficult and imperfect, but given the seeming-strength of Nina and Evie's relationship in early episodes, I would have loved to see the characters' mutual frustrations treated as more mutually *valid*. As I propose of *The Glass Menagerie*'s Tom and Laura, in the first part of this chapter, loving each other does not mean that the sisters' needs and wants will not conflict.

In the children's programme *A Kind of Spark* (2023–2024), protagonist Addie Darrow and her sister Keedie are both autistic. The two have a special bond like that articulated by some of my interview participants (as previously referenced): 'my sister is the only person I can near fully unmask and be my autistic self around and I know she feels the same'. Older sister Keedie feels a responsibility to be a guide and role model for the younger Addie (episode 1.9: 10:28–11:30), but she also has a non-autistic twin, Nina, who sometimes feels excluded from her sisters' closeness. This causes conflict in the first season, and in an interview about the novel that inspired the programme, McNicoll describes Nina's role as 'almost one of an antagonist'. Much like Evie in *Dinosaur*, McNicoll says that Nina 'creates tension between the sisters' and 'has to learn to fully understand' her neurotypical privilege, compared to Addie and Keedie's experience (Eagleton, 2021). In the novel's television adaptation, Nina is a teenage influencer who, particularly in the first season, is incredibly image conscious. In the second episode, she broadcasts about Addie's autism diagnosis for online clout, and Keedie is furious with her, anticipating the ableist comments that this will draw.

While Nina Darrow is naively self-centred, however, she is mostly well-meaning. The character offers a genuine apology to Addie near the end of the first season (episode 1.8: 21:25) and defends her sisters from others' bullying taunts (1.5: 17:10). By the end of Season 1, the three Darrow sisters present a mostly united front, with Nina and Keedie defending Addie against a cruel teacher and all three attempting to solve problems together before the meddlesome adults can intervene. Nina's journey from self-centredness to empathy, here, is miles away from that of Charlie in *Rain Main*. Although both might be described as 'how my autistic sibling made me a better person' narratives, Nina's growth is a result of her sisters' active agency. Nina learns the same lessons about thinking of others

and accepting difference that Addie spends the series teaching their entire town.

In Season 1, *A Kind of Spark* also features a second neurodiverse sibling relationship in its historical timeline, as Addie investigates a diary written during the village's sixteenth-century witch trials. Here, the status-conscious sister, always policing her sibling's behaviour, is not the headstrong, neurotypical Maggie Fraser but the autistic Elinor, who is terrified of attracting the witchfinder's attention to herself. Elinor and Maggie's plotline emphasises the difficulty of being different when you lack the words to describe it: Maggie assures her sister that 'One day there'll be a name for the way you are. One day people will understand' (episode 1.10: 20:22–20:28). In reversing the dynamics between autistic and non-autistic sisters, however, the show also demonstrates that autistic sisterly relationships can be as varied as those in any other family, countering any impulse to tropify the siblings' roles. Reading the diary, Addie draws a comparison between the status-conscious Nina and Elinor, while Maggie—arguing to protect those who are different or vulnerable—bears far more similarity to Addie herself.

The show also takes some steps towards challenging the binary between autistic and neurotypical siblings. Although Nina is not autistic, like Addie and Keedie, she is shown to have her own struggles with anxiety. Nina is anxious about her social status, worries that a vintage clothing store will be 'an allergic reaction waiting to happen' (1.4: 8:35), and faces decision paralysis over choosing a university course in Season 2. In Episode 2.5 ('Choices'), Nina's anxiety over the future is rendered in ways that echo Keedie and Addie's moments of overstimulation and meltdown in the series' first season. When Keedie is overstimulated at a birthday party, in Episode 1.5 ('Party'), the music distorts and the camera switches to shaky close-ups—both of Keelie and from her perspective—which make the room seem to spin (15:13–15:52). When one of the other students, Emily, bullies Addie in Episode 1.8 ('Something Wicked'), the camera goes similarly blury and out of focus, with the view again shifting between close-ups of Addie and her perspective (1.8: 16:00–16:43). Both moments muffle or dampen the sound of the dialogue, distorting the music in Keedie's and adding a high-pitched drone sound over Addie's. In Episode 2.5,

Nina's audio is similarly dampened when a question on her vlog sends the character into an anxious spiral. Visually, the moment takes a different but still disorienting approach: the camera closes in on Nina, cutting back and forth between naturalistic footage and the flatter image of her phone camera with increasing rapidity as Nina grows more upset (09:42–10:36).

It was refreshing to see Nina's struggles in Season 2 treated as separate from but equally valid to those of her sisters. When Nina tells Keedie that she is 'fine', Keedie responds, 'That's what me and Addie say when we're not fine'. Although Nina's answer claims, 'Well, I'm not like you am I?' her tone conveys precisely the opposite (2.5: 11:36–11:43). Perhaps the character does not feel she is allowed to be 'not fine', but the storytelling assures the audience that this is a false assumption. In a later episode, Nina gets a reminder that the unconditional nature of their parents' love extends to her as well:

> BESS: If [university is] not for you, who cares? […] You can do anything!
>
> NINA: But can I do nothing?
>
> BESS: You know what? Yeah. […]
> We love you, no matter what you do.
>
> (2.8: 06:35–06:55)

In the first season, I also appreciated Addie's acknowledgement that life in their small, gossipy village is 'not exactly easy for [Nina] either, is it?' (1.8: 21:47). While Addie and Keedie are obviously the primary victims of the town's ableist bullying, siblings like Nina can also find themselves collateral targets of prejudice. One of my project's autistic interviewees observed that, especially in a small, rural community, 'You get tarred with the same brush […] And my sister, I think, kind of resented me for that'.

As a children's programme, *A Kind of Spark* can feel somewhat didactic, explaining autism and other life lessons in very clear and child-friendly terms. It offers a relatively nuanced portrait, however, of a neurodiverse sisterly relationship. The non-autistic Nina is sometimes her sisters' antagonist but also frequently their ally, and Nina's own challenges with meeting normative

expectations are given space. Like *Dinosaur*, *A Kind of Spark* shows neurodiverse sisterly relationships—between autistic and non-autistic sisters—following similarly 'ambivalent' patterns to those in other families where, as Meltzer observes, siblings often alternate between support and conflict (2018: 1221). Compared to *Dinosaur*, however, *A Kind of Spark* offers clearer evidence of sisterly support. Although both shows premiered while this thesis was already in progress, I looked to their examples while figuring out how I wanted to stage Kate and Anna's sisterly relationship in *Two Truths*.

In this chapter, I have reviewed a number of representations of neurodiverse siblinghood from *The Glass Menagerie*, debuting in late 1944, to *Dinosaur* and *A Kind of Spark* nearly eight decades later in 2024. I've discussed how *The Glass Menagerie* and later plays reverberate with the guilt of Tennessee Williams's sister's lobotomy, but I've also drawn on the examples of *Amy and the Orphans* and *Bernie and Mikey's Trip to the Moon* to find more productive alternatives to that guilt. In the chapter's second section, I examined examples of neurodivergent brotherly dysfunction—in *The Caretaker* (1960), *Orphans* (1985), and *Boo* (2009)—while also looking at how *Boo* complicates questions of authenticity and invites comparison between neurodiverse and more typical sibling pairs. I then turned to televised representations, examining *There She Goes* as a generic subversion of Marla Carlson's 'Autism Family Drama' and finishing with an analysis of sisterly relationships in *Dinosaur* and *A Kind of Spark*. The next chapter will build on that analysis—and the lessons of all these examples—to evaluate my own playwriting in the thesis's creative component, *Two Truths*. I'll also return to this analysis of existing drama in the Conclusion, where I discuss how the insights 'practice gives us into what performance is, or can be, or could have been' (Trimingham, 2002: 56, 58) suggest possibilities for reinterpretation and directions for future research.

Chapter 4 *Two Truths*: A Dramaturgy of Similarity and Difference

Of the various neurodiverse sibling plays investigated in the previous chapter, it is worth noting that only two place more than one set of siblings onstage. In Mike Leigh's *Two Thousand Years* (2006), these are two generations of the same family, and the character Tammy's joke about 'our genetic malfunctions' (61) suggests a link between her autistic brother Josh and their mother's 'meshuga' (or 'mad') sister Michelle. Mike Kenny's *Boo* (2009), on the other hand, offers an inter-family comparison, showing the autistic Boo and his caretaker Benny alongside the more familiar sibling dynamics of their neighbours Girl and Boy. The latter play makes explicit an act of comparison that seems to run under the surface of most other sibling-disability dramas, offering audiences an invitation to find similarities between the characters onstage and their own presumably neurotypical family lives. Stories about families and neurodiversity may make the familiar strange—exaggerating stereotypically masculine terseness and aggression into the dysfunctional brothers of Pinter (1960), Kessler (1985), and *Rain Man* (1988)—or the strange familiar—inviting us to identify with the parenting struggles of Simon and Emily Yates in *There She Goes* (2018–2023). Through these acts of comparison, we can cultivate empathy, fostering moments of recognition between a presumptively normative audience and groups perceived as different. As Leigh's characters declare: 'Families!' 'It's the same everywhere' (2006: 61).

Still, sociologist Ariella Meltzer cautions us against frameworks that ask neurodiverse siblings to 'measure up' against 'a normative vision of what they […] "should be"' (2018: 1229). Extending her argument about comparisons between neurodiverse and neurotypical sibling relationships, as discussed in the Literature Review, we might also suggest that there is danger in cultivating a singular image of how neurodiverse siblings, specifically, ought to behave. As a diagnostic label, autism covers a broad spectrum of neurodivergent experiences. Rather than a linear continuum from 'mild' to 'profound', or high support needs to low support needs, the autism spectrum has more recently been visualised in the form of a colour wheel, where common traits vary by individual in countless gradations of hue and tone (see Sochacka, 2022: 184–186). As the saying goes, 'If you've met one autistic person then you've met *one* autistic person', and

autistic or not, we are all individuals. It makes sense, then, that siblings' experiences of autism and autistic people's sibling experiences will each vary in diverse ways. While each of the plays discussed in this thesis offers its own portrait of *a* neurodiverse sibling relationship, it is only in television programmes—like *A Kind of Spark* (2023–2024) and, to a lesser degree, *Atypical* (2017–2021)[28]—that I have seen more than one family of neurodiverse siblings represented side by side. In *A Kind of Spark*, the contrasts between the contemporary Darrow and historical Fraser sisters worked well to counter any generalisations about sisters and autism, reinforcing my decision to explore multiple pairs of siblings onstage in *Two Truths*.

In the play, baker Kate and car-afficionado David are both autistic, while their sisters, Anna and Jackie, aren't. Kate runs her own café and is sick of being coddled by her older sister, but the over-stretched Anna would rather stick her nose in Kate's business than admit she has any problems of her own. Jackie is a bit more reluctant to take an active role in her brother David's life, but that doesn't stop her from dropping what she's doing to answer his calls. *Two Truths* begins with Jackie and Anna on a coffee date, playing the get-to-know-you game (two truths and a lie) that inspired its title. As they get to know each other better, the pair bond over their shared experiences as siblings, but they also find and miss opportunities to get to know their own siblings, David and Kate. When David crashes his car, Jackie struggles to understand why her brother is so opposed to riding the (unreliable, overstimulating) bus to work. Later, Anna gets a taste of her own medicine when she is also involved in an accident and is forced to accept Kate's hovering as she recuperates. Like the Yates family in *There She Goes*, all four siblings are flawed but loving, as they muddle through their relationships—often to the amusement (and sometimes frustration) of the play's fifth character: David's friend and Kate's employee, Steph.

Over the past three years, I've had the opportunity to speak with a number of other siblings, through both the thesis itself and my volunteer work with the charity Sibs. On a personal level, it has been incredibly rewarding to connect

[28] In the first season of *Atypical*, Sam's therapist Julia speaks with Sam's father about the way her own parents mishandled her brother's autism diagnosis (episode 1.6). In the second season, she briefly introduces Sam's mother to her brother, Jesse (episode 2.4).

with other siblings over our shared experiences, generating a sense of community and a reassurance that I am not alone. At the same time, I have found that seeing the difference and variety in other siblings' stories has helped me to feel more included in that community, reassuring me that I still belong even when my own experiences do not entirely align with others in a group. By including multiple sets of neurodiverse siblings in *Two Truths*, I hoped to recreate some of that affirming experience for autistic and sibling audiences, fostering what James McGrath calls an 'imagined community' of people who identify with the narrative—much like the autistic community that McGrath himself traces in the essay 'AutisTime' (2025). Although two sets of siblings, as in *Two Truths* or *A Kind of Spark*, cannot hope to represent the full range of autistic and sibling experiences, they can offer points of resonance and recognition while leaving room, through the characters' differences, for alternate ways of being autistic or a sibling to someone on the spectrum.

This chapter will serve as a dramaturgical analysis of the formal choices that followed from my decision to explore similarities and differences between two pairs of neurodiverse siblings in *Two Truths*. It will begin by explaining how the script took shape around a series of parallel scenes and overlapping conversations, evolving into a formal experiment that embraces autistic and sibling experiences of narrative disorganisation. Section 4.2 will focus on the play's most autofictional storyline, represented in siblings Jackie and David, and explain how I addressed ethical concerns about autofiction and autism representation by engaging with the double empathy problem and tropes of unreliable authority. The third section will shift focus to the play's other set of siblings, examining how material from the project's interviews led to a focus on negotiating care and reciprocity in sisters Kate and Anna's arc. Section 4.4 will discuss how all of those strands coalesce into a part-linear, part-circular dramaturgy of autistic siblinghood, characterised by overlapping scenes, partial perspectives, and mutual missteps.

4.1 Playing with Parallels

Many autistic adults, according to a recent study, describe their ideal form of social play as an activity done in close proximity to others, without any requirement for interaction or collaboration (Pritchard-Rowe et al., 2024: 222–

224). These descriptions align with what neurotypical researchers term 'parallel play', viewed as a key symptom for diagnosing autism in childhood. In the normative, medicalised models represented by the DSM and ICD, parallel play is assumed to demonstrate a deficit in 'reciprocal social interactions' (World Health Organization, 2022: 6A02) and ranked somewhere on the borderline between 'lesser' solitary and more interactive social play (Bauminger et al., 2008: 1227; Zucker et al., 2022: 1142). Intervention studies from the early 2000s, for example, used neurotypical siblings to coach their autistic brothers and sisters from solitary play towards parallel and then more collaborative activities (see Ferraioli et al., 2012). By interviewing autistic adults about their own experiences, however, Pritchard-Rowe and her collaborators invite us to reject this deficit model, recognising autistic modes of play as valuable in their own right—rather than, as Meltzer might say, measuring them against what we assume they 'should be' (2018: 1229). Hanna Bertilsdotter Rosqvist and Anna Nygren do something similar in their chapter for *Critical Neurodiversity Studies* (Bergenmar et al., 2025), taking up the volume's mandate to 'explore[] neurodivergent potentialities' (11) by celebrating both solitary and collaborative forms of autistic playfulness as a methodology for read-writing and analysing text (189–201).

The following section will use the concept of parallel play as a critical framework to introduce the use of concurrent or parallel scenes and dialogue in *Two Truths*. Drawing on examples from plays by Mike Kenny and Alice Birch, it will explain how parallel scenes and overlapping dialogue became tools, not only to foreground similarities and differences between the characters but also to amplify emotional moments throughout the play. It will draw on the work of Matthew Belmonte, Chiara Robbiano, and Bernadette Kneidinger-Müller to explain how I've tried to use overlapping techniques—and what Kneidinger-Müller calls 'parallel communication'—to immerse the audience in autistic and sibling experiences of narrative or perceptual disorganisation. These moments offer opportunities for audience members to empathise with, and recognise similarities between, experiences belonging to both the play's autistic and non-autistic characters.

Play with my own brother, as a child, was often a parallel activity. Without much conversation, we wheeled Matchbox cars around tracks in his bedroom then graduated to racing Mario Kart on the living room TV. Several of my interviewees likewise spoke fondly about playing video games, making art, or watching television as shared activities with their siblings. These experiences are represented in the third scene of *Two Truths,* where the autistic Kate nudges her sister, Anna, into playing Mario Kart together when they cannot agree on a television programme to watch. Parallel activities, as Pritchard-Rowe et al. note, allow for the possibility of interaction while removing the pressure for it (2024: 222, 224), and that is particularly important for Kate and Anna in this scene. The two characters have recently argued, and their conversation at the start of Scene 3 often lapses into strained and awkward silence. Playing Mario Kart offers them something to talk about but also, crucially, an excuse *not* to converse, as each focuses her attention on the gameplay. Without the pressure to 'be sociable'—or to sustain eye contact[29]—the sisters' silences grow more comfortable, and their occasional commentary evolves into a pleasant conversation over the course of the race.

After hearing from several participants about playing video games, in ways that resonated with my own experience, the Mario Kart scene was one of the first that I envisioned. I wanted to explore how parallel activities help to facilitate sibling interaction, but I also worried that conversational lulls might lose the audience's attention. For this reason, I wrote Kate and Anna's gameplay to run concurrently with another conversation, between David and his friend Steph elsewhere onstage. This means that Scene 3 *plays out in parallel*, as well as literally representing the sisters' engagement in parallel play. As focus shifts back and forth between the two pairs, the audience has opportunities to sit with each in moments of silence, but the gaps are far shorter than a naturalistic rendering of either scene independently would entail.

Steph and David's conversation is designed both to mirror the sisters' and to offer points of contrast. The two conversations are similarly defined by gaps and pauses, but their tones follow opposite trajectories. Where Kate and Anna start

[29] Eye contact can be particularly challenging or uncomfortable for some autistic people (see Hutchins and Brien, 2016; Singer, 1999: 65).

out awkward, in the wake of an argument, David and Steph sit in the comfortable silence of friends who can communicate without many words. By the end of the scene, Mario Kart is facilitating warmer interactions between Kate and Anna, but David and Steph have hit a roadblock. After Steph tells David that he wouldn't be a good fit at her new workplace, the friends' conversation fizzles out, and they bid each other an awkward and stilted goodbye.

At the beginning of Scene 3, the two conversations fit into the gaps left by each other's silences. The short sections of each conversation function much like the alternating vignettes of Mike Kenny's *Boo* (2009), discussed in the previous chapter, and draw attention to similarities between the two pairs. As the silences become shorter, however, the dialogue in *Two Truths* begins to overlap, which occurs only once in Kenny's play. Around page 44 of *Two Truths*, these overlaps start to blur the boundaries between conversations, so that Kate and Anna's responses to in-game fumbles ('Shit!' 'Careful!' 'Kinda funny though.') sound almost like commentary on Steph and David's conversational missteps. Such crossings are not uncommon in plays with simultaneous staging, but if they move beyond the realm of strictly parallel, that also feels appropriate as a metaphor for mixed autistic-nonautistic sibling experience. While my brother might have preferred to drive Matchbox cars around the rug in silence, I was always trying to insert a sense of shared narrative into our parallel play. A 2008 study by Bauminger et al. suggests that I was not alone in that impulse: the researchers observed that groups with all autistic children were most likely to engage in parallel play, but groups combining autistic and neurotypical children were more likely to engage in the latter's preference for some form of coordinated or cooperative activity.

In *Boo*, Kenny's strategy of alternating vignettes works to frame the siblings in strict parallels: 'two sets of isolated people' who 'actually have a lot in common, but very little connection' (2). *Two Truths* is structured differently, in that the two pairs of siblings have much more interaction with each other, but it still tries to offer comparisons between the characters. Alternating more rapidly between conversations allows me to highlight similarities and differences at the more granular level of line by line, rather than scene by scene as Kenny does. It also allows the emotions of parallel conversations to amplify each other, as

occurs in the one sequence of *Boo*—discussed in the previous chapter—where all four siblings interact and their dialogue overlaps:

> BENNY: What the hell are you doing? Get away from here. What are you doing? Get back inside. You're asking for trouble. I told you. I told you to keep inside. […]
>
> BOY: What are you doing? I was only gone for a minute. I left you on the playground. What did I say?
>
> [GIRL]: He's got our ball. He was going to give me a ball.
>
> BOO: Nothing. I was doing nothing. We were just talking. I was just talking
>
> (Kenny, 2009: 32)

By doubling Boy and Benny's voices on the shared/overlapping line 'What [the hell] are you doing?' (2009: 32), Kenny not only emphasises the characters' similarities but also underlines their heightened emotions. The doubled voices quite literally turn up the volume on the characters' shared agitation, a potent blend of anger, protectiveness, and fear.

In *Two Truths*, I use overlaps as an intensifying strategy in moments of both comparison and contrast. In the middle of Scene 2, for example, Kate and Anna are both working in/from the café: Anna's exaggerated patience, on a phone call with a client, underlines her sister's anxiety, as Kate searches behind the counter for a missing order form. Anna's serene tone contrasts against Kate's panic, but her words also mingle with the ringing shop phone to create a chaotic soundscape that mirrors Kate's internal state. When Kate answers the phone, her own customer service voice is not so very different from her sister's, but Kate stims as she talks, showing that this mask requires effort. This is one of the earliest indicators of Kate's neurodivergence for the audience, but as her busy hands contrast with Anna's placidity, they perhaps also begin to suggest that there are cracks in Anna's patient façade as well.

Later in the scene, Anna applies that same exaggerated patience to Kate herself, in a split-stage sequence where Anna and Jackie each nag their siblings to eat something for lunch:

JACKIE *[to David]*:
Right, come on. After this I'll buy you lunch.
Where do you // want to go?

ANNA *[to Kate]*:
So do you want me to grab you anything for lunch, Katie?

KATE *[to Anna, distracted]*:
Hmm?

DAVID *[to Jackie]*:
I don't want // lunch.

ANNA *[to Kate, deliberately slow]*:
Do you want anything for // lunch, Katie?

JACKIE *[to DAVID]*:
I will buy you something anyway.
So pick // something.

KATE *[to Anna]*:
I'm fine Anna.
// You don't need to— *[…baby me.]*

DAVID *[to Jackie]*:
What's the point?

JACKIE *[to DAVID]*:
Food, David?

ANNA *[to Kate]*:
You're sure?

KATE *[to Anna]*:
Yes, Anna! I am // perfectly fine!

DAVID *[to Jackie]*:
I don't have a car, and I can't get to work, so I might as well starve!

(*Two Truths*: 26–27)

The conversational doubling, here, uses repetition and overlaps to amplify the characters' frustration, helping to create a feeling that this argument is well-trod ground. Instead of speaking simultaneously, as in *Boo*, the dialogue here is staggered, with the characters speaking over each other at points marked by

double slashes (//). This creates a sense of interruption even though none of the siblings is actually speaking over their own scene partner. While the sequence highlights a similar 'caretaking' dynamic between the two pairs, it also reveals differences between them. David's final line ('I don't have a car […] so I might as well starve!') underlines his need for support in this moment, too fixated on the car to remember that life and the need for sustenance goes on. As the conversation continues, however, Kate defends her own capabilities and accuses Anna of being overbearing: 'I am not one of your clients, okay? You can't just— ' (27) and 'I brought myself a sandwich, Anna. Like usual. You, however, are welcome to buy yourself whatever you'd like and eat it anywhere but here' (28).

This model of highlighting and then subverting parallels is a major feature in Alice Birch's *Anatomy of a Suicide* (2017), another key influence on the overlapping structure of *Two Truths*. In her triptych portrait of intergenerational trauma and mental health struggles, Birch stages parallel scenes across three time periods simultaneously, highlighting echoes and variations across three generations of mothers' and daughters' lives. If the alternating vignettes of *Boo* offer tidy comparisons between Kenny's two pairs of siblings, then Birch's drama is intentionally messier: mothers and daughters make both similar and very different choices, and the simultaneous scenes generate near-constant decisions about where audiences ought to focus their attention next (see Billington, 2017). While Kenny's script clearly directs the audience's focus in sequence, first to one pair of siblings and then the other, Birch's actions and dialogue nearly always play out in parallel. Focusing on one portion of the scene necessarily means missing something elsewhere, and for some theatregoers, the experience of making that conscious decision—or letting one's attention wander—seems to have created an almost Brechtian distancing effect (see Greenstreet, 2020).

For many people on the autism spectrum, however, having one's attention pulled in multiple directions is an everyday occurrence. Commenting on a reading of *Two Truths*, one of the project's interviewees observed, 'That's what it's like for me a lot of the time when there's just stuff happening'. In conversations they'll realise, 'I've obviously, like, missed something and […] just have to backfill that as I go and hope that it sort of works itself out'. Matthew K. Belmonte attempts to explain this distractibility with his theory that autism is an

impairment in ‘narrative organisation’, the set of connected processes we use to organise our perception of the world from chaotic details into recognisable and actionable patterns (2008: 167). That organisation is ‘narrative’ because the patterns tell a story to the observer, allowing us to focus our attention in a linear fashion on one detail and then the next.

Belmonte proposes narrative *dis*organisation—where multiple stimuli or thought processes are experienced simultaneously—as an overarching explanation for the mind blindness, executive dysfunction, sensory overload, and language difficulties associated with an autism diagnosis (169–172). This perhaps suggests that an episodic structure—a non-chronological, open-ended collection of scenes—would be most effective at representing an autistic experience. While Belmonte celebrates the insights offered by autistic authors’ less automatic, more deliberate processes of narrative organisation (173), however, his essay takes as a given that linear narrativisation is most desirable. Non-linear processing is narratively *dys*functional or *dis*ordered, and to be avoided if one can.

Chiara Robbiano, by contrast, argues that the more ‘bottom up’, or narratively disorganised, process of autistic sensory perception should itself be celebrated. This ‘lingering perception’, or nonlinear spatial and temporal immersion, lends itself to meaning-making that is less encumbered by prior assumptions or pre-formed narratives, offering a pathway, in the words of the Zen Buddhist philosopher Dōgen, to ‘be actualised by myriad things’ (Robbiano, 2025). Non-linear perception can, as Belmonte recognises, cause confusion in a neurotypical world, when focus is directed to the ‘wrong’ places. However, it can also be beautiful, as when Mel Baggs describes ‘being in a constant conversation with every aspect of my environment’ (2007), or Sonya Freeman Loftis writes about enjoying repetitive pleasure ‘for its own sake’ (2015: 12). In her conference paper, Robbiano encourages us to explore the generative potential of neurodiverse forms and perspectives that aren’t bound to strict linearity. We can see examples of this in the open form of Georg Büchner’s *Woyzeck* (1836), where many of the scenes have no clear order, and in Louise Creechan’s analysis of multi-temporality in *The Lifted Veil* (Eliot, 1859) for *Critical Neurodiversity Studies* (2025).

In drawing a connection to the Zen Buddhist teacher Dōgen, Robbiano also frames non-linear or lingering perception as a skill that can be learned with practice and intention. Even within a more linear storyline, sequences of overlapping dialogue might present an opportunity for non-autistic audiences to experience moments of parallel or non-linear perception, requiring them to make more conscious choices about how or if to organise information. Belmonte's deficit model suggests that narrative *dis*organisation should pose an accessibility barrier to autistic audiences—who require clearer signposts to follow a linear structure—but it was, in fact, primarily non-autistic commenters who voiced discomfort with overlapping dialogue during the July 2025 reading of *Two Truths*. People were particularly concerned about the feeling that they had 'missed something important', which aligns very closely with the daily experience of the interviewee discussed above. With edits to better signpost that narrative confusion as intentional and autistic, however, I realised that discomfort could become productive. A couple of autistic women in the audience also voiced that they appreciated a reference to David stimming, in the stage directions, and they would like to see more of that, from Kate as well. Based on this feedback, I not only increased the concentration of overlapping dialogue in Scenes 2 and 7 but also added moments where Kate's frustration with interruptions and crosstalk are made visible by stimming. Because I am not autistic, however, I left the specifics of that stimming up to the individual actor to decide.

The goal of these edits was to facilitate what Marla Carlson calls 'moment[s] of self-recognition' between neurotypical audiences and autistic characters. She points, in particular, to the stage adaptation of *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (Haddon and Stephens, 2012), where stylised sound and projection designs heighten the sensory experience of navigating an unfamiliar train station. This 'facilitates slippage and stickiness' between the audiences' own occasional experiences of overwhelm or overstimulation and the character Christopher's autistic perspective (Carlson, 2018: 70–71). *Two Truths* uses a similar technique to offer a window into David's distress during an overstimulating bus ride (64–65), where the audience is immersed in the exaggerated sounds of other passengers, building to an overwhelming cacophony. The stage directions here leave space for neurodivergent directors,

actors, and designers to contribute their perspectives to staging the scene. As a playwright, however, I was also interested in using live dialogue to drive such chaotic soundscapes—where the layering of sounds and rhythms takes precedence over the intelligibility of individual words.

Birch describes her dialogue, in *Anatomy of a Suicide*, as 'scored' across the page (2017: ix), like a piece of music in which audiences are not expected to pick out each instrument's individual line. I have borrowed her musical metaphor in trying to compose a textual soundscape for *Two Truths* that intermittently privileges Robianno's 'nonlinear spatiotemporal immersion', with layered sounds and rhythms continuing to convey the characters' emotional states even when the specific contents of their conversations are lost. Although I've long been drawn to the musicality of Birch's style, the autistic resonances of this technique were a discovery over the process of writing *Two Truths* and something that, on reflection, I could have pushed further. Early on, I worried about the balance between narrative disorder and intelligibility—particularly as an access issue—and this means I did not always fully commit to the idea. Many of the overlapping sequences are limited in length and scored so that particular words or phrases still land in audible gaps to continue moving the story along. There is room for much more intense experimentation with overlapping dialogue as a form of autistic dramaturgy in future work.

The sequences of narrative disorganisation in *Two Truths* are not, however, solely an autistic dramaturgy. In Scene 4, two conversations overlap in the café to indicate Jackie's boredom and distraction, as her attention is drawn away from a conversation with David to observe Anna speaking on the phone across the room. Given the non-linear and narratively disorganised perception attributed to autism, we might expect David to be the more distractable sibling. After stumbling through some awkward and unsuccessful small talk with his sister, however, David launches into a passionate monologue—or 'info dump'—about one of his favourite video games. Instead, it is Jackie who cannot maintain her attention. She is disinterested in David's hobbies or special interests and far more invested in clocking the moment that her romantic interest, Anna, hangs up the phone. As the scene progresses, stage directions indicate that Anna's voice should grow more prominent, overlapping with David in a dissonant

harmony that makes both of their lines very difficult to understand. In trying to half-listen to both characters, neither Jackie nor the audience can successfully follow either thread of conversation, and David's enthusiastic story becomes little more than the droning 'wah wah wah' of the teacher in a Charlie Brown cartoon.

This scene is the second of three sequences in which I've placed Anna on a one-sided phone call. In Scene 2, that seemed like a useful way to ease audiences into the use of parallel conversation: in the first overlapping sequence of *Anatomy of a Suicide*, Birch similarly places one character on a phone call to indicate that her interjections are of secondary importance, and audiences can keep their primary focus on the other portion of the scene. Because I've used the technique repeatedly with Anna, however, there is a danger that not enough information about her life is explicitly articulated. As will be discussed later in the chapter, Anna works in disability services, and I wanted to represent the stress of the sector's under-staffing and under-resourcing through a series of telephone-mediated intrusions from her workplace. Bernadette Kneidinger-Müller uses the term 'parallel communication' to describe these increasingly common interruptions by 'mobile mediated communication with absent people' while engaged in other 'face-to-face conversations' (328) in the digital age.

For Anna, such interruptions build to a crescendo at the end of Scene 7, in a split-stage sequence taking place simultaneously in Kate's café and Anna's car. Crucially, *both* sisters are juggling competing stimuli in this sequence. Anna tries to split her attention between her mobile phone and rainy road conditions, juggling incoming calls from both her sister and her boss. Meanwhile, Kate stresses in the café about a missing case of oat milk, frustrated by a series of 'helpful' interruptions from Steph and Jackie. The stress makes her more susceptible to overstimulation, and the added noise from Anna's parallel scene helps to exaggerate and accentuate this. For Anna, the competing stimuli *are* the stressors, resulting in a very similar experience of sensory and information overwhelm that I hope invites a moment of recognition between autistic and non-autistic experiences. By the end of the scene, the dialogue in both spaces builds to cacophony of overlapping conversation, culminating in a squeal of brakes and flash of headlights, as the distracted Anna crashes her car.

Although Anna has the play's most consequential incident of digital distraction, this was also something I was conscious of with Jackie's character, for whom digital distraction is specifically a sibling experience. If, as Belmonte argues, autistic experiences resist linear narrativisation, then Mark Osteen suggests that familial experiences of autism may do the same. How, he asks, 'do you tell a cohesive narrative about continual interruption', where routines never seem to change and yet include regular eruptions of 'pure chaos' when overwhelming stimuli intrude (2008: 17)? Although Kate is only a minor contributor to Anna's distracted driving in Scene 7, David's frequent texts and phone calls provide Jackie with precisely that sense of 'continual interruption' throughout the play. In the first scene, her coffee date with Anna is interrupted by a persistent series of texts and calls and from David. She tries to ignore the phone but is unable to devote her full attention to Anna either, each buzz a reminder that there is something to worry about. After stepping away to answer the call, Jackie promises Anna that she doesn't usually 'drop everything' for her brother (68), but she does continue to be distracted by her phone and her worries about David throughout the play. This becomes a point of contention between the couple, showing that Jackie and Anna's sibling experiences are different, even as they bond over similarities in other ways.

Jackie and David's phone calls and text messages are drawn partly from my own experience, but also from those of other siblings. Publications by the charity Sibs note that informal acts of care for a disabled sibling can include things like '[a]nswering the phone to your brother five times a day […] because he is lonely' or needs assistance (Sibs, 2020: 76) and managing urgent calls and emails from siblings' doctors and support staff (2024: 8). Although digital distraction is—as Kneidinger-Müller makes clear—by no means unique to the realm of siblings and disability, Meltzer argues that disabilities can shape and amplify siblings' experience of otherwise typical dynamics (2018: 1217–1218). The habits of answering the phone more frequently or always being alert to interruptions are one way that, as Mitchell and Snyder observe, the 'continual navigation and intensive strategies that characterize life with a disability […] reroute[] the circuitry of friends and family' (2000: xiii), inscribing neural pathways that shape the ways we move about our lives. Although these experiences are not equivalent to David and Kate's experience of neurodivergence, I hope that

Jackie and Anna's digital distraction will nonetheless offer moments of recognition, fostering empathy between neurodiverse audiences and characters. As with Jackie and Anna's sibling experiences, acknowledging both our similarities and our differences is key.

Overlapping and parallel conversation are used throughout *Two Truths* to represent elements of both autistic and sibling experience, amplifying heightened emotions and conveying frustration and/or distraction in various scenes. Most importantly, they offer opportunities to compare the characters, both to each other and the audience's own experience, highlighting similarities and differences across neurodivergent and neurotypical lives. The stories of the two families, in the play, both echo and diverge from each other, in ways that were intended to invite autistic and sibling audiences to identify with 'imagined communities' of neurodiverse siblinghood. In structuring the play around those parallels, however, I also found myself engaging with ideas about the non-linearity or narrative disorganisation of autistic perception, offering neurotypical audiences opportunities to empathise with and appreciate autistic modes of being. I also found parallels between autistic experiences of narrative disorganisation and siblings' experiences of distraction, inviting 'moments of recognition' between neurodiverse siblings while acknowledging that their experiences will not be the same. There is room to experiment more with these stylistic conventions, and push them further, in future work. For now, however, the themes of similarity and difference will be continued through the rest of the chapter, as the next two sections look in more detail at each of the play's two neurodiverse sibling pairs.

4.2 Unreliable Authority

About a year into this project, I received a text message from my brother: 'BIG PROBLEM', he announced, in all capitals; then, 'There's been a break in'. The next hour or so was a wild ride of phone calls and text messages that loosely inspired Jackie and David's storyline in the opening scenes of *Two Truths*. In the fictionalised version, David calls Jackie and says he needs a lift to work because his car is 'gone'. By 'gone', he almost certainly means 'out of commission', but Jackie fills in 'missing', and David, in turn, spins a tall tale about someone else stealing and then crashing his car. Real events unfolded a little bit differently,

and while my brother wasn't technically lying about the break-in, he was selectively self-reporting it in an effort to cover up an inside job. My parents' car had been 'borrowed' but not crashed, so what happens in the play is inspired as much by my fears as by actual events, but the incident held a firm grip on my imagination. In addition to inspiring a specific plotline, it also set me thinking about unreliable narrators and who is or is not assigned authority in a text.

Although the characters of Jackie and David are not one-for-one representations of myself and my brother, they are very much inspired by my own sibling relationship, placing *Two Truths* within a tradition of autobiographical or autofictional sibling-disability plays. The most famous of these, as discussed in the previous chapter, is Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie* (1945). That play's narrator, Tom, promises audiences 'truth in the pleasant disguise of illusion' (1945: 5, 4), but as its singular storyteller, he can only deliver a partial truth. Autofictional stories, like *The Glass Menagerie*, make their claim to truthfulness based on the author's personal experience. They are therefore necessarily limited to the author's specific or partial perspective. *Two Truths* is no exception, and the following section will probe the representational quandaries posed by depicting a version of my own family's experiences in the characters of Jackie and David—particularly the power-dynamic of writing from a nondisabled sibling perspective. It will consider the unreliability of my own authorial position in relation to stereotypes that paint autistic people as unreliable narrators and reflect on how that partiality is addressed in recent autobiographical sibling solo shows. Drawing on Damien Milton's theory of the 'double empathy problem', I'll explain how *Two Truths* highlights Jackie and David's mutual missteps, suggesting that the real problem is not necessarily in either character's individual perspective but in their consistent inability to find themselves on the same page.

Throughout this project, I have been conscious of a tension, as discussed in the Methodology chapter, between an autobiographer's right to self-representation and others' rights to privacy or to determine their own stories (see Heddon, 2008: 124–127). Because my brother was not interested in being interviewed for the project and representing his own perspective, I had questions about how much of his story I could or should reveal. The project's ethics approval process,

however, focused almost entirely on the interview component as 'involving human participants'. From a legal standpoint, the interview participants, who consented to take part in the study, have rights under the UK GDPR to access, correct, restrict, or object to the data collected about them. The participants' siblings have the right to know that information about them has been collected but not to know *what* their sibling has said about them, or to access, correct, restrict, or object to any of the data. Because good data relies on the trust and openness of pseudonymous participants, research ethics allow us to prioritise the interviewees' self-representation—or 'auto/biography' (Heddon, 2008: 127)—over the privacy of those they speak about. Since, as Carolyn Ellis observes, the relational ethics of autoethnography fall largely outside of these institutional ethics review processes (see Ellis, 2007), we might infer a similar prioritisation of self-representation over privacy: autobiographical and autoethnographic researchers, it seems, are trusted to decide for ourselves. On the other hand, the author-narrators of autobiographical works are readily and publicly identifiable. Without the protection of anonymity, as is typically given to interview participants, such authors carry a greater responsibility to the others we are in relation to and may be identified as writing about.

Undertaking this project and framing my own positionality as a sibling within it has, from the outset, involved sharing information about my brothers' autism diagnosis. It has therefore, to some degree, always prioritised my self-representation over his privacy. I have sat with an ethical discomfort over that disclosure throughout the project, and it has shaped my decisions about how much to disclose. Initially, I intended to camouflage my own and my brother's stories as much as possible by integrating them with material from various interviews. The idea was to create composite characters who would not recognisably align with any individual. In practice, however, I did not speak to any interviewees whose experiences were similar enough to accomplish this—and even if I had, not to acknowledge the role of my own experience in the writing process would have been disingenuous.

On the other hand, it is in offering reflections on my own position and experience—particularly in this section of the thesis—that I disclose the most about my brother. The play-text is, at the end of the day, a work of fiction, and

I have tried to be clear that while it draws on mine and my brother's dynamics and speech patterns, the conversations and events of the play are largely invented. Although I hear my brother's voice in my head when I am writing David, the actor in the reading had different interpretations on those lines, and even where I have been inspired by real-life happenings (as with the 'break-in' incident), events are heavily edited. In writing the play, I felt a responsibility not only to my brother, specifically, but also to autistic people and their siblings more broadly. Parent and family perspectives continue to dominate the autism conversation, often implicitly or explicitly blaming autism as the source of familial suffering, and recurring narratives of cure or parental endurance reinforce cultural assumptions that, as Loftis and Murray argue, authorise discrimination and devalue autistic lives (Loftis, 2015: 62–66; Murray, 2008: 168–171). I therefore wanted to avoid an overly negative representation of either my brother or of autism and have tried to be careful in choosing which elements of my own sibling relationship to write about.

At the same time, my experiences hardly fit into what Bergenmar, Creechan, and Stenning would term a 'celebratory discourse[]' of neurodiversity (2025: 7). In the stage directions for *Glass Menagerie*, Williams declares, 'This is my sister: Celebrate her with strings' (1945: 53), but when I think of my own brother, I don't think of singing along to Elvis, as in the opening scene of *Bernie and Mikey's Trip to the Moon* (Aiello, 2018), or 'O Holy Night', as Will Arbery does in his programme note for *Corsicana* (Arbery, 2022). Instead, our relationship is mostly defined by conflict: fights about money, my brother complaining that I chew too loudly and drive too slowly, me ready to throw my phone out the window if I have to hear another word about his car. I am constantly frustrated and I love him in equal measure—the play title's two interlinked, if seemingly contradictory, truths.

Since my goal is to depict neurodiverse sibling relationships as they are, rather than an idea of what they 'should be' (Meltzer, 2018: 1229), I knew I could not simply 'suppress the expression of painful, localized or difficult experiences' to produce a purely celebratory discourse (Bergenmar et al., 2025: 7). The project originated, in part, from feelings of guilt and discomfort over my own inability to identify with more celebratory narratives—and therefore a desire to share

alternatives. Plays, like *Corsicana* (2022), *Through Andrew's Eyes* (Cabrera, 2016), *Amy and the Orphans* (Ferrentino, 2019), and *Falling* (2013), focus largely on conflicts driven by external factors like insufficient or abusive care provisions, so the conflict seems to be mostly *about* rather than *including* the plays' learning-disabled characters. If, however, disabled siblings follow similar relationship patterns to their nondisabled peers, as Meltzer argues, then that includes conflict between siblings (2018). As one of my interviewees put it, 'We're very much like the typical sibling […] I hate you, but I'm the only one allowed to hate you. And, like, if anything were to happen [to you], tell me who to beat up'. I wanted Jackie and David to reflect a similar 'ambivalence' (Meltzer, 2018: 1221), moving between love and frustration, but I was also conscious that my own emotional positionality was primarily aligned with Jackie's. It was a challenge, throughout the writing process, to balance acknowledging my own, more difficult emotions through Jackie's character while giving comparable weight to the experiences of a brother whose real-life perspective I so rarely understand. In the process, I found myself reflecting not only on how much to disclose (both emotionally and factually), but on how to undercut a sense of my own and the character's non-autistic authority.

Thanks to widespread acceptance of Simon Baron-Cohen's 'theory of mind' hypothesis (1995), autistic people are often dismissed not only as incapable of understanding neurotypical cognition but also as unreliable narrators of their own experience (Yergeau and Huebner, 2017: 276–277). In an essay for *Disability Studies Quarterly*, autistic scholar M. Remi Yergeau reflects on being denied such rhetorical and narrative autonomy during an involuntary psychiatric hospitalisation, ironically branding themself the 'ultimate unreliable narrator' (2013). Yergeau's essay suggests, however, that the real problem lies with neurotypical people, who fail to empathise with, and therefore reject the validity of, autistic perspectives. Damien Milton coins this reciprocal 'mind blindness' between autistic and non-autistic individuals as the 'double-empathy problem', a failure of communication between 'people of different dispositional outlooks and personal conceptual understandings' (2012: 884). In drawing parallels between elements of autistic and neurotypical experiences, as discussed in the previous section, I hope that *Two Truths* works in some small way towards bridging those empathetic gaps.

I must admit, however, that like Yergeau's unempathetic doctors, I am used to thinking of my brother as an unreliable narrator. He has an often-frustrating tendency to extremes of both optimism and pessimism, missing or ignoring key information as he relates it. While my brother doesn't lie very well, he does so often and is probably better at convincing himself than anyone else. In some ways, I can recognise these habits as very much connected with his autism diagnosis: he doesn't always pick up on unspoken social cues and will get stuck in looping thought patterns until all other possibilities disappear. In another sense, however, I can also recognise them as permutations of more 'typical' human behaviour. Who of us hasn't misread the date and time of an event or skimmed past inconvenient terms and conditions? My brother might be accused of spinning self-serving narratives and then coming to believe them, but which of us doesn't choose to remember the most flattering version of events?

The autistic author Tito Rajarshi Mukhopadhyay insists that he 'would never be able to forgive myself if I narrated an episodic memory, which was recorded by an indulgence, partial indulgence, selective indulgence, or underindulgence of my senses' (2008: 204). We might argue, however, that to be human is to be an unreliable narrator, constantly relating—or, perhaps, indulging in—our own flawed and limited perspectives. If fiction aims, as Shakespeare says, 'to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature' (*Hamlet*: ll. 3.2.21–22), then that mirror, as George Eliot observes, 'is doubtless defective, the outlines will sometimes be disturbed, the reflection faint or confused' (Eliot, 1859: 158; as cited in Creechan, 2025: 95). Louise Creechan explains that Eliot frames her own narrators as 'neither infallible, nor omniscient; they make mistakes, hold biases and are unable to access the interior mental processes of other characters' (2025: 95), just like the rest of us. A story and its telling are shaped by both the author's and the character's human limitations, which may, at times, be difficult to separate (ibid.: 95). Although narrator Tom admits that *The Glass Menagerie* is shaped by his self-declared sentimentality and 'poet's weakness for symbols' (Williams, 1945: 5), the play, as discussed in the previous chapter, is also shaped by playwright Williams's grief and guilt. My own writing has been shaped by both the biases I examine in this critical thesis and those I have not yet come to recognise.

We can see a deconstruction of such authorial fallibility in the meta-theatrical approach of Holly Gifford's *Big Little Sister* (Edinburgh Fringe, 2025), a recent autobiographical solo show, in which the distinction between author and narrator are collapsed. In the first half of the performance, Gifford stages a conversation between herself and the disembodied voice of her disabled brother's AAC (or Augmentative and Alternative Communication) device. Partway through, that voice begins to challenge Gifford: first, on her avoidance of certain topics—she wants nothing to do with becoming her brother's carer—and then on the matter of authorship itself. As the voice points out, even these interjections are not truly an expression of her brother's agency, since Gifford has scripted and programmed all of them herself.[30] Following the voice's challenge, Gifford candidly discusses her impulse to self-censor the show's material, not wanting to come across, she says, as 'too much of a bad person'. In doing so, however, the writer-performer actually confesses to precisely the thoughts and feelings she claims she wanted to avoid.

Admitting to those faults serves two key dramaturgical purposes. First, it helps to authorise Gifford's performance as something more than a series of jokes or complaints about her disabled brother. The author tells us that she has reflected on her own positionality, so we as the audience do not need to call her out. Second, the flaws make Gifford's character feel more relatable. Even those who do not share in her sibling experiences can surely relate to feeling or behaving selfishly sometimes. In *Big Little Sister* and other recent Fringe shows—like Emily Potter's *Sophie* (2023) and Caroline McEvoy's *Train Man* (2025)—the writer-performers carefully balance anecdotes about their neurodivergent siblings with at least as many in which they, themselves, behave poorly or serve as punchline to the joke. This self-aware, or even self-critical approach, places all three performances as much within the confessional, self-deprecating tradition of Phoebe Waller-Bridge's *Fleabag*[31] as within *The Glass Menagerie*'s lineage of autobiographical sibling plays.

[30] In a later video clip, Gifford attempts to interview her brother, but she then confesses that his 'yes' or 'no' answers are largely arbitrary and led by the tone in which the question is asked.

[31] Emily Potter's *Sophie* (2023) was, in fact. funded by a grant from Waller-Bridge's 'Keep it Fringe Fund'.

Although *Two Truths* has no narrator, this tactic of self-deprecation was central to my approach for writing Jackie, as I tried to avoid endowing the character with too much seeming-authority as my authorial analogue. Much like Shaun Pye's self-portrait in *There She Goes* (2018–2023), I tried to use self-deprecating humour to capture some of my more difficult emotions without wallowing in them. I wanted Jackie to ride a fine line between unflattering and relatable: neither a martyr to David's autism—Pye describes an early draft of his series as a woe-is-me tale about 'this poor bloke who has this learning-disabled daughter' (quoted in Dowell, 2018)—nor a villain herself, like the overprotective, overbearing Treat in Kessler's *Orphans* (1985) or Tom Cruise's cold and selfish Charlie in *Rain Man* (1988).To call her worldview into question, Jackie needed to be someone whose mistakes the audience could identify but also empathise with. A useful reference, in this regard, was Jane Austen's novel *Emma* (1815), with its heroine 'whom no one but myself will much like' (quoted in Austen Leigh, 1871: 148). Like Jackie, the naively self-centred Emma Woodhouse might well be described in terms of Milton's double empathy problem. She not only, 'ha[s] rather too much her own way, and a disposition to think a little too well of herself' (Austen, 1815: 3) but also, to borrow Milton's terms (2012: 884), consistently fails to account for 'dispositional outlooks' and 'conceptual understandings' outside her own norm.[32]

In particular, I looked at Austen's Box Hill scene, where the wealthy Emma goes too far in making a joke at her less fortunate neighbour, Miss Bates's, expense. Egged on in a game of wordplay, and seeking to impress the flirtatious Frank Churchill, Emma remarks that the loquacious Miss Bates will struggle to confine herself to saying *only three* 'very dull things' at one time (Austen, 1815: 403). What works so well about the scene—and I hope translates to *Two Truths*—is that the reader/audience can recognise Emma's error but also imagine ourselves committing it, encouraging us not merely to judge the character but to examine ourselves. Austen's narrator frequently urges the reader's private laughter at Miss Bates' longwindedness, but she also guides us to see the cruelty of Emma's public words. In a similar fashion, I hope the audience for *Two Truths* will

[32] Emma is particularly blindsided by assuming other people's motivations. The one key exception to this is her astute anticipation and management, as Carol J. Adams (2015) notes, of her father's many anxieties, which place serious limits on her social sphere.

identify with Jackie's exasperation, in Scene 2, when she turns David's own insult back on him. After a long and circuitous argument, David is complaining about people who ride the bus ('It's for retarded people') and Jackie retorts, 'Well if the shoe fucking fits!' (31). The insult originates with David, whose use of the R-word, as an autistic person, is inappropriate but perhaps also understandable. One of my interviewees observed that it can be difficult to filter language when distressed and on the verge of a meltdown, 'I get super agitated […] Then all the swear words are coming out'. For Jackie to turn it back on David, however, is clearly a bridge too far, shocking the characters—and the audience at an early scratch night—into pin-drop silence. Even if, as in Austen's *Emma*, we can understand why the character might have thought it, it is immediately obvious to both Jackie and the audience that she never should have said those words aloud.

If the goal in humanising Jackie was to expose her flaws, so that audiences can identify with and reflect on them, then humanising David meant authorising his world view: making his motivations more legible and understandable for a non-autistic audience to empathise with. In the lead-up to the July 2025 workshop, the actor playing David noted that it might not be clear for audiences why David reacts as he does to the loss of his vehicle. It certainly isn't apparent to Jackie, and there was a time when it would have been equally unclear to me. The more research I've done, however, into how autistic people describe their own thinking, the more I have come to understand and empathise with my brother's perspective. That understanding, in turn, helps me to temper my frustration with his more disruptive behaviour and begin to bridge the double empathy gap. Although David tells Jackie that he hates the bus in Scene 2 and explains a bit about why in the third scene, the actor felt that audiences were likely to join Jackie in reading David's reaction as a petulant temper tantrum. It needed to be clearer that his meltdown is because the car is key to David's independence and the structure of his life.

One of the benefits to *Two Truths*' lack of narrator is that the play is not locked to a single perspective. It can access, or provide a window into, 'the interior mental processes' (Creechan, 2025: 95) of different characters at different times. In response to the actor's feedback, I added a transitional vignette at the

end of Scene 4, where the audience has an opportunity to join David on his bus ride. In this sequence, directions for sound and lighting cues expose the audience to an approximation of David's overwhelming sensory experience, offering an insight that the neurotypical Jackie, even if she has ridden the bus alongside David, presumably lacks. As Sonya Freeman Loftis observes:

> Sensory sensitivities […] can mean that two people (one autistic and one neurotypical) can stand in the same space but have completely different perceptions regarding the activity in that space. Neither person is delusional. Neither person has a sensory impairment. Yet the radical difference in what they perceive calls into question the very nature of a shared reality. (2015: 12)

Rather than offering an omniscient lens into a shared, objective reality, *Two Truths* moves between different characters' limited perspectives—both sensorially and in other ways. In the first scene, for example, the audience begin with very limited information about Jackie and David's telephone conversation. They only have access to Jackie's side of the call. As more information is revealed through David's monologue and in the second scene, I hope the audience will see that some of the confusion has been caused by Jackie jumping to conclusions and cutting David off. In this way, I hope to emphasise that a lack of understanding contributes to the problems in David and Jackie's relationship. The issue is not necessarily that one of them is right or wrong but that the two of them are so rarely on the same page.

In Scene 4, I drew on models of frustrated conversation from *Boo* (Kenny, 2009) and *The Caretaker* (Pinter, 1960) to illustrate the siblings' disconnect. In a conversation that will be repeated, with slight variations, throughout the play, Jackie tries to make small talk about David's week. She asks him, 'How'd your day go, yesterday?', then 'How did work go?', and 'What did you get up to after work, then?' (*Two Truths*: 53–54). Each time, David responds with a variation on 'Fine. I dunno', and Jackie, increasingly annoyed with his repetitive non-answers, eventually lets the conversation drop. For David, however, 'Fine. I dunno' is meant to be a placeholder, not a roadblock—the verbal equivalent of a computer's buffering screen. From David's perspective, Jackie keeps interrupting with a new question before he has time to process the last one, and by the time he does start to tell her about one of his special interests, Jackie's attention has rudely migrated to Anna across the room.

I first became aware of this 'placeholder' communication strategy after seeing it described in a stage direction for *Bernie and Mikey's Trip to the Moon* (Aiello, 2018: 1). Now that I'm looking for it, however, I see it everywhere: not only recognising when my brother uses stock phrases as a conversational buffer, but also how I use similar vocal fillers when I am nervous, distracted, or need a moment to think. David, like my brother, may use these tactics more frequently, but Jackie and the other characters unconsciously do so too. My hope is that once audiences are attuned to the pattern of David's frequent *I dunno*s, they will also begin to register the phrase's use by other characters—especially in awkward conversations between Jackie and Anna or Anna and Kate. I was particularly pleased that some of the project's interview participants, watching a recording of the July 2025 reading, noted the irony in Jackie telling Anna that her day was, 'Fine. I dunno? It was…long, I guess?' (89). Jackie herself, however, fails to catch the significance.

It felt especially important that halting and dysfluent conversation, like Jackie and David's, not be solely associated with or blamed on autistic characters. The stilted awkwardness of Jackie and David's attempt at small talk may sound different from Jackie's stumbling flirtations with Anna, but both are humorous for similar reasons. They capture the awkwardness of all sorts of everyday speech. In particular, characters tend to leave sentences unfinished: Jackie jumps from one thought to another when she's nervous, while Kate and Anna decide to leave certain words unsaid. Jackie does the latter too on occasion, as when she very obviously avoids repeating the word 'autistic' to Anna in Scene 5 (68). As with the overlapping dialogue discussed in the previous section, however, I sometimes struggled to find the right balance between establishing unfinished sentences as an intentional (and perceptible) dialogue style and making sure that there was enough text for the content of conversations to be understood. In future projects, I would experiment with pushing both techniques further but would do so independently from each other, as their combination, in some scenes, made intelligibility a more pressing concern.

It is in David and his friend Steph's conversations that unfinished sentences are most pronounced but also most comfortable. The two characters are on the same wavelength and do not need to say very much. In the pair's interactions, I

wanted to challenge the notion that the minimalism of what Baron-Cohen (2003) might call an 'extreme male' communication style—attributed, in Section 3.2 of the previous chapter, to the 'dysfunctional' brothers of *Boo* (Kenny, 2009) and *The Caretaker* (Pinter, 1960)—is intrinsically a fault. David and Jackie's conversation is unsatisfying not because he has 'extreme male communication syndrome' but because their conversational approaches are so woefully misaligned with each other. In Scene 3, however, David can have an equally taciturn but far more rewarding conversation with his friend Steph. Although Steph is now a gender-blind character (short for Stephanie or Stefan/Stephen), the character was originally called John, and the pair's scenes were intended to be an experiment in the minimalism of 'masculine' communication. When a scheduling conflict resulted in recasting the role with a female actor for the July 2025 reading, I discovered that the scenes worked as simply 'Steph and David's' style of communication, without requiring a specifically masculine lens.

Because I found ways to highlight the characters' conflicting, partial worldviews within their dialogue, I didn't feel a need to follow *Boo* (Kenny, 2009) or *The Glass Menagerie* (Williams, 1945) in offering direct address narration to the audience—although I do come close with David's monologue, as he is thinking aloud on page 9. While I was interested in 'unreliable narration' as a concept, Deirdre Heddon observes that we fit our spoken 'auto/biographies' to specific listeners as well as to our internal narratives (2008: 131), so I felt it was important to keep in mind who specifically the characters are speaking to. Jackie and David are each partial not only in their perceptions but also in representing themselves as they would like to be perceived by other characters. David seems to interact much more comfortably and openly with Steph than he does with Jackie, but there are also vulnerabilities that only his sister is allowed to see. It is Jackie who David calls when he's in a panic and heading towards a meltdown, as with the car at the beginning and perhaps again at the very end of the play. While such interactions can be frustrating (for both Jackie and myself), there is also a tenderness in the reminder that a loved one trusts you with their vulnerability. Jackie, too, censors herself with characters other than David. She keeps the conversation relatively light when she and Anna discuss their siblings in Scene 5 and tries to prevent any interactions between her brother and her date. When Kate sees Jackie snap at David, in Scene 7, Jackie apologises not for

David's autism but for her own reactions. She is not particularly proud of who she becomes when David is in the room.

Jackie's shame in that scene should absolutely be taken as a valid criticism of her behaviour, but it also harkens back to the idea of comparison from the start of this chapter. Jackie is aware that she 'should be' responding to David differently, comparing herself not only to an idealised version of 'typical siblings' but also her own impressions of Kate and Anna. She has heard at least part of the sisters' argument over groceries, in Scene 6, so she knows that Kate and Anna are not perfect, but she has not seen the examples of their conflict that the audience has experienced in Scene 2 or at the end of Scene 4. Jackie's line 'I could never have the patience Anna does' (107) is a reminder that Anna, too, tries to present herself differently in front of Jackie than at other times. Kate and the audience should recognise the irony in calling Anna patient, but Jackie, as an unreliable narrator, does not.

These public-facing personas resonate with the autistic concept of 'masking', or the performance socially-acceptable typicality. Identifying David's bus sequence as a private moment where he lets that mask slip, an autistic commentor at the in-person reading voiced that she would love to see a similar moment for Kate, who (at the time) was only ever seen in public spaces. In response to that feedback, I added a private moment for Kate in the kitchen, following her fight with Anna, at the end of Scene 6. Rather than writing a monologue here, however, I gave a rough sketch for a visual moment, leaving space for an autistic actor and/or director to shape its specifics, based on their own experience.

In writing Jackie and David's storyline, I worked to problematise my own autobiographical authority by engaging with the characters' unreliability and partiality. To move away from stereotypes that frame autistic people as uniquely unreliable, I focused on highlighting how Jackie missteps and fails to understand her brother's perspective—falling herself into Milton's double-empathy gap. I drew on the examples of *There She Goes*, *Emma*, and various sibling solo-shows to emphasise Jackie's fallibility but tried to do the opposite with David, offering insight into his behaviour and evidence that the siblings' conversational missteps are not entirely his fault. I wanted to render both siblings as people with whom the audience might empathise and identify, rather

than simply judge or sympathise with. Finally, as will be explored in the next section, I placed Jackie and David alongside a second set of siblings, Kate and Anna, whose stories depart from my own experience and draw on a series of research interviews.

4.3 Negotiating Sisterhood and Mutuality

With one set of siblings based largely on my personal experience, I had choices to make about who and what should be represented in the play's other neurodiverse sibling pair. As touched on in Chapter 2, some of these decisions were clear from the demographics of my interview pool. All of my interviewees were in their 20s or 30s with at least one surviving parent, so issues around aging with autism or taking over parents' care responsibilities were not strong features in any of our discussions. The latter topic had also been covered recently in plays and films about Down Syndrome, like *Corsicana* (Arbery, 2022), *Amy and the Orphans* (Ferrentino, 2019), and *An Irish Goodbye* (2022). While a few interviewees had brothers or sisters with profound learning disabilities and communication impairments, I did not hear directly from any non- or minimally-verbal autistic siblings. It was important to me that each of the siblings be fully developed characters, not simply objects in someone else's story, and without that input, I felt I lacked the requisite expertise to bring a non- or minimally-verbal character to life.

What did stand out from the interviews was that most of the participants were women, many of whom had sisters. This was both outside my own experience and, as previously discussed, a contrast to most existing autism and sibling-disability representation. The recent television programmes *Dinosaur* (2024) and *A Kind of Spark* (2023–2024), both written from female, autistic perspectives, have gone some way toward redressing that balance on both counts, but I still felt there was more to be explored. Where *Dinosaur* and *A Kind of Spark* focus, and rightly so, on the perspectives of autistic women and adolescents, I was drawn to some of the parallels between my own autistic and non-autistic participants' accounts.

This section will explain how my interviews with autistic and non-autistic sisters and nonbinary siblings shaped the development of Kate and Anna's storyline,

coalescing around a central theme of reciprocity and mutual care. It will acknowledge the roles that gender and birth order can play in expectations for typical sibling relations and reflect on how neurodiversity may complicate siblings' experiences of those roles. Comparing interviews between autistic and non-autistic participants revealed that siblings on both sides of the equation were frustrated or harmed by rigid roles of 'carer' and 'cared for' but did not always know how address their concerns. These parallel concerns surfaced in different ways across the interviews but suggested it might be worth structuring the plot around a pair of sisters' mutual growth. Returning to Osteen's hypotheses about how we narrativise familial perspectives of autism, I'll explain why this mutuality was important on a dramaturgical level and examine how the sisters' journey is reflected in the text. I will conclude with a reflection on how Kate and Anna's storyline differs from Jackie and David's, comparing their linear versus cyclical structures and offering observations about the gender dynamics in play.

Gender, as Meltzer observes, plays a significant role in how sibling relationships are enacted, regardless of disability. Gender not only shapes expectations about which family members will serve as caregivers (see Conlon et al., 2014), but also our ideas of how nondisabled, neurotypical siblings are likely to bond: through shared activities or sisterly conversation and brotherly protection or other forms of care (Meltzer, 2018: 1218–1219). There is perhaps also an expectation that relationships between same-gender siblings will be closer and more intimate. From military 'bands of brothers' to fraternal and sororal organisations and the second wave feminist movement, 'brotherhood' and 'sisterhood' have been specifically invoked as metaphors for gender-based solidarity and social bonding (Mauthner, 2005: 626–627). One teenager, interviewed by Rosalind Edwards and Susie Weller, reflected on the importance of sharing hobbies and school experiences with his brothers, hypothesising '[If I'd had a sister] I think we would sort of be separate from her because she would have different hobbies' and 'wouldn't be interested in the same things as I am' (2014: 191). As a mixed-gender pair, no one expected my own brother and I to have similar interests or to be each other's confidants, but friends with sisters have confessed to feeling—or being told—that in failing to do so, their relationship falls short.

Melanie Mauthner observes a gap between the idealised, egalitarian utopia of feminist political 'sisterhood' and the messy realities of domestic 'sistering' (2005: 626). She identifies an expectation that both sisterhood and female friendship *should be* defined by 'mutuality, reciprocity and equitable exchange', when, in fact, both frequently involve complex dynamics of power, antagonism, and care (1998: 165). Although studies by Meltzer (2018: 1225–1227) and Petalas et al. (2015: 45) evidence a desire for reciprocal relationships across siblings of all genders, I found this was particularly present in some of my interviews with neurodivergent women and nonbinary people about their sisters. Autistic participants with autistic sisters, on the one hand, expressed that this deepened their intimacy: 'I feel like it definitely adds to [our] relationship', said one, 'being able to, like, understand each other, and relate to each other. I think that's really special'. Another offered that 'my sister is the only person I can near fully unmask and be my autistic self around and I know she feels the same'.

Two interviewees with non-autistic sisters, by contrast, expressed frustration at being cast permanently in the care-receiving rather than care-giving role: 'It's like, I could have helped,' said one, 'And I would have helped. But I'm just…I was dismissed. And I think I still am. I'm dismissed now as not being, like, adult enough. Or developed enough'. Another said she'd like to remind her sister, 'I'm not just my diagnosis, you know. I'm still a person. […] We're still a kind of similar age, so I'm not really any different to anyone, and you can talk to me in the way that you'd be talking to one of your friends'. As Mauthner notes, sisters often grow beyond their childhood and adolescent dynamics of birth order and 'mini-mothering', shifting or even trading off roles as they move through various stages of adult life. Others preserve their roles as 'big sister' and 'little sister'—although these do not always correspond to actual birth order—and may find that positioning to be rewarding, oppressive, or an ambivalent mix of both (1998: 162–201, 101–104). As the above interviews suggest, these dynamics can be particularly loaded for neurodivergent siblings. Even in adulthood, as Loftis reminds us, autistic and learning-disabled people are culturally positioned as 'childlike' (2015), never perceived as 'adult enough' or 'developed enough' to grow into the roles of equal contributors.

The interviewees' desire to move beyond childhood or child-like roles and habits in their sistering became a guiding thread for Kate and Anna's storyline. From the first scene, Kate tries to achieve reciprocal intimacy with Anna, attempting to be a sounding-board for her sister's dating life. Anna, however, keeps turning the conversation back to her perception of Kate's needs, undercutting Kate's autonomy in the process of deflecting attention from her own romantic woes. These deflections are so transparent that they make Anna seem a bit ridiculous, making the non-autistic character the scene's comedic figure—as in *Dinosaur* (2024) or the self-deprecating solo-shows discussed in the previous section—and undercutting Anna's argument. In the second scene, Kate has a moment of vulnerability, visibly but successfully self-regulating as she solves a problem in the café, and Anna butts in to 'manage' her. Frustrated with being treated like one of her sister's clients, Kate pushes back, and although the two do have moments of warmth and camaraderie, it is clear their relationship needs renegotiation. The sisters' storyline slowly builds towards an argument in the final scene, where Kate has a chance to express the sentiment I heard in the interviews: please recognise that I am an adult, and you can also lean on me.

In speaking to both autistic and non-autistic siblings, I was able to recognise that renegotiation as being necessary on both sides of the equation. It wasn't merely that neurotypical or non-autistic siblings[33] failed to trust their autistic brothers and sisters, but that many were used to being fiercely self-sufficient or responsible for others. Even when they needed help, they did not always know how to switch gears and be on the receiving end of care. When asked about things her siblings have done to 'help or care, or show that they care' for her, one eldest sister had difficulty leaving behind that mindset: 'I think I spend more time thinking about how I'm caring for other people than the other way around'. 'I don't advocate very well for my own needs', said another, recalling a time when her own chronic health issues flared up during a family outing. 'It was really loud and chaotic, and I shut down, but I wasn't able to say, like, "I'm not okay with this. […] I need to leave", because [my sibling] was really excited to be there' and the interviewee did not want to ruin everyone else's night.

[33] As discussed in Chapter 2, Section 2.3 many of the non-autistic siblings I spoke to were neurodivergent in other ways.

In *Two Truths*, Anna acknowledges that she struggles with trying not to be 'overprotective' of Kate (68), but, more than that, she seems to have built her whole identity around being 'helpful'. She answers work-related phone calls out of hours in Scenes 4 and 7 and picks up unnecessary baking supplies at the grocery store for Kate in Scene 6. According to the charity Sibs, it is not uncommon for siblings like Anna to enter disability-adjacent fields, drawing on skillsets honed as sibling carers or driven by a desire to help others with disabilities to live fulfilling lives (2020: 85–86; see also National Adult Sibling Group, 2023; Alyx, 2024). Anna says she became a job coach in hopes of being 'someone else's Miss Michaels', a reference to one of her sister's more supportive teachers (71), while one of my interviewees was driven to provide the resources her own family lacked: 'I find a lot of hope in what I'm doing', she said, 'That even if I can't change my family situation […] I can impact things in my work life' and make a difference for somebody else. Unfortunately, she qualified, that sense of purpose comes with a real danger of compassion fatigue and burn-out: 'I have to be careful with myself, emotionally with that'.

That sense of purpose may be part of what keeps siblings working in the social care sector, despite the stress of chronic under-resourcing: a 'lack of funding from local authorities, an increase in demand, and major recruitment and staff retention issues' (Tobi and Harris, 2025). The details of Anna's work stress, in the play, are often lost to overlapping conversation, but what the audience can hear of her phone calls is meant to hint at the pressures of understaffing. Reports suggest that there are roughly 131,000 unfilled roles in the care sector across the UK (2023 jobs report, cited in ibid.), and, as Anna alludes to in Scene 4, most UK supermarkets 'pay higher starting salaries than is typically available in social care' (Irvine et al., 2024: 11; *Two Truths*: 57). Undervaluing that labour hurts both those who work in the sector and those who rely on it. One interviewee mentioned that with high turnover in social workers, there is almost no institutional memory for what programmes her sibling might be eligible for. Instead, her family has to do the research and present options to the social worker themselves.

Marla Carlson makes a strong case for putting these overburdened systems at the heart of Autism Family Dramas, changing the narrative from one of personal or

familial failure and triumph into one of social responsibility (2018: 51–76). Plays like *Falling* (Jent, 2013), *Through Andrew's Eyes* (Cabrera, 2016), and *Cartoonopolis* (Bray, 2025 & 2015) each movingly address the impact of overburdened, underfunded systems on service users and their families, as Carlson urges. They do important work to raise awareness of the system's shortfalls and help to counter narratives that blame parents if their autistic children fail to achieve normative benchmarks of success. In my experience, however, most autistic people and their siblings are fully aware of the system's shortfalls. We experience them daily. While it can be affirming, as Carlson recognises, to see these struggles validated, it can also be disheartening to repeatedly read or watch stories about systemic problems that we as individuals have very little power to fix. *Two Truths* tries, at least obliquely, to acknowledge that overburdened care system through Anna's phone calls and jokes about her too-small paycheck, but as a play seeking to generate a sense of community *for* siblings, I made a deliberate choice not to dwell on this.

Although it might make for a compelling drama to have a pair of siblings band together and successfully fight the system, that would not, according to most of my interviews, be a very realistic story. It might be more accurate to have siblings *unsuccessfully* fight the system, but that makes for a much less satisfying and more stagnant plot. This returns us to Osteen's observations about the problem of linearising autism family narratives (2008: 16–22). While linearity is not, as discussed in the first part of this chapter, always superior to simultaneity or 'disorder', Osteen notes that the draw of linear narrative is not merely about conformity and marketability. It is also a way for authors and audiences to make sense of and find meaning within their own lives. In this attempt to find or make meaning, disability stories that won't conform to conventional 'cure' narratives often focus on personal growth as an alternative framework. As Osteen diagnoses, however, the trouble with 'how autism made me a better person' narratives is that autistic characters are almost always the catalyst, rather than the subject, of this personal growth (2008: 22; see also Murray, 2008: 168–206).

In both memoirs and fiction, like *Rain Man* (1988), such narratives reinforce an assumption that autistic people are 'fixed and static', incapable of growth or

'journey[ing] towards self-knowledge', as protagonists in their own life stories (Murray, 2008: 106). This compounds on the eternally 'child-like' stereotypes that Loftis identifies, and which have caused such frustration in relationships for some of the project's autistic interviewees. At the same time, I wanted to avoid any semblance of a 'cure' narrative, in which only or primarily autistic characters are required to move towards normalcy. It seemed important, then, that Kate and Anna's journey towards a more reciprocal relationship be one of mutual growth and understanding, in which both sisters learn and change.

Throughout *Two Truths*, both Kate and Anna try to care for each other while struggling to articulate their own need for space. Kate often cuts herself off in the middle of complaining: 'I'm fine, Anna. You don't need to—' (26) or 'It's not about that, Anna. I don't need you to— ! You're always doing this! And I…' (86). When their roles are reversed, after Anna's car crash, Anna uses very similar language: 'Kate, it's fine. I don't need you to—' (116) and 'You don't need to hover, Katie! I am perfectly capable of—' (117). Even when their mutual frustration finally builds to an all-out argument, they still cannot quite name the issues:

> ANNA: Kate! I cannot manage your…whatever *[guilt]* right now. I'm just trying to hold it // together.
>
> KATE: I'm an adult, Anna! You don't have to manage me! Just because I'm— *[…autistic.]*
>
> *[She takes a breath and re-centres herself.]*
>
> I can help, Anna. I want to help.
>
> (140)

Like several of the non-autistic siblings I spoke to, Anna feels responsible for managing her sister's emotions, even when she is the one in the more vulnerable position. One interviewee recalled her younger siblings coming to visit her in hospital after a life threatening illness and worrying about the mark that experience would leave on them. Kate, in turn, is frustrated about being pigeonholed by her autism diagnosis and defends her own capabilities, even if, with Anna's hovering as her primary example, she does not quite know *how* to

help. The conversation that follows is not merely about Anna learning to accept help from Kate, but both of them re-learning how to care for and accept care from each other, in parallel. One of my autistic interviewees highlighted the way this reciprocal 'fussing' is under constant negotiation, simultaneously frustrating and essential to our role as family members: 'I'm her [sibling], I should be worried! It's the same reason my mother won't stop fussing about me!'. Both Kate and Anna act as fuss-er and fuss-ee over the course of the play and their relationship, so everything Anna says to Kate about how to support her without hovering can be equally applied to Anna's own behaviour, as the fuss-er, earlier in the play.

Another interviewee provided inspiration for the scene's resolution when they shared a memory about being on crutches during a summer holiday. Their sister, they said, 'did actually help me. Or she came with me, because it's—you can't really help someone [on crutches]—trying to get from where I was sitting […] to where the toilets were'. Earlier in Scene 8, the play takes some humorous inspiration from that story, as Kate and Jackie make a mess of helping the injured Anna to and from the toilet. More fundamentally, however, the story and scene assert that just being with someone and providing company is an important way for siblings to enact care. 'If you want to do something, just…stop hovering', Anna says, and 'Take a seat' to chat (140).

This aligns with Meltzer's research about how care is enacted between disabled and nondisabled siblings. Siblings have boundaries about the care they are willing to receive, as well as perform, and giving or receiving care perceived as more than 'typical' can disrupt their sense of a reciprocal sibling bond (2017: 1019–1020). Siblings both with and without disabilities, however, referred to their conversations with each other as a form of support or informal caregiving:

> I can kind of say anything to [my sister]… she's not going to say anything else, she's not going to talk back to me. She's kind of like a sounding board in a sense […] Often when I'm really upset or distressed about things, I find it helpful, because I feel like I can kind of sink that information into her. (2018: 1221)

> Before going to sleep, [my sister] would talk to me about things, what she did at school, what her friends said and some of her ideas about what she wanted to do with her life. I listened.… She was my best

> friend and made me feel accepted and cared for. I was less lonely when we were together. (2018: 1222)

My own interview participants spoke about everyday things like helping to choose their sibling's outfits, or texting to say 'How are you doing? How's life, how's [your partner], that sort of thing'. Another woman said her sister:

> tries to show me that she's there for me by, like, making jokes or trying to make me laugh. Spending time with me. There's been times where she's come into my room—Sometimes we haven't really seen each other […] She'll show me something she's made, or something she's done, and it shows me that, you know, she wants to interact and speak with me. And it does make me feel quite special.

Physically or virtually spending time with each other is key to sibling care, and Kate and Anna end the play in a friendly conversation, reminiscing—and playfully contradicting each other's stories—about a shared baking mishap from the past.

Drawing on comments from both autistic and non-autistic interview participants, Kate and Anna spend the play renegotiating a relationship in which one has generally been the person receiving care or advice and the other has built an identity around giving it. This renegotiation is both typical of sisters (Mauthner, 1998) and specifically informed by the pair's experiences of Kate's autism diagnosis. Unlike the conventional cure or acceptance narratives that Osteen and Murray critique—in which either the autistic child grows towards normalcy or their parents grow in patience and acceptance—this is a growth narrative for both sisters, as they learn to communicate better (or, perhaps, just differently) with each other about their wants and needs. In both form and content their mutual and parallel growth narrative resists assumptions that autistic people are 'fixed and static' (Murray, 2008: 106) or eternally 'child-like' (Loftis, 2015).

If Kate and Anna's arc offers the play a sense of linear narrative—a satisfying resolution, which asserts that autistic people and their siblings are capable of growing in a relationship together—then Jackie and David's storyline performs a more cyclical counterpoint. In highlighting parallels between the play's autistic and non-autistic characters, I wanted to suggest that there is common ground to be found in the midst of sibling conflict, but I also know that linear growth and reciprocity will not feel like relevant or achievable paradigms for all

neurodiverse sibling sets. Jackie and David's storyline acknowledges and validates that. This chapter has already addressed Jackie's experiences of David's autism as 'perpetual interruption' (Osteen, 2008: 17)—in the form of his text messages and phone calls—but Osteen also notes that families' experiences of autism may be repetitive or cyclical, invoking a comparison to the time-loop in the movie *Groundhog Day* (1993; Osteen, 2008: 17).

Where the inverted repetitions of Kate and Anna's dialogue, in Scene 8, indicate the role reversal that leads to their argument and new understanding, Jackie and David's dialogue repetitions suggest a more cyclical pattern. The two attempt nearly the same half-hearted small talk in Scene 6 as they do in Scene 4—and even in Scene 7, when Jackie has a clear objective, she still opens the conversation with a variation on the same phrase: 'So. How *has* work been going? Like, really though' (94). Throughout the play, the pair repeat conversational habits, like talking over each other, and keep rehashing the same argument about whether or not Jackie will give David a ride. In the final scene, Jackie steps out of the room to take a phone call from her brother. Her absence gives Kate and Anna the opportunity to hash things out, but it is also intended to echo the first scene, where Jackie kept stepping away from her coffee date to answer David's calls. When Jackie returns, she watches some of Kate and Anna's conversation, and their resolution prompts her to step outside the café to return David's latest phone call. Because the play ends before we actually hear any of that call, however, Jackie and David's story is left far more open-ended. There is a possibility they *might* have a productive conversation, modelled on Kate and Anna's, but it is far more likely that the call will devolve into an argument, as most of Jackie and David's conversations have throughout the play.

By combining Kate and Anna's linear storyline with David and Jackie's more cyclical one, I have tried to address some of the problems Osteen identifies with narrativising familial experiences of autism. I want to acknowledge, however, that these choices still represent only a limited range of autistic and sibling experiences. They lack a character with significant intellectual and/or communication impairments and also reproduce some of the gendered dynamics discussed at the start of this section. Although Jackie and David's sibling dynamic is drawn from my own real-life example, the fact that a resolution is

achieved between the sisters, while the play's mix-gender pair remains more conflictual, might reinforce expectations that sisters 'should' learn to get along. Similarly, although I have tried to offer insights into David's perspective, and Jackie's contributions to their rocky relationship, I also have to acknowledge that his disruptions and angry outbursts align with existing masculine stereotypes of autism—like those seen in *The Caretaker* (Pinter, 1960), *Orphans* (Kessler, 1985), and *Boo* (Kenny, 2009), as discussed in the previous chapter. Kate, much like Nina in *Dinosaur* (2024) or Addie and Keedie in *A Kind of Spark* (2023–2024), is meant to be a counternarrative example, but if only female characters transcend these tropes, that does very little to change public perceptions of autistic men and their behaviour. There is room, then, for future critical and creative work to more thoroughly investigate and subvert the gendered conventions of autistic and sibling representation, especially as more complex representations of autistic girls and women are emerging in recent years.

4.4 Summary

This chapter has mapped out three different ways that *Two Truths* explores similarities and differences within and between its pairs of neurodiverse siblings. As discussed in Section 4.1, the script began by using parallel scenes to compare conversations between different pairs of characters, highlighting both their similarities and the ways that they contrast. This stylistic choice then developed into the use of overlapping dialogue. In addition to amplifying emotions and offering points of comparison—as in *Boo* (Kenny, 2009) and *Anatomy of a Suicide* (Birch, 2017)—these moments of simultaneity offer a window into the parallel processing or narrative disorder of both autistic perception and sibling distraction. They aim to facilitate moments of empathetic recognition between a neurodiverse mix of audiences and characters, acknowledging the ways that neurodivergence shapes both autistic people and their siblings' lives.

Section 4.2 focused on the autofictional nature of siblings Jackie and David's storyline and the parallels I found between the inherent partiality of autobiographical writing and popular stereotypes of autistic people as 'unreliable narrators'. Drawing on Damien Milton's concept of the double-empathy problem, I focused on Jackie and David as mutual contributors to their less than satisfying relationship, drawing attention to Jackie's missteps while

illuminating some of the reasons behind David's seemingly illogical behaviour. I also discussed how Jackie and David's dysfluent communication habits are shown as anything but unique to his autism or masculinity. Other characters echo David's conversational buffering strategies, and Jackie is just as awkward in her flirtations with Anna, while David has an equally taciturn but far more rewarding conversation with his friend Steph.

Section 4.3 addressed Kate and Anna's journey towards a more reciprocal relationship, in which both sisters have things to learn about how to care for and accept care from each other. This was inspired by autistic interview participants' desire to be considered equal contributors in their relationships, but it also addresses a dramaturgical desire to frame autistic and non-autistic characters as equally capable of or in need of growth. The sisters' plotline offers the play a linear structure to generate and maintain the audience's interest; it is contrasted by Jackie and David's more cyclical patterns, which acknowledge some of the profoundly frustrating, nonlinear ways that experiences of autism can 'reroute the circuitry' (Mitchell and Snyder, 2000: xiii) of family life.

Although the play unfolds in chronological order and is grounded in the linear structure of Kate and Anna's narrative, it also tries to embrace the narrative disorder of simultaneous and cyclical action as valid modes of being and perceiving. The mutuality of the sister's linear storyline avoids pigeonholing Kate into the conventional roles that Osteen identifies, of autistic catalyst or patient, while Jackie and David's interactions demonstrate that it is not only autistic people who are 'unreliable narrators'. Jackie is equally implicated in the double empathy problem that undergirds the pair's dysfunctional communication, and all the characters take part in awkward and dysfluent conversational habits at times. The play's parallel and overlapping scenes call attention to these similarities between autistic and non-autistic characters, but they also offer opportunities for contrast, reminding audiences that there is no one way (or one right way) to be autistic or a sibling to someone on the spectrum. Although the play cannot hope to represent all autistic or sibling experiences, I hope it offers an opportunity to reflect on how neurodiverse sibling relationships do and might unfold.

Chapter 5 Conclusion

In this thesis, I offer the play-text for *Two Truths*, as an answer to the question: 'How might auto-fictional and interview-inspired playwriting techniques be combined to create nuanced, contemporary representations of autistic–nonautistic adult sibling relationships?'. In doing so, I do not claim that the play is a representation of all neurodiverse or autistic-nonautistic sibling experiences. As discussed in the previous chapter, this text is specifically grounded in my own experiences and informed by those of my thirteen interviewees. In addition to representing two specific sibling relationships, however, I propose that what the play does do is to offer a model for auto/ethnographic practice and research, exploring relationships—like those between autistic people and their siblings—that cross borders between marginalised or minoritised and less-marginalised experiences.

In this concluding chapter, I will begin by addressing the work done by the play-text that accompanies this thesis. As discussed in the previous chapter, I hope that *Two Truths* offers a (fictional) space of 'imagined community' (McGrath, 2025) for autistic people and their siblings but also that it will cultivate empathy by highlighting similarities and differences *within*, as well as between, its two sibling pairs. After discussing the play-text itself, I'll turn my focus to the project's methodological enquiry, expanding on the auto/ethnographic approach discussed in the Methodology chapter and explaining its usefulness beyond the realms of sibling-disability and practice-research. I will explain how the specific combination of autofictional and interview-inspired playwriting, in *Two Truths,* might serve as a model for investigating and addressing the challenges of other disabled-nondisabled or marginalised-nonmarginalised relationships. Finally, I'll turn my focus to the project's other two research questions, addressing neurodiverse sibling representations in existing drama and the findings of the project's interviews. Although both of these questions were asked in service of the project's practice-research enquiry, the insights gained also point towards fruitful directions for future research.

5.1 The Play-Text and Its Limitations

The dramaturgical analysis of *Two Truths*, in the previous chapter, explains how the play explores similarities and differences within and between two pairs of neurodiverse siblings. It aims to facilitate moments of empathetic recognition and imagined communities for both autistic and sibling audiences. Although the play's two pairs of siblings only represent a small fraction of autistic and sibling experiences, my hope is that they will nonetheless offer points of resonance for relevant audiences, while leaving room, through the characters' differences, for alternate ways of being autistic or a sibling to someone on the spectrum. The story is part-linear, in Kate and Anna's storyline, and part-cyclical, in Jackie and David's: looking at how the sisters move towards a more reciprocal relationship and how the other pair are caught in mutually unsatisfying conversational loops. Drawing on concepts of parallel processing (or narrative disorganisation) and the double empathy problem, the text looks at the unreliable authority and dysfluent conversation of both autistic and non-autistic siblings, while experimenting with overlapping dialogue as a representation of both autistic perception and sibling distraction. As discussed in Chapter 4, the play's story is partly autofictional, derived from reflections on my own sibling relationship, and partly inspired by a series of interviews.

Some Autism Family Dramas—like Deanna Jent's *Falling* (2013) and Lewis Ian Bray's *Cartoonopolis* (2025)—involve navigating the hurdles of location-specific social services systems, whose intricacies vary even between US states and across the UK's devolved nations. Because these are not the focus of *Two Truths*, however, I felt that the characters' stories were reflective of both the US and UK contexts that myself and the project's interviewees hail from. The over-arching problem of insufficient support remains relevent in both places, and although Steven Silberman notes that differing priorities in autism research fostered different cultural attitudes in Britain and America around the close of the twentieth century (2016: 375), increasingly globalised media has since elided many of those geographic distinctions across anglophone spheres. I spoke to interviewees from both the US and UK for this project and have also had the opportunity to familiarise myself with UK support models through volunteering as a peer-support facilitator with the charity Sibs.

As an American living in Scotland, I tried, in early stages, to write a script that could be staged with either a US or UK setting. I deliberately left off currency denominations and tried to limit myself to referencing global brands. There came a point, however where I needed to make choices. Knowing that the play would be performed by a group of Scottish actors in the July 2025 reading/workshop, I set about trying to localise its dialogue. Asked to let me know if anything 'did not sound natural' for their voices, the cast were a huge help in identifying and replacing some of my most flagrant American-isms (like David asking for 'a ride' rather than 'a lift'). I acknowledge, however, that errors remain in subsequent drafts. Although there are Starbucks locations in Glasgow, for example, it would probably have been more realistic for Anna to meet her client somewhere like a Costa, when she references the coffee chain in Scene 6 (page 87).

Other lines or references do not translate so easily. I cut a quip about 'U-Haul lesbians' from Scene 5, because it no longer worked without the American brand-name, and I would struggle to find a non-Scottish equivalent to David ordering an Irn Bru. Because public transit infrastructure is so much stronger in the United Kingdom, some collaborators flagged the association between David's car and freedom as belonging to a particularly American mythos. I hope, however, that the exploration of David's sensory experience provides a character-specific motivation that remains believable even outside of that cultural context. With some minor edits to dialogue between the Scottish and American versions, I plan to seek production opportunities for the play on both sides of the Atlantic, offering the text's two models of neurodiverse sibling relationships to help expand the theatrical repertoire.

At the same time, I acknowledge that the stories in the play represent only a limited segment of autistic and sibling lives. They are grounded, like too many autism resources, in my own white and middle-class experience and therefore reproduce a cultural bias towards imagining autism, and its associated challenges, as largely white and middle class. While the interviews were a step towards addressing my own blind spots in consulting neurodiverse perspectives, I failed to recruit a racially diverse group of interviewees. I also did not fully utilise material that did arise from the interviews reflecting on working-class and

low-income experiences. Although the play alludes to under-resourcing in the social services sector (in which Anna works), it does not address the ways that these shortfalls impact service users and their families, including how more robust support provision might be a crucial foundation to building more positive sibling relationships (see Meltzer and Muir, 2021). What David can and cannot afford is a frequent topic of conversation, but the script largely ignores that his focus on 'wants' is only possible because his more basic needs are provided for by a familial (and/or governmental) safety net. In this way, my own writing echoes some of the blind-spots identified of the television programme *There She Goes* (2018–2023), in Chapter 3. As in any interview-based playwriting process, I made decisions—sometimes unconsciously—about which parts of the interviews to draw from, and I acknowledge that *Two Truths* is far from the only play that this (or other) interview material might have produced.

Beyond the individual work of the play-text, however, the practice-research process has also served as a methodological enquiry into *how* writing about neurodiverse-sibling and other disability-adjacent relationships might be approached. In the next section, I'll focus on that methodological enquiry and how my autofictional and interview-inspired playwriting strands coalesced into what I've termed an auto/ethnographic approach. I'll make a case for applying this methodology well beyond the spheres of siblings and disability, in both creative practice and more traditional research.

5.2 An Auto/Ethnographic Methodology

In the introduction to *Autism and Representation*, Mark Osteen articulates a need for families and carers to 'find a location from which to comment' on their own and their loved ones' experiences of disability (2008: 7; quoting Linton, 2005: 520). Bree Hadley terms such a position as a 'disability adjacent' or 'by proxy' experience of disability (2020: 182), which the field of anthropology might call a near-outsider's perspective. Since addressing normative power structures is central to the work of disability studies, it makes sense to name and acknowledge this positionality. However, while both Simi Linton (in 2005) and Katherine Schaap Williams (in 2021) argue that 'scholars who may not identify as disabled […] should care about disability' (Schaap Williams, 2021: 221), discussions often seem to revolve around whether or not it is permissible

for those speaking from a nondisabled, neurotypical position to contribute to the conversation at all. To move the conversation forward, it seems useful to consider not only location, but also orientation. How might those speaking from a 'disability adjacent' position orient ourselves to our relationships, our own experiences, and the disabled lives we live alongside? This section will look beyond the specific work achieved in *Two Truths* to propose that its methodology offers a blueprint for how the telling of nuanced, contemporary stories about autistic–nonautistic or other marginalised-nonmarginalised relationships might be approached.

Stuart Murray (2008: 170) and Bree Hadley (2020: 182) are correct in their observation that stories told by or about parents and caregivers have traditionally and sometimes harmfully dominated the autism conversation. Other parental perspectives, like Murray's own and Marla Carlson's, however, have offered productive and insightful commentary, reflecting on how the authors' own experiences with cure-centred messaging or insufficient social services have harmed their children as well as themselves. Nor are parents, who occupy a particularly unequal power dynamic with their children (see Couser, 2017: 208), the only disability-adjacent stakeholders. Lennard Davis observes that while the 2021 film *CODA* was praised for its authentic Deaf representation, real-life Children of Deaf Adults (or CODAs, as the film's title refers to) were only involved in the project incidentally, as some of the sign language interpreters during the shoot. As such, while *CODA* corrects some misconceptions about d/Deafness from its French predecessor, *La Famille Bélier* (2014), Davis argues that the film still makes assumptions about CODA experiences that fail to reflect this under-represented constituency's real-life wants and needs (2022).[34]

Siblings of autistic people are another such disability-adjacent group. A friend who saw the reading of *Two Truths*, told me afterwards that they 'didn't know there were other people who had relationships like [Jackie and David's]' and

[34] *CODA* (2021) is an adaptation of the French film, *La Famille Bélier* (2014), which was criticised for its error-prone use French Sign Language and for not casting Deaf actors in any of its principle roles. The two films also bear similarities, however, to the 1996 German film *Jenseits der Stille* (or *Beyond Silence*), which did feature the Deaf actors Howie Seago and Emmanuelle Laborit as the protagonist's parents. The earlier German film offers a more nuanced take on the Deaf parents' discomfort with their daughter's musical ambitions, linking them to a larger, longstanding conflict between the protagonist's father and her musician aunt.

seeing the characters' interactions helped them to feel less alone. In addition to generating this sense of community—or, at least, what McGrath terms 'imagined community' (2025), between real-life people and the stories they encounter—the process of researching and writing the play allowed me the opportunity to consider my own, sometimes fractious, sibling relationship in new ways, which are discussed in the second part of Chapter 4. There is reason, then, for those of us who live our lives *alongside* disability, neurodivergence, and other forms of marginalisation to seek a location from which to comment on and find community in our own and our loved ones' experiences. The challenge is to do so from an ethical and empathetic approach.

I have already, in Chapter 2, used the example of Rachel Simon's memoir, *Riding the Bus with My Sister* (2002), to explain the hybrid methodology of auto/ethnography. Although the memoir is not, as G. Thomas Couser acknowledges, a formal ethnography—lacking proper methodological reflection—it offers something very much like a participant-observer account of learning disability, as the author spends time rebuilding her relationship with her learning-disabled sister, Beth (2005: 132–133). Although Rachel can't truly walk a mile in Beth's shoes, experiencing that disability herself, she consciously sits *alongside* her sister, becoming acquainted with the world as Beth inhabits it while they ride a series of buses on a loop around town. Through and between these monthly bus journeys, Simon's memoir also tells an autobiographical story about her own experiences *as a sibling*, both in flashbacks to the ways that growing up alongside Beth shaped her childhood and as she begins to take on a more active role in Beth's adult life. The book's orientation is both inward- and outward-looking in turns but always, at its core, relational.

What sets *Riding the Bus with My Sister*—like *Two Truths*—apart from other 'relational life writing', in Couser's assessment, is that the memoir is 'not the organic byproduct of an ongoing relation' between the sisters. Instead, it is a deliberate project undertaken by Rachel Simon to 'shar[e], investigat[e], and document[] an aspect of her sister's life that would otherwise have remained opaque to her' (2005: 133). Although my own project has taken on a very different shape to Simon's participant-observer methods, it is an equally intentional investigation. In addition to observing my own individual sibling, it

broadens its scope to a wider community of autistic and sibling interviewees. In the remainder of this section, I will use Simon's memoir—and Couser's commentary on it—as a jumping off point to outline my own auto/ethnographic methodology and explain how this might be applied to future practice and/or research.

Couser holds up Simon's memoir as an example not because of the sense of imagined community it offers to other siblings, but because it follows the model of an 'autobiographical' or 'confessional' ethnography in relation to Beth's learning disability. The book, as Couser observes, reflects on the author's outsider positionality, admitting to her unfamiliarity with Beth's lived experience and examining Simon's 'personal relations with the [othered group]' that she is learning and writing about (2005: 126). Simon herself does not seem particularly keen to identify the book as about her own experiences: 'But the book isn't about me. It's about Beth', she tells her editor, in the book's post-script. The editor, however, insists, 'The book is about you, too! You and Beth!' (2002: 295), because the story of their journey cannot be complete without acknowledging the impacts that Beth has had on Rachel too.

It is for two reasons, then, that disability-adjacent commenters ought not erase ourselves from the story. To do so would not only minimise our familial experiences of disability—those 'anything but individual impacts' mentioned by Mitchell and Snyder (2000: xiii)—but also obscure our authorial subjectivity, following the habits of documentary theatre in seeming to offer a 'more distanced, [and therefore] objective perspective' on events (137). It is bringing these two ideas together that constitutes an auto/ethnographic methodology, designed to be both *in*ward- and *out*ward-looking because it written from with*in* the relationship, but *out*side the experience of disability itself. Although this thesis's discussion has centred specifically around disability representation and scholarship, I propose that its auto/ethnographic methodology might be applied to writing from within a range of relationships where there is an imbalance of privilege and/or authority.

I have reflected separately, in Chapter 4, about working from both autobiographical and interview-based sources, but the process was, in truth, very much intertwined. At the start of the project, I did think of the two strands

as almost working against each other, with the interviews correcting or compensating for my own non-autistic sibling perspective: I wanted to tell my own story, so I needed to consult some autistic voices to balance things out. What I've discovered in practice, however, has been a generative space in looking at relationships from the inside, while seeking out alternative and sometimes conflicting perspectives. My personal reflections—on both my own experiences and positionality—shaped what stood out to me in/from the interviews, while material from the interviews (and reading autistic authors) has shed new light on my own experience.

For that reason, I propose that an auto/ethnographic methodology is not merely an ethical tool to excuse or authorise speaking from a disability-adjacent perspective. It is also a source of insight in its own right, presenting opportunities to find the places where different perspectives clash and where they meet. As I have previously acknowledged, there are many plays that could have been written based on the project's interview material, especially in another sibling or autistic author's hands. I do not believe it was an accident, however, that my autoethnographic methodology led to a focus on similarity and difference within as well as between the sibling pairs of *Two Truths*. Engaging with both autistic and sibling perspectives, from my own location within one such relationship, primed me to consider how others' stories both resonated with and differed from my own. I mention, in Chapter 4 that 'the neurotypical Jackie, even if she has ridden the bus alongside David, presumably lacks' insight into his sensory experience (111). An auto/ethnographic methodology, however, represents a toolkit for siblings like Jackie and myself—or others adjacent to marginalisation—to follow Rachel Simon's example in sitting *metaphorically* alongside our brothers and sisters, empathetically acknowledging the similarities and the differences in our experience.

My own specific strategy has been a part autofictional, part interview-based playwriting practice, which might serve as a model for other practice-research projects investigating relationships with or adjacent to marginalised and minoritised individuals or communities. These are not the only methods, however, for working auto/ethnographically. Some form of autobiographical, self-reflective, or 'confessional' (Couser, 2005: 126) element is necessary,

alongside some form of outward-looking, ethnographic or ethnography-like engagement, whether that takes the shape of Rachel Simon's participant-observation, my own research interviews, or some form of co-production. Beyond those core criteria, however, the specific methods and format are highly flexible, available to both artists and researchers (as well as other practice-researchers) from any number of disciplines. An auto/ethnographic methodology can be used not only to research other disability-adjacent relationships but also the nuances of other relationships where closeness or collaboration mingles with some form of inequality.

If I could start this project over again (and with a larger budget), my primary innovation would be to plan for more sustained collaboration with one or more autistic artists and/or researchers, who might offer comparable and contrasting insights to my own. This was the work I initially hoped to accomplish through the workshop process and public reading of *Two Truths*, creating a space where collaborators would feel comfortable offering their insights and opinions—helping to co-author a story about interdependence grounded in inter-subjectivity. While the conversations I did have with performers both during and after that process were incredibly helpful, they also offered glimpses into how much *more* fruitful a sustained auto/ethnographic collaboration might be. To that end, I present the script for *Two Truths* not as a fixed artefact but as a scaffolding for future collaboration(s). While the script itself might shift, in response to future feedback, I have also tried to leave space within the text for neurodiverse teams of actors, designers, and directors to make staging choices that shape the storytelling based on their own lived and sensory experience. This recognises not only that there are experiences I lack, as a non-autistic playwright, but also that autistic experience itself is not a monolith. Part of the beauty of theatre is the space it leaves for variation, and ongoing neurodiverse collaboration is an essential part of *Two Truths*'s auto/ethnographic dramaturgy.

If, as Fox and Sandahl assert, theatre and disability are both grounded in material embodiment (2018: 121), I have proposed that they are more specifically grounded in interactions *between* bodies, within social spaces (see Methodology, page 49). Michael Davidson (as discussed in the Introduction) identifies interdependence as a central component of disability aesthetics.

Because many '[p]ersons with disabilities depend on others in ways that challenge post-Enlightenment ideals of autonomy and independence' (2016: 113), disability aesthetics invite us to reject the neoliberal assumption that dependency is alien and pitiable. They challenge us, instead, to value the complex, interdependent relationships that exist in all our lives. That relationships are interdependent, however, does not necessarily make them equitable or easy, and this where both disability arts and auto/ethnographic methodologies come into play. In the inequitably dependent relationships of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1954) and *Endgame* (1958), Davidson proposes that the playwright offers audiences an opportunity to interrogate conventional 'rituals of deference and leadership, support and authority' (Davidson, 2016: 114). As the plays act out 'parodies of Christian charity, on the one hand, [and] the master–slave dialectic on the other', they demonstrate that both are ultimately untenable, inviting us to imagine new, more egalitarian social contracts in their place (113–114).

Imagining new social contracts, however, requires attention to the perspectives of all relevant stakeholders, including disabled people *and* their loved ones or carers (as well as the overlaps between those groups). An auto/ethnographic methodology, like that I have used in writing both *Two Truths* and the critical component of this thesis, offers a pathway to break free, as Matt Hargrave suggests, from 'preordained socially scripted identities […] to invent and reinvent other life scripts' that instead 'proceed from inter-subjectivity and [ideally] co-authorship' (2015: 138). This invites us to reflect on our interdependent relationships, honouring both their joys and their challenges, and the complex ways that 'lived experience of disability [or other marginalisation] plays out between people, within relationships and within the sometimes-exciting but often repetitious and mundane ways that life is lived with others on an everyday basis' (Meltzer, 2018: 1217).

5.3 Additional Directions for Research

In service of writing and reflecting on the play-text for *Two Truths*, this practice-research thesis has also asked two additional research questions. While neither, as discussed below, is answered as fully as it might have been in its own independent enquiry, they were both crucial in informing the play-text and

begin to suggest directions for future research. Each will be discussed, in turn, below:

- **How do contemporary autistic and non-autistic adult siblings describe their relationships with each other?**

In order to gain insight into real-life sibling experiences beyond my own, I conducted thirteen research interviews with adults who are autistic and/or who have autistic siblings. As discussed in Chapter 4, these interviews were particularly helpful in finding the shape for Kate and Anna's storyline in *Two Truths*, with its focus on negotiating care and reciprocity. Although the play-text never quotes the interviews directly, I was guided by phrases like 'I'm not just my diagnosis, you know' and 'I think I spend more time thinking about how I'm caring for other people than the other way around'. As discussed in Chapter 2.4 (Interview Methods and Findings), the full breadth of the interviews also reinforced for me Ariella Meltzer's observations about variation within and between disabled-nondisabled sibling relationships. Autism, like other forms of disability and neurodivergence, shapes the specifics of 'interactions that are [otherwise] typical of many sibling relationships irrespective of disability' (Meltzer, 2018: 1221).

Although my own investigation lacked some of the scope and rigour that would have been expected in social sciences research, like Meltzer's, I propose that the project nonetheless has insights to offer the wider field of sibling-disability research. In particular, my own interviews build on Meltzer's observations about the complexities of siblings and care-giving. Care, as Meltzer reminds us 'is a feature of many sibling relationships irrespective of disability', but it can also be 'relationally challenging or disruptive' (2017: 1017, 1023). As discussed in Chapter 2, she highlights how adolescent and young adult siblings often resist the more formal and unequal vocabulary of 'caring' (or 'care-giving') in favour of the more reciprocal term 'help' and the more informal (or 'typical') family dynamic of 'looking after' one another (1021–1022).[35] Meltzer argues that these language choices are a form of boundary setting and a way to prioritise the more equal dynamics of a sibling relationship over those associated with more formal

[35] The phrase 'looking after' also re-occurs in my discussion of *Boo* (Kenny, 2009) in Chapter 3.

'care'. In another article, she mentions how one nondisabled sister purposely creates opportunities where her autistic sibling can 'be [her] older brother' by assisting her in turn (2018: 1225).

In speaking to slightly older siblings, in my own interviews, I found both autistic and non-autistic sisters who were very aware of the ways that their sibling dynamics *are* unequal. As discussed in Chapter 4, two of the autistic interviewees expressed frustration that their non-autistic sisters did not seem to consider them 'adult enough' or 'developed enough' to provide care and support as well as receive it. Non-autistic sisters, on the other hand, admitted that after years of being fiercely self-sufficient or responsible for others, they did not always know how to switch gears and be on the receiving end of care. This provided inspiration for Kate and Anna's plotline in *Two Truths* and suggests that there is more to be explored around the question of how unequal care dynamics—and sibling perceptions of them—shape disabled-nondisabled or neurodiverse relationships.

Another area of exploration suggested by the research interviews is what it might look like when neurodiverse sibling relationships are not strictly disabled-nondisabled. As discussed in Chapter 2, most sibling-disability research to date has been organised around a disabled-nondisabled binary: assuming that one sibling will be disabled and/or neurodivergent and the other one will not be (Pavlopoulou, 2024). In eight of this project's thirteen interviews, however, both the participant and at least one of their siblings were in some way neurodivergent. In two more, the neurotypical sibling had some other form or history of chronic health concern. Some of the participants spoke about how this shared neurodivergence enhanced their relationship—'I feel like it definitely adds to [our] relationship, being able to, like, understand each other, and relate to each other'—while others highlighted how different neurodivergent or health needs and sensitivities can conflict. Although relationships with multiple disabled siblings were not the primary focus of this playwriting project, the archived interview transcripts evidence the variation in such sibling experiences and might be a useful reference point for other researchers interested in exploring beyond disabled-nondisabled or neurodivergent-neurotypical binaries.

- **How are autistic-nonautistic or neurodivergent-neurotypical sibling relationships represented in existing drama, from *The Glass Menagerie* (1945) to the present?**

The final research question, which asks about existing representations of siblings and neurodivergence, is primarily addressed in Chapter 3, the thesis's Practice Review. Beginning with Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie* (1945) and ending with contemporary televisual examples, I traced ideas about both autism and familial responsibility through the mid-twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. This exercise helped me identify some of the narratives that have shaped my own perspective as a sibling, examining not only *what* existing plays and television programmes have suggested about neurodiverse siblinghood but also *how* they work to do so. This allowed me to make choices about which elements of existing works I wanted to emulate and avoid in my own playwriting. At the same time, my playwriting and the other investigatory strands of this thesis have informed my analysis of existing play-texts, allowing me to read canonical works like *The Glass Menagerie* or Pinter's *The Caretaker* (1960) in a new light. As Melissa Trimingham argues, '[T]he insight' that creative 'practice gives us into what performance is, or can be, or could have been', feeds back into more traditional research, 'revealing the prejudice and unspoken assumptions clustering around accepted historical interpretations' (2002: 56, 58).

Building on analysis by Clay Morton (2012) and Sonya Freeman Loftis (2015), my analysis in Chapter 3 argued for re-evaluating *The Glass Menagerie* not only through an autistic lens but also specifically through a neurodiverse *sibling* lens. Comparing Williams's work to later sibling-disability plays and the formula of 'Autism Family Drama', I examined *The Glass Menagerie* as a prototype for later narratives of familial responsibility, but I also looked at the ways that more recent examples like *Amy and the Orphans* (Ferrentino, 2019) and *Bernie and Mikey's Trip to the Moon* (Aiello, 2018) have rejected and offered alternatives to Williams's guilt. Although I acknowledged that there are places where the play falls short in aligning the character of Laura with autism stereotypes, I also read solidarity in the ways that Tom or Tennessee is attuned to his sister's sensory sensitivities. In particular, I suggested directorial and design choices, grounded in Williams's original stage directions, which might offer a

counternarrative staging of the popular play. Because dramatic texts leave space for interpretation (and re-interpretation) in future productions, such readings represent a particularly fertile space for academic criticism to feed back into creative practice, continuing the cycle of practice-research.

Moving through the second half of the twentieth and into the early twenty-first century, I then traced narratives of hyper-masculine or autistic dysfunction in three plays about neurodiverse or neurodivergent brotherhood. Although only the last of these, Mike Kenny's *Boo* (2009), is explicitly about autism, I used the example of *The Glass Menagerie* to propose autistic readings of Harold Pinter's *The Caretaker* (1960) and Lyle Kessler's *Orphans* (1985) too. I looked at how all three plays resonate with medical or scientific autism rhetoric, but I also argued that the characters' dysfunctional relationships are not necessarily unique to autism. *Boo*, in particular, complicates the narrative by drawing similarities between its neurodiverse and more typical sibling pairs.

Although the chapter's analysis of neurodiverse siblinghood in drama was far from comprehensive, the thesis lays a foundation for future research on this under-explored topic. The sibling-authored plays *Cartoonopolis* (Bray, 2025; 2015) and *Through Andrew's Eyes* (Cabrera, 2016) both deserve further attention, as do the other sibling solo-shows discussed in Chapter 4. Future research might examine how narratives about siblings and autism or siblings and learning disability compare to and intersect with those about siblings and other forms of neurodivergence, like mental health challenges or addiction. An alternate approach might experiment with re-staging more 'canonical' works, like those by Williams and Pinter, which are frequently revived but rarely with any mention of autism.

If, as Rosemarie Garland Thompson asserts, 'we accept the [cultural] convention that fiction has some mimetic relation to life'—that, at the very least, stories reflect their authors' perceptions of reality—then there is risk but also great potential in fiction's 'power to further shape our perceptions of the world' (1997: 10). In the social sciences, there have been significant shifts in sibling-disability research narratives over the past decade, and at a recent symposium, Ariella Meltzer asked how the field might work to disseminate these updated narratives among the general public to reach 'siblings who have heard their

relationships framed as less-than [and] may need help to reframe their own relationships' (2024). In showing how both current and historical ideas about autism and family roles or responsibilities are reflected in drama and other media, this thesis proposes fiction is a key method for disseminating such ideas. It presents the play-text for *Two Truths* as one contribution towards diversifying sibling-autism narratives, but it also (and more significantly) offers an invitation for other new and re-imagined works of fiction to contribute to the conversation.

Appendices

A.1 Summary of Interviews

Participant A (female, around mid-twenties) is not autistic and has two younger siblings, with about a seven-year age range between the three of them. Although Participant A has had health challenges, neither she nor her sister identify as disabled/neurodivergent. Her younger brother, however, is autistic, nonverbal, and learning disabled, with type-one diabetes. He lives at home with their parents and the participant lives a few hours away.

Participant B (female, around 20 years old) identifies primarily as neurodivergent and has an autism diagnosis. She has a sister who is about five years younger and in the process of pursuing her own neurodivergent diagnosis. They both live at home with their parents.

Participant C (male, around mid-thirties) is autistic and the oldest of four brothers, with about an eight-year age range between them. None of the others is disabled or neurodivergent. All have moved in and out of their parents' house throughout early adulthood, but the participant is the only one who has never lived anywhere but the family home.

Participant D (female, around mid-twenties) has an autism diagnosis but prefers the term 'neurodivergent'. She has one sister who is a year or two younger and does not identify as disabled or neurodivergent. Both base out of their parents' house but have lived (or are living) away for their studies.

Participant E (female, around mid-twenties) is neurodivergent but not autistic and also has chronic health issues. She has taken on a caring role with her two brothers, who are both about a decade younger than her. One is autistic and the other is dyslexic. All are currently living at home.

Participant F (female, around mid-twenties) is neither autistic nor otherwise neurodivergent/disabled. She has one brother who is a year or two younger. He is autistic, nonverbal and learning disabled, with type one diabetes. He lives at home with their parents, while Participant F lives several hours away.

Participant G (female, between mid-twenties and mid-thirties) is autistic with other learning disabilities and mental health challenges. She the oldest of four siblings, with about a ten-year age range between them. Most are neurodivergent, although not all have a formal diagnosis. Participant G and one sibling currently live at home and receive support from their mother, while the other two are living a bit more independently.

Participant H (female, around 30 years old) has an autism spectrum diagnosis and a brother who is a year or two younger than her. Her brother is also autistic and is nonverbal and learning disabled. He is in supported living, near their parents, while she lives abroad with her partner and visits a few times per year.

Participant I (gender-queer, around 30 years old) is autistic with ADHD and a chronic health condition. They have one sister who is a year or two younger and is neurodivergent but not autistic. Participant I is still living at home, in a rural area, but their sister has moved abroad with her partner.

Participant J (male, around mid-twenties) is autistic. He has one older sister, who is a year or two older and does not identify as disabled or neurodivergent. The two of them are both living independently, but in the same general area as where they grew up.

Participant K (gender not specified, around 20 years old) is autistic and has one sister who is also autistic and a year or two younger. The two have shared experiences of trans-ness and mental health struggles, as well. Participant K is living away for their studies, while their sister is currently living at home.

Participant L (female, around mid-twenties) is neurodivergent but not autistic. She is one of six siblings, several of whom are autistic or otherwise neurodivergent. The siblings' ages range about 8-10 years from the participant's in either direction. She is currently living away from home.

Participant M (female, around 30 years old) is neurodivergent but not autistic. She is the oldest of four siblings and has ADHD and PTSD, as well as a chronic illness. Her siblings range between three and ten years younger. One has a mental health diagnosis and another is autistic, with a mild learning disability.

A.2 List of Interview Questions

1. About how old are you?
2. How many siblings do you have?
3. How many years apart are you and your sibling(s)?
4. Where are you both (all) from?
5. Do you both (all) still live there now?
6. Do you have any disabilities?
   Do you consider yourself disabled or neurodivergent?
7. Does (Do) your sibling(s) have any disabilities?
   Do they consider themselves disabled or neurodivergent?
8. Tell me an interesting fact about yourself.
   What's something you like to do for fun?
9. Tell me an interesting fact about (each of) your sibling(s).
   What's something they (each) like to do for fun?
10. Tell me a little bit about growing up together.
11. What's your relationship with each other like now?
    Do you see each other often?
12. What's something you do to help or care for your sibling(s)?
13. What's something they do to help or care for you?
14. Would you share with me a favourite or a really good memory with your sibling(s)?
15. How about a funny memory involving your sibling(s)?
    Something that you laugh about now, whether or not it was fun at the time.
16. Can you think of a time you felt really angry or frustrated with your sibling(s)?
17. What about a time you felt really worried for or about your sibling(s)?
18. If you could give your younger self one piece of advice about being your sibling(s)'s sibling, what would it be?
19. What advice would you want to give your sibling about you?
20. Where do you hope to see yourself ten years from now?
21. Where do you hope to see your sibling(s) ten years from now?
22. Is there anything else you'd really like to share about your relationship with your sibling(s)?

A.3 Participant Information Sheet

Thank you for your interest in the Staging Neurodiverse Sibling Relationships project!

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide whether or not to take part, it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask us if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information.

Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.
Thank you for reading this.

What is the purpose of the study?

This study is researching the relationships between autistic adults and their siblings. The researcher will gather real-life stories from interviews to inspire a play about the lives and relationships of a set of fictional characters.

The play and an accompanying reflection will be submitted as the researcher's PhD thesis, in Autumn 2025 or 2026. They will be made available for members of the public to read or watch.

Why have I been chosen?

You are at least 18 years old *and* you are either an autistic person with siblings or a person with autistic siblings. (You might also be both.)

You may have received an invitation to participate via an autism and/or family services organization you are involved in, via a friend or acquaintance, or by finding a link to the study online.

Do I have to take part?

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do take part, you are free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason. You may stop the interview at any time and can choose not to answer any questions that make you feel uncomfortable.

Whether or not you participate will have no impact on your grades (if you are a student at the University of Glasgow), nor will it impact your relationship with the researchers or with any organization that you may have heard about the research through.

What will happen to me if I take part?

If you choose to take part, you will be asked a series of questions about yourself and your sibling(s), and to share some memories involving your sibling(s).

You can choose whether to take part via:

A) an audio-recorded virtual interview (on Zoom or Teams),
B) an audio-recorded in-person interview, or
C) a written questionnaire online.

The interview itself should take no more than 90 minutes of your time.

The researcher conducting the interviews is a non-autistic adult with an autistic sibling. Please let me know if there are any accommodations that would help you to take part!

After the interview, you may be invited to take part in a group discussion with other autistic people and/or siblings. You will also have the opportunity to be contacted about future readings or performances of the play. You can opt out of these emails at any time.

Will my taking part in this study be kept confidential?

All information collected about you during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential. Your data will be assigned an ID number, and information about you will have your name and contact details removed.

Please note that if safeguarding concerns or other evidence of potential harm are raised, the University may be obliged to contact relevant statutory bodies/agencies.

You will also be asked to give your sibling(s) a Privacy Notice, to let them know that you will be sharing some information about them with the study. Your sibling(s) have a right to know that we are processing their data, but they will not be able to access any of the information you share with us.

What will happen to the project data and the results of the research study?

Under the UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR), your personal data (name, contact details) will be processed under the legal basis of 'task in the public interest'. Where special categories data (such as disability status) is recorded, this will be processed under the legal basis that it is 'necessary for archiving purposes in the public interest, or scientific and historical research'.

After your interview, an audio recording and detailed summary will be stored on a secure, encrypted server in the UK. Identifying information will be redacted, and the files will be assigned a pseudonymous ID number, to keep them separate from identifying data like your name, consent form, and contact information. Because your voice may still be recognisable in the audio, a separate identifier document will be maintained in case you wish to exercise your privacy rights.

Your data will be retained on a secure server, maintained by the University of Glasgow, for at least 10 years after the research project is completed. In this time, interview summaries (and, with your permission, audio recordings) may also be consulted by other research teams.

If you opt-in to hearing about project updates and future participation opportunities, your contact information will be maintained (separate from interview data) either until the project's completion or until you opt out.

The researcher will use stories you share during the interview to inspire a fictional stage play, which will be shared with the public. The play will combine stories from many people's interviews along with made-up ideas and events, so no one will be able to identify you. Some of your own words may appear in the final script, but most of the text will be altered or invented. When you consent to participate in this study, you will be asked to assign performance rights in your interview contributions to the researcher.

The researcher will also write a critical reflection on the research and writing process. Things you say in the interview may be referenced here, with your name and any identifying data removed. Parts of this thesis may also be shared in academic conference papers and/or journal articles.

Who is organising and funding the research?

This research is funded by a doctoral scholarship from the University of Glasgow College of Arts.

Other organizations may fund portions of the play's development process (ie. so that actors can be hired for readings and/or workshops).

Who has reviewed the study?

The study has been reviewed and approved by members of the College of Arts Research Ethics committee.

How can I access information relating to me or complain if I suspect information has been misused/ used for purposes other than I agreed to?

You can contact the researcher or their supervisor(s) in the first instance if you have any concerns. If you are not comfortable doing this, or if you have tried but don't get a response or if the person in question appears to have left the University, you can contact the College of Arts Ethics Officer (email: arts-ethics@glasgow.ac.uk).

Where there appear to have been problems, you can – and indeed may be advised to – submit an 'access request' or an objection to the use of data. As part of the University's obligations under UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR), participants retain the rights to access and objection with regard to the use of non-anonymised data for research purposes.

1. Access requests and objections can be submitted via the UofG online proforma accessible at: https://www.gla.ac.uk/myglasgow/dpfoioffice/gdpr/gdprrequests/#.

2. Access requests and objection are formal procedures not because we mean to intimidate participants into not raising issues, but rather because the

University is legally required to respond and address concerns. The system provides a clear point of contact, appropriate support and a clear set of responsibilities.

3. Anyone who submits a request will need to provide proof of their identity. Again, this is not to deter inquiries, but rather reflects the University's duty to guard against fraudulent approaches that might result in data breaches.

4. You also have the right to lodge a complaint against the University regarding data protection issues with the Information Commissioner's Office (https://ico.org.uk/concerns/).

Contact for further Information

Emma Ettinger, PhD Researcher: e.ettinger.1@research.gla.ac.uk

Dr. Graham Eatough, Theatre Studies (Primary Supervisor):
Graham.Eatough@glasgow.ac.uk

Professor Deborah Cairns, Scottish Learning Disabilities Observatory:
Deborah.Cairns@glasgow.ac.uk)

If you have any concerns regarding the conduct of this research project, you can contact the College of Arts Ethics Officer (arts-ethics@glasgow.ac.uk).

A.4 Participant Privacy Notice

Your Personal Data

The University of Glasgow and PhD researcher Emma Ettinger will be what's known as the 'Joint Data Controllers' of your personal data processed in relation to *Staging Neurodiverse Sibling Relationships*. This privacy notice will explain how The University of Glasgow and the researcher will process your personal data.

Why we need it

Staging Neurodiverse Sibling Relationships is a PhD research project looking at the relationships between autistic adults and their siblings. The researcher is conducting interviews with siblings in order to inform the writing of a new theatrical play about sibling relationships involving autism.

We are collecting your basic personal data such as name, age, contact details, and place of origin/residence, as well as limited special categories data about your disability status to register your interest in the study and to select participants who meet our selection criteria. For those who are selected, we will use your data to arrange study interviews and to contextualise the experiences you share with us in your interview. We will also use your contact details to send you updates/information about the study and resulting play, if you have consented to receive this.

We will only collect data that we need in order to carry out our research.

Legal basis for processing your data

We must have a legal basis for processing all personal data. In this instance, the legal bases are that the project constitutes 'a task in the public interest', and that any processing of special category data is 'necessary for archiving purposes in the public interest, or scientific and historical research'.

What we do with it and who we share it with

- All the personal data you submit is processed by the PhD research student and staff at the University of Glasgow in the United Kingdom.
- Your data will be stored in a password-protected file on a secure server, which is only accessible by the student researcher and their supervisors.
- If you participate in the interview phase of this research project, your data will be pseudonymised. An audio recording of your interview, and any other personal data which we collect, will be assigned a Participant ID number and disassociated from your name and contact details. Personally identifiable information will be redacted (bleeped out or replaced with silence in the audio recording), but as audio recordings are difficult to fully anonymise, an identifier document will be maintained in a separate, encrypted and password-protected file, in case you wish to exercise any of your privacy rights.

- At the completion of the project, pseudonymised archival data sets may also be made available to other bona fide research teams.
- Your name or any other identifiable data will not be included in the published output of this research.

How long do we keep it for

Data for potential participants will be retained by the study until all research interviews have been conducted (estimated Spring 2024). If you do not participate in the interview phase of the research project, your data will be securely deleted at this time, except for your contact details if you have indicated that you would like to receive updates about the resulting play. If you do not meet the interview criteria or choose to withdraw from the study, your data will immediately be deleted.

If you do participate in the interview phase of the research project, any unredacted audio recordings and transcripts of your interview will be deleted before the project's completion. Your pseudonymised data (including redacted audio recordings) will be retained by the University for at least 10 years after the project's completion (longer if the materials are consulted during this time). After this time, your data will be securely deleted.

What are your rights?*

You can request access to the information we process about you at any time. If at any point you believe that the information we process relating to you is incorrect, you can request to see this information and may in some instances request to have it restricted, corrected or, erased. You may also have the right to object to the processing of data and the right to data portability.

If you grant us permission to contact you about opportunities for future involvement in this research, you have the right to withdraw that consent at any time.

Your sibling(s) also have a right to information about our processing of their data. A separate privacy notice to be shared with your sibling(s) can be found at the following links:

Standard Privacy Notice (for siblings)

Easy Read Privacy Notice (for siblings)

If you wish to exercise any of these rights, please submit your request via the webform or contact dp@gla.ac.uk.

**Please note that the ability to exercise these rights will vary and depend on the legal basis on which the processing is being carried out.*

Complaints

If you wish to raise a complaint on how we have handled your personal data, you can contact the University Data Protection Officer who will investigate the matter.

Our Data Protection Officer can be contacted at dataprotectionofficer@glasgow.ac.uk

If you are not satisfied with our response or believe we are not processing your personal data in accordance with the law, you can complain to the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) https://ico.org.uk/

An Easy Read version of this information can be found at this link:
Easy Read Privacy Notice (participants)

A.5 Privacy Notice for Non-Interviewed Siblings

Your Personal Data

The University of Glasgow and PhD researcher Emma Ettinger will be what's known as the 'Joint Data Controllers' of your personal data processed in relation to *Staging Neurodiverse Sibling Relationships*. This privacy notice will explain how The University of Glasgow and the researcher will process your personal data.

Why we need it

Staging Neurodiverse Sibling Relationships is a PhD research project looking at the relationships between autistic adults and their siblings. The researcher is conducting interviews with siblings in order to inform the writing of a new theatrical play about sibling relationships involving autism.

If you are a sibling of someone in the study, we will collect personal information about you, including your name, age, place of origin/residence, and limited special categories data about your disability status.

We will record your name so that the participant can talk about you as part of the interview, and your age, place of origin/residence, and disability status in order to contextualise the experiences your sibling shares with us.

We will only collect data that we need in order to carry out our research.

Legal basis for processing your data

We must have a legal basis for processing all personal data. In this instance, the legal bases are that the project constitutes 'a task in the public interest', and that any processing of special category data is 'necessary for archiving purposes in the public interest, or scientific and historical research'.

What we do with it and who we share it with

- All the personal data you submit is processed by the PhD research student and staff at the University of Glasgow in the United Kingdom.
- Your data, including an audio recording of your sibling's interview, will be stored in a password-protected file on a secure server, which is only accessible by the student researcher and their supervisors.
- Your data will be assigned a pseudonymous identifier and disassociated from your and your sibling's name and/or contact details. Personally identifiable information will be redacted (bleeped out or replaced with silence in the audio recording). An identifier document will be maintained in a separate, encrypted and password-protected file.
- At the completion of the project, pseudonymised archival data sets may also be made available to other bona fide research teams.
- Your and your sibling(s) names and other identifiable data will not be included in the published output of this research.

How long do we keep it for

Your data will be retained by the University's data archive for at least 10 years after the project's completion (longer if the material is consulted during that time). After this time, data will be securely deleted.

What are your rights?*

You have the right to information about why we are processing data on siblings, and this privacy notice is how we are giving you that information. We also have provided study participants with information about how we use their data.

As we are conducting this project for research purposes, certain rights normally available to individuals do not apply. In line with article 89 of the General Data Protection Regulation, you will not have the right to access your data collected as part of the study, and you will also not be able to erase or modify your data. The reason you cannot access, modify, or erase your data is to protect the confidentiality of the study participants. Everything that the study participants tell us is confidential. This includes any information they tell us about siblings. Study participants have the right to tell their siblings about taking part in the study, and we have encouraged them to share this privacy notice with you.

If you wish to discuss your data rights, please contact dp@gla.ac.uk.

Complaints

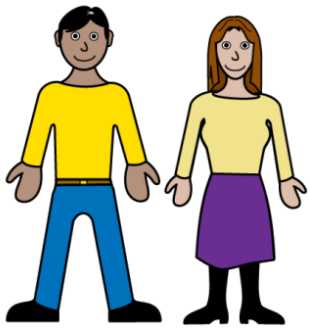
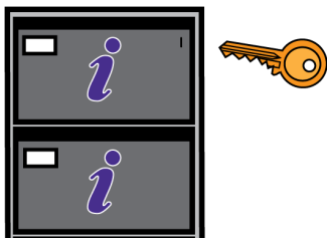
If you wish to raise a complaint on how we have handled your personal data, you can contact the University Data Protection Officer who will investigate the matter.

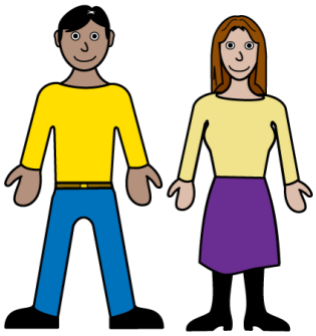
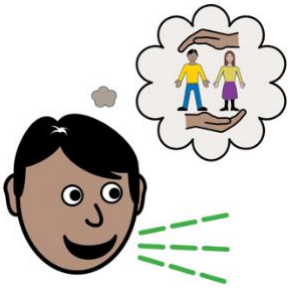
Our Data Protection Officer can be contacted at dataprotectionofficer@glasgow.ac.uk

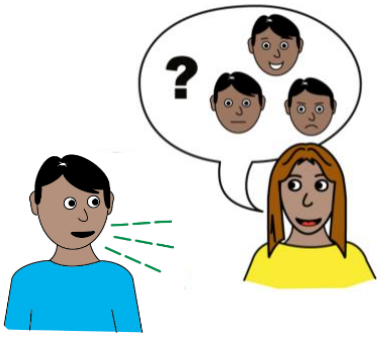
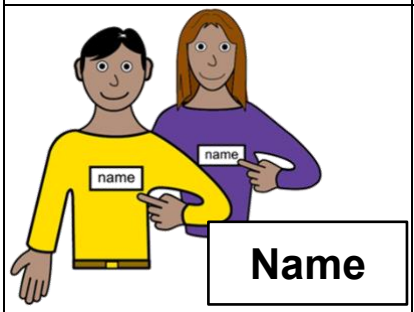
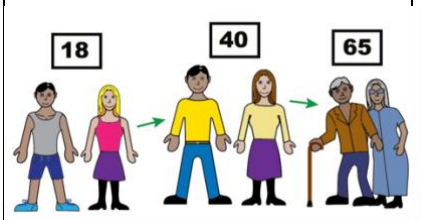
If you are not satisfied with our response or believe we are not processing your personal data in accordance with the law, you can complain to the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) https://ico.org.uk/

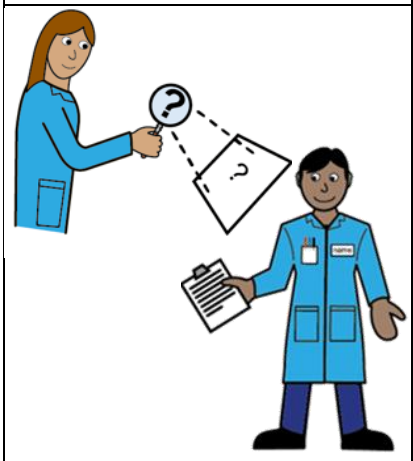
An Easy Read version of this information can be found at this link:
Easy Read Privacy Notice (for siblings)

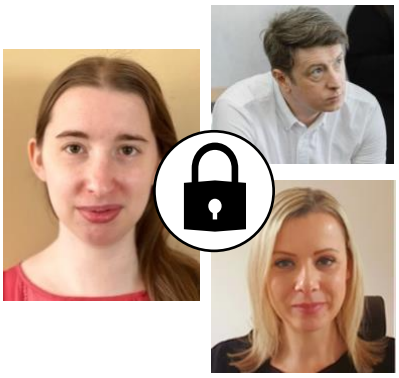
A.6 Easy Read Privacy Notice for Non-Interviewed Siblings

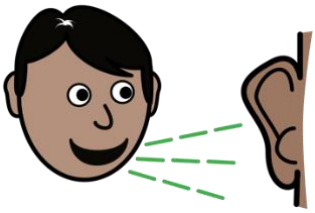
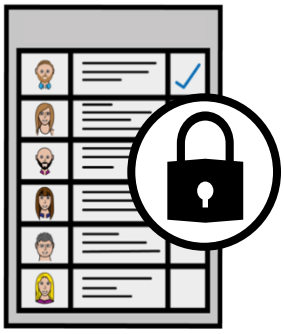
	Your brother or sister is taking part in a research study.
	By taking part in this project, they will give us some information about you.
	What does a Privacy Notice explain?
	How we will use your information.
	How we will keep your information safe and private.

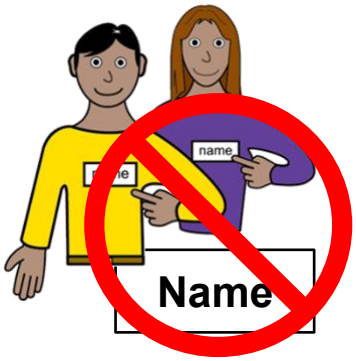
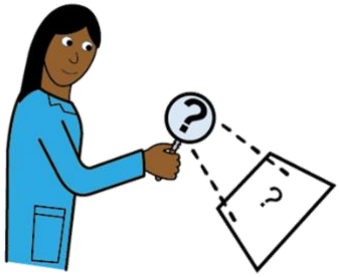
	Your rights.
	Why do you need my information?
	This study is looking at the relationships between autistic people and their brothers or sisters.
	We will use the things we learn to write a play.
	During the interview, your brother or sister will tell some stories about you. They will talk about things you have done together.

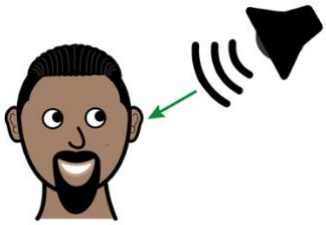
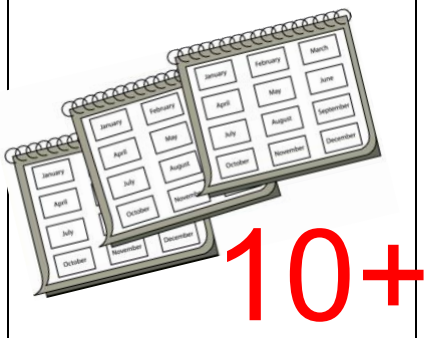
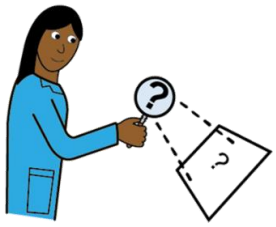
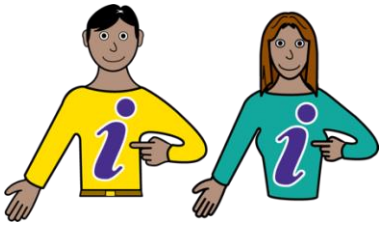
	Information about you will help the researcher know what is going on in their stories.
	What information will you collect?
	**Personal information** is information which may let people know who you are.
	The researcher will ask about your name
	How old you are
	Where you grew up And where you live now

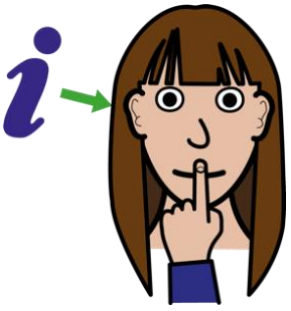
	The researcher will also ask about your autism or other disabilities.
	Information about your autism or disability is called **special category data**.
	The law says we need a good reason for using your information. This is called the **legal basis**.
	Our reason is that this study is a **task in the public interest.** It means that we are doing **research** that will help people understand the world better.
	How will you keep my information safe?
	The researcher is a PhD student at the University of Glasgow.

University of Glasgow	The other people who will be able to see your information are staff at the University of Glasgow.
	Your information will be stored and looked at in the United Kingdom
	During the study, your information will be kept safely on a computer. It will be protected by a password.
	Only the researcher and their supervisors will be able to see it.
	We will keep an audio recording of your brother or sister's interview.

	The recording and other notes about them will be stored without their name.
	Other information that might identify your family will be deleted.
	Someone listening to the recording may still know your brother or sister by their voice.
	We will keep a list that tells us which recording is theirs. It will be protected by a password.

	Will your information be shared?
	At the end of the study, the researcher will write a play and a report.
	Other people will be able to see the play and read the report.
	Your family's names will not be in them. No one will be able to tell what your brother or sister has said.
	After the study is over, information without names in it may be shared with researchers doing other studies.

	If your brother or sister says it is okay, these researchers may also listen to their recording.
	How long will you keep my information?
	We will keep your information for at least 10 years.
 **10 Years**	After 10 years, your information will be destroyed. This will be done in a way so no one else can see it.
	We will keep your information for longer if other researchers use it during that time.
	What are my rights?
	You have the right to know that we have asked for information about you. You also have the right to know why.

	There are some rights you **do not** have because this is a research project.
	This is because of a part of the General Data Protection Regulation (or **GDPR**). It is called **Article 89**.
	You **do not** have the right to see the information we have about you.
	You **do not** have the right to change or delete the information we have about you.
	This is because the things your brother or sister say are **confidential**. This means that we cannot share them with people, even you.
	We have asked your brother or sister to share this Privacy Notice with you.

	Here is a link to a version without pictures.
	How can I contact you?
	If you have questions about your **Privacy Rights**, you can email the University's Data Protection office: dp@gla.ac.uk
	Who can I speak to if I want to complain?
University of Glasgow	If you want to complain about the way we are looking after your information: You can email the University's Data Protection Officer: dataprotectionofficer@glasgow.ac.uk
ico. Information Commissioner's Office	If you still have complaints, you can contact the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) https://ico.org.uk/

This Privacy Notice was created using *Easy on the i*.
(additional images sourced from Creazilla)

A.7 Participant Consent Form – Interviews

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE
AGREEMENT TO THE USE OF DATA

I understand that EMMA ETTINGER is collecting data in the form of recorded interviews for use in an academic research project at the University of Glasgow.

I have read the information sheet outlining the project and its methods and had the opportunity to ask any questions arising from that.

I consent to participate in the interviews on the following terms:

1. I can leave any question unanswered.
2. The interview can be stopped at any point.

I assign to the researcher performance rights to my interview on the following terms:

1. I will not be identifiable in the performance or play-text.
2. Only short excerpts in my own words may be used.

I agree to the processing of data for this project on the following terms:

1. Use and storage of research data in the University of Glasgow reflects the institution's educational/ research mission and its legal responsibilities in relation to both information security and scrutiny of researcher conduct.
    a. As part of this, under UK legislation (UK General Data Protection Regulation [UK GDPR]), I understand and accept that the 'lawful basis' for the processing of personal data is that the project constitutes 'a task in the public interest', and that any processing of special category data is 'necessary for archiving purposes in the public interest, or scientific and historical research'.
    b. I understand that I have the right to **access** data relating to me or that I have provided and to **object** where I have reason to believe it has been misused or used for purposes other than those stated.
    c. Project materials in both physical and electronic form will be treated as confidential and kept in secure storage (locked physical storage; appropriately encrypted, password-protected devices and University user accounts) at all times.
2. The interviews will be audio-recorded. A detailed interview summary and a voice-to-text transcript will be generated from this recording, but the audio recording itself will also be maintained (with personal information redacted).
3. I will not be identified by name in the study. All other names and information likely to identify individuals will be removed or redacted from the published results, including the play-text and the critical thesis.
4. As a pseudonymous participant (my name will not be published, but will be retained in the researcher's records), I retain the rights of access and objection where I have legitimate grounds for concern that I remain directly identifiable from the data or that it has been used for purposes other than those stated.
5. Project materials (including audio recordings and interview summaries) will be retained in secure storage by the University for ten years for archival purposes (longer if the material is consulted during that time). Consent forms will also be retained for the purposes of record.

6. The resulting play and other anonymised materials may be used in future research and be cited and discussed in future publications, both print and online.

Would you like to be contacted about opportunities to participate in a follow-up interview or focus group related to this project?

☐ YES (Your contact information will be retained until interviews are completed.)

☐ NO, I would *not* like to be contacted in this way.

Would you like to be contacted about opportunities to hear and/or respond to the play(s) resulting from this project?

☐ YES (Your contact information will be retained until the project's completion.)

☐ NO, I would *not* like to be contacted in this way.

ALL PARTICIPANTS:

☐ I consent to take part in the above study.

☐ I agree to the terms for data processing outlined above.

☐ I confirm I have been given information on how to exercise my rights of access and objection.

Name of Participant: _____ Date: _____

Signature: _____

AFTER THE INTERVIEW:

☐ My interview recording may NOT made available to other researchers beyond this project. It will still be archived for purposes of academic integrity monitoring.

OR

☐ I consent to my redacted interview recording being made available to future research projects via the University's data archive system.

(You may contact the researcher or the University's Data Protection & FOI Office if you later wish to revoke this consent: https://www.gla.ac.uk/myglasgow/dpfoioffice/gdpr/gdprrequests/)

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Researcher:	Emma Ettinger (e.ettinger.1@research.gla.ac.uk)
Supervisors:	Graham Eatough (Graham.Eatough@glasgow.ac.uk) Deborah Cairns (Deborah.Cairns@glasgow.ac.uk)
Department address:	Gilmorehill Centre, 9 University Avenue, Glasgow, G12 8NN, Scotland

A.8 Participant Consent Form – Written Questionnaire

I have read and understood the Participant Information.

- ○ Yes
- ○ No

I have had the opportunity to ask the researcher any questions I have about the project.

- ○ Yes
- ○ No

I understand that participation in the research is voluntary. I can choose to leave any question unanswered or to exit the form at any time.

- ○ Yes
- ○ No

I understand that if I exit the online form before submitting, I will have two weeks to return and complete it. If I do not return to the form within two weeks, I will be considered to have withdrawn, and my data will be deleted.

- ○ Yes
- ○ No

I have read and understood the Privacy Notice (Participants)

- ○ Yes
- ○ No

I have had the opportunity to ask the researcher any questions I have about the privacy notice.

- ○ Yes
- ○ No

I understand that my data will be processed on the following terms:

- Under the UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR), I understand and accept that the 'lawful basis' for the processing of personal data is that the project constitutes 'a task in the public interest', and that any processing of special category data is 'necessary for archiving purposes in the public interest, or scientific and historical research'.

- I understand that I have the right to **access** data relating to me or that I have provided and to **object** where I have reason to believe it has been misused or used for purposes other than those stated.
- Project materials in both physical and electronic form will be treated as confidential and kept in secure storage (locked physical storage; appropriately encrypted and password-protected devices and University user accounts) at all times.

○ Yes

○ No

I understand that my answers will be downloaded to a secure, encrypted server in the UK and any identifying information will be redacted. If I provide any contact information (to receive updates about the project), it will be kept separate from my answers.

○ Yes

○ No

I understand that I will not be identified by name in the study. All other names and information likely to identify individuals will be removed or redacted from the published results, including the play-text and the critical thesis.

○ Yes

○ No

As an anonymous participant, I understand that once the data is anonymised, in accordance with UK legislation (General Data Protection Regulation [UK GDPR]), it may be used for the purposes of the project without further reference back to me. However, I understand that I may request access or raise an objection if I have legitimate grounds for concern that I remain directly identifiable from it or that it has been used for purposes other than those stated.

○ Yes

○ No

I know that I can find information about how to exercise my privacy rights in the Privacy Notice and Participant Information.

○ Yes

○ No

I understand that project materials will be retained in secure storage by the University for at least ten years for archival purposes and may be consulted by other research teams during that time.

- ○ Yes
- ○ No

I understand that the researcher is writing a stage play and agree to assign the researcher performance rights to my answers on the following terms:

- I will not be identifiable in the performance or play text.
- Only short excerpts in my own words may be used.

- ○ Yes
- ○ No

I understand that this means I will NOT receive any compensation from performance or publication of the resulting play.

- ○ Yes
- ○ No

I understand that the resulting play and other anonymised materials may be used in future research and be cited and discussed in future publications, both print and online.

- ○ Yes
- ○ No

I consent to take part in the above study.

- ○ Yes
- ○ No

Would you like to be contacted about opportunities to read or hear about the play that will be written based on this research?

- ○ Yes (the researcher may retain my contact details for this purpose)
- ○ No

Would you like to be contacted about opportunities to participate in group interviews or focus groups as part of this research project?

- ○ Yes (the researcher may retain my contact details for this purpose)
- ○ No

Would you like to be contacted if the researcher has any questions about the answers you have given?

- ○ Yes (the researcher may retain my contact details for this purpose)
- ○ No

At what email address may the researcher contact you?

_____

Is there any other information you'd like to make the researcher aware of at this time?

_____

A.9 Participant Consent Form – Workshop Actors

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE
AGREEMENT TO THE USE OF DATA

I understand that EMMA ETTINGER is carrying out a research project based at the University of Glasgow about sibling relationships involving autism and the ways they are depicted on stage. The project includes a play which is being workshopped through a series of readings, in one or more of which I am being invited to take part. I may also be invited to provide some written or verbal feedback about the creative process. The rehearsals will not be recorded, but the workshop's final performance will be filmed.

I have read the information sheet outlining the project and its methods and had the opportunity to ask any questions arising from that.

INITIAL CONSENT
I consent to participate in the workshop(s) and related activities on the following basis:

- I will be compensated for my participation in the workshop and its final reading.
- I can leave any feedback questions unanswered.
- I have the right to step out of a rehearsal or withdraw from the workshop at any point. I will still be compensated for the work I have performed.

AGREEMENT TO PROCESSING OF DATA
I agree to the processing of data in relation to this project on the understanding that:

- Use and storage of research data in the University of Glasgow reflects the institution's educational/research mission and its legal responsibilities in relation to both information security and scrutiny of researcher conduct.
    - Under UK legislation (UK General Data Protection Regulation [UK GDPR]), the 'lawful basis' for the processing of personal data is that the project constitutes 'a task in the public interest' and that any processing of special category data is 'necessary for archiving purposes in the public interest, or scientific and historical research'.
    - I understand that I have the right to **access** data relating to me or that I have provided and to **object** where I have reason to believe it has been misused or used for purposes other than those stated.
    - Project materials containing personal data will be treated as confidential and kept in secure storage (appropriately encrypted, password-protected devices and University user accounts) at all times.
- Once the workshop project is completed, selections of the resulting materials may be used in future publications (including the researcher's thesis), both in print and online.
    - I will be allowed to see and approve of any identifiable references to my participation, comments, or feedback in pre-publication drafts.
- The academic project resulting from this work and related project materials will be kept by the University for ten years for archival purposes (longer if the material is consulted during that time). Consent forms will also be retained for the purposes of record.

INITIAL CONSENT

☐ I consent to participate in the workshop and related feedback activities.

☐ I would like for my participation to be recognised in the programme and thesis acknowledgements under the following name:

_____

☐ I consent for the final performance of the workshop to be video recorded.

Signed by the contributor: _____ Date: _____

END OF PROJECT CONFIRMATION (CHOOSE ONE):

☐ I am happy to be identified (by name and/or character) in the researcher's critical thesis, as well as other publications as outlined above.

- I understand that I will be allowed to see and approve of any identifiable references to my participation, comments, or feedback in pre-publication drafts.

☐ I do NOT want my comments or feedback during the workshop process to be identifiable to me in critical discussion of the process.

- If the researcher would like to include any of my comments/feedback anonymously, I will be allowed to see and approve of those instances in pre-publication drafts.

☐ I do not want ANY of my feedback or contributions to be discussed in the critical thesis.

Signed by the contributor: _____ Date: _____

Researcher's name and email:	Emma Ettinger (e.ettinger.1@research.gla.ac.uk)
Supervisor's name and email:	Graham Eatough (Graham.Eatough@glasgow.ac.uk) Deborah Cairns (Deborah.Cairns@glasgow.ac.uk)
Department address:	Gilmorehill Centre, 9 University Avenue, Glasgow, G12 8NN, Scotland

A.10 Participant Consent Form – Virtual Focus Group

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE
AGREEMENT TO THE USE OF DATA

I understand that EMMA ETTINGER is collecting data in the form of recorded group interviews (focus groups) for use in an academic research project at the University of Glasgow.

I have read the information sheet outlining the project and its methods and had the opportunity to ask any questions arising from that.

I consent to participate in the focus group on the following terms:

3. I can leave any question unanswered.
4. I can leave the group interview at any point.
5. What is said in the group interview will be confidential. I will NOT tell anyone what others in the group have said, and the other participants will NOT tell anyone what I have said.
6. I will NOT receive any compensation from performance or publication of the resulting play.

I agree to the processing of data for this project on the following terms:

7. Use and storage of research data in the University of Glasgow reflects the institution's educational/ research mission and its legal responsibilities in relation to both information security and scrutiny of researcher conduct.
    a. As part of this, under UK legislation (UK General Data Protection Regulation [UK GDPR]), I understand and accept that the 'lawful basis' for the processing of personal data is that the project constitutes 'a task in the public interest', and that any processing of special category data is 'necessary for archiving purposes in the public interest, or scientific and historical research'.
    b. I understand that I have the right to **access** data relating to me or that I have provided and to **object** where I have reason to believe it has been misused or used for purposes other than those stated.
    c. Project materials in both physical and electronic form will be treated as confidential and kept in secure storage (locked physical storage; appropriately encrypted, password-protected devices and University user accounts) at all times.
8. Group interviews will be audio-recorded. Notes and a transcript will be generated from this recording, but the audio recording itself will be deleted upon the project's completion.
9. I will not be identified by name in the study. All other names and information likely to identify individuals will be removed or redacted from the published results, including the play-text and the critical thesis.
10. As a pseudonymous participant (my name will not be published, but will be retained in the researcher's records), I retain the rights of access and objection where I have legitimate grounds for concern that I remain directly identifiable from the data or that it has been used for purposes other than those stated.
11. Project materials (including the transcript and notes from this focus group) will be retained in secure storage by the University for ten years for archival purposes (longer if the material is consulted during that time). Consent forms will also be retained for the purposes of record.

12. The resulting play and other anonymised materials may be used in future research and be cited and discussed in future publications, both print and online.

ALL PARTICIPANTS:

☐ I consent to take part in the above study.

☐ I agree not to share any information I learn about others participating in this study.

☐ I agree to the terms for data processing outlined above.

☐ I understand that I will NOT receive any compensation from performance or publication of the resulting stage play.

☐ I confirm I have been given information on how to exercise my rights of access and objection.

Name of Participant: _____ Date: _____

Signature: _____

Researcher:	Emma Ettinger (e.ettinger.1@research.gla.ac.uk)
Supervisors:	Graham Eatough (Graham.Eatough@glasgow.ac.uk) Deborah Cairns (Deborah.Cairns@glasgow.ac.uk)
Department address:	Gilmorehill Centre, 9 University Avenue, Glasgow, G12 8NN, Scotland

A.11 Participant Information – Workshop Audience

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide whether or not to take part, it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask us if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information.

Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.
Thank you for reading this.

What is the purpose of the study?

This study is researching the relationships between autistic adults and their siblings. The researcher has drawn on her own experiences as well as real-life stories gathered through interviews, to inspire a play about the lives and relationships of a set of fictional characters.

The play and an accompanying reflection will be submitted as the researcher's PhD thesis, in approximately January 2026. The play will be available for the public to read or watch, and the critical thesis will be published online in the University of Glasgow's Enlighten data base.

Why have I been chosen?

You are attending a reading of the draft play-text. Following the performance, you will be invited to offer some feedback if you wish.

Do I have to take part?

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part in the talkback or otherwise offer feedback.

Whether or not you participate will have no impact on your grades (if you are a student at the University of Glasgow), nor will it impact your relationship with the researchers or with any organization that you may have heard about the research through.

What will happen to me if I take part?

Following the reading you will be invited to offer feedback in any of three ways:

- By taking part in a talkback after the reading:
    - If you choose to take part in the talkback, your feedback will be audio-recorded so that the researcher can listen back to it and take more detailed notes.
    - Your name and other identifying details will not be included in the researcher's notes. The recording itself will be destroyed upon the project's completion.

- By leaving anonymous written feedback:
  - There will be a box with blank index cards by the door, if you would like to leave anonymous written feedback.
  - I will redact any personal / identifying information that you share.
- By emailing the researcher:
  - If you would like to get in touch non-anonymously, you can email me at my university account: e.ettinger.1@research.gla.ac.uk

Your feedback may be used to inform future drafts of the play-text. I might also discuss some of your comments in the critical reflection portion of my thesis but will not use any names.

Will my taking part in this study be kept confidential?

Your name will not be included in the thesis or linked to your comments. The back of your head may appear in archival video of the performance, and it is possible that you might be recognised by other people who attended the talkback / event.

What will happen to the project data and the results of the research study?

A recording of the talkback will be stored on the secure server so that the researcher may listen back to it and take notes. The recording itself will be deleted, but the notes will be retained with other documentary evidence of the project on a University of Glasgow server for at least 10 years after the project's completion. Notes from feedback cards will transcribed/digitised and archived in the same manner.

Who is organising and funding the research?

This research is funded by a doctoral scholarship from the University of Glasgow College of Arts. The reading/workshop has been funded through the College of Arts Community Building and Public Engagement fund, a grant from the Society for Theatre Research, and research support awards from the university's College of Arts and School of Culture and Creative Arts.

Who has reviewed the study?

The study has been reviewed and approved by members of the College of Arts Research Ethics committee.

How can I access information relating to me or complain if I suspect information has been misused/ used for purposes other than I agreed to?

You can contact the researcher or their supervisor(s) in the first instance if you have any concerns. If you are not comfortable doing this, or if you have tried but don't get a response or if the person in question appears to have left the University, you can contact the College of Arts Ethics Officer (email: arts-ethics@glasgow.ac.uk).

Where there appear to have been problems, you can – and indeed may be advised to – submit an 'access request' or an objection to the use of data. As part of the University's obligations under UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR), participants retain the rights to access and objection with regard to the use of non-anonymised data for research purposes.

1. Access requests and objections can be submitted via the UofG online proforma accessible at: https://www.gla.ac.uk/myglasgow/dpfoioffice/gdpr/gdprrequests/#.
2. Access requests and objection are formal procedures not because we mean to intimidate participants into not raising issues, but rather because the University is legally required to respond and address concerns. The system provides a clear point of contact, appropriate support and a clear set of responsibilities.
3. Anyone who submits a request will need to provide proof of their identity. Again, this is not to deter inquiries, but rather reflects the University's duty to guard against fraudulent approaches that might result in data breaches.
4. You also have the right to lodge a complaint against the University regarding data protection issues with the Information Commissioner's Office (https://ico.org.uk/concerns/).

Contact for further Information

Emma Ettinger, PhD Researcher: e.ettinger.1@research.gla.ac.uk

Dr. Graham Eatough, Theatre Studies (Primary Supervisor):
Graham.Eatough@glasgow.ac.uk

Professor Deborah Cairns, Scottish Learning Disabilities Observatory:
Deborah.Cairns@glasgow.ac.uk)

If you have any concerns regarding the conduct of this research project, you can contact the College of Arts Ethics Officer (arts-ethics@glasgow.ac.uk).

A.12 Post Interview Resource List

It is possible that our conversation will have stirred up difficult emotions for you. If you find yourself struggling, here are some resources that can help.

If you live in the UK:

- Samaritans provides a safe space to talk about things that are troubling you
  - call 116 123 any time of day or night
  - email jo@samaritans.org
- 'Give Us a Shout' provides similar support over text
  - text 'SHOUT' to 85258
- Mind can help with seeking more ongoing mental health support
  - call their Infoline at 0300 123 3393 (from 9am-6pm, Monday-Friday)
  - email info@mind.org.uk

If you live outside the UK:

- Befrienders Worldwide has a search tool to find helplines around the globe.

If you are autistic and want longer-term support resources:

In the UK:

- There are many local self-advocacy organisations around the UK. Try an online search for one in your area (unfortunately there's no central list)!
- The Autism Alliance has a list of regional support organisations, each of which can point you towards local resources and groups.
- The National Autistic Society has an online forum and a directory of service providers around the country.

In the US and elsewhere: The Autistic Self Advocacy Network has a library of self-advocacy resources, plus affiliate groups in the US and other countries.

If you are a sibling and want longer-term support resources:

In the UK: Sibs runs support groups for adult siblings of people with disabilities, and has a number of guides which provide advice on navigating care and future-planning concerns

In the US and elsewhere: the Sibling Support Project hosts online groups for teen and adult siblings, while the Sibling Leadership Network provides resources for siblings as disability advocates (with state chapters around the US).

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