Chapter 9

'that old shame trick': Mothering, Trauma and Neurodiversity in Emilie Pine's *Ruth & Pen*

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This essay explores shame in the context of Emilie Pine's contemporary novel *Ruth & Pen* (2019), which connects narratives of neurodiversity and women's reproductivity. Pine explores what it means to live a life in the shadow of the pronatalist imperative of what she describes as 'compulsory motherhood', extending themes about fertility so arrestingly treated in her bestselling 2018 memoir *Notes to Self*.[1] The eponymous Ruth, a psychoanalyst, is in her early forties, and in the process of evaluating her marriage to her husband, Aidan, in the wake of four unsuccessful attempts at IVF, while the nominative Pen, who is autistic and in her mid-late teens, is gathering the courage to ask her friend, Alice, on a romantic date. Pine is explicit about the 'totally conscious' gestures to James Joyce and modernist literature, which involve the remapping of Dublin in *Ruth & Pen*, as Joyce once mapped it in *Ulysses*.[2] Like *Ulysses*, and Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*, the action takes place on a single day, Monday 7 October 2019, during which the protagonists cross the city as they both consider significant changes in their lives. Reviews of *Ruth & Pen*, focused on the architecture of the plot and precision of style, as well as on the more legible story of Ruth's reproductive trauma and grief, but were less positive, and even neuroshaming, when it came to Pen. The term autism is still pervasively freighted with ableist overtones.[3]

During the round of promotion interviews for *Ruth & Pen*, Pine was asked by one journalist why she chose 'to foreground an autistic character', and Pine answered, 'why not?'[4] Her answer, much like

[1] Emma Saunders, 'The Novelist Putting Autism Centre Stage', 4 May 2022, https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-61227465; Emilie Pine, *Notes to Self* (Dublin: Tramp Press, 2018).

[2] Saunders, 'Emilie Pine'.

[3] See Edith Sheffer, *Asperger's Children: The Origins of Autism in Nazi Vienna* (W. W. Norton and Company, 2018).

[4] Moynagh Sullivan, interview with Emile Pine, UCD, December 2023.

the novel itself, refuses complicity in the ongoing marginalisation of autistic identities, as instanced in Rosemary Goring's review, which was 'unconvinced' by the foregrounding of an autistic protagonist:

> Less assured, or convincing, is the implied parallel between Ruth and Pen. Why she has chosen someone with autism remains unclear, unless it is to highlight that everybody struggles, a fact Pen recognises herself: 'even for people without sensory processing differences, emotions can be really hard to read'. Basically, thinks Pen, the entire rom-com genre is proof that feelings aren't easy.

I want to argue, against Goring, that the two stories and situations are 'very differently weighted'.[5] *Ruth & Pen* links gender and neuroequality by shaping and breaking maternal lines, to suggest a wider register of coded neurodivergent characters besides the openly identified autistic Pen. Pine disassembles the ableist/disableist binaries and hierarchies inherent in traditionally pathologising accounts of autistic/allistic differences.[6] By refusing to make Pen a foil for a neurotypical person to flourish, the novel affirms what Joseph Valente calls the 'heterogeneity' of autistic identities. It underscores Valente's observation that there is no typical autistic, only a set of contradictory, widely variable behavioural characteristics that occur across the spectrum into neurotypicality.[7] Hephzibah Anderson, in *The Guardian*, confirmed that 'Pine sidesteps many of the cliches that attend the representation of autistic characters in literature and film'.[8]

The text's reframing of dominant and inherited autistic tragedy tropes is clearly aligned with the adult autistic-led Autism Rights Movement,[9] and draws from what Mary Doherty calls 'autistic community wisdom and scholarship'.[10] This identity and rights-based movement is for

[5] Rosemary Goring, 'Ruth & Pen, by Emilie Pine, Hamish Hamilton', https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/20171907.ruth-pen-emilie-pine-hamish-hamilton/

[6] Hanna Rosqist, Nick Chown and Anna Stenning, eds, *Neurodiversity Studies: A New Critical Paradigm* (London: Routledge, 2020).

[7] Joseph Valente, 'This Disability Which Is Not One: Autistic Intermittency in Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*', *Contemporary Literature* 62:1 (Spring 2021): 35.

[8] Hepzibah Anderson, '*Ruth & Pen* by Emilie Pine review – A World of Joy and Pain', 15 May 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2022/may/15/ruth-pen-by-emilie-pine-review-a-world-of-joy-and-pain

[9] AsIAm, Ireland's National Autism Charity, is also strongly aligned with autistic-led values https://asiam.ie/statement-on-applied-behavioural-analysis-aba-therapy/

[10] Mary Doherty, 'Viewpoint: 'Weaponized Heterogeneity Only Harms the Most Vulnerable Autistic People', *Spectrum | Autism Research News*, 17 April 2023. https://www.spectrumnews.org/opinion/viewpoint/weaponized-heterogeneity-only-harms-the-most-vulnerable-autistic-people/

the most part, situated within the frame of the neurodiversity paradigm, which understands neurotypes not in pathological terms, on an abnormal/normal binary, but simply as neuro-majorities and minorities.[11] Julie Singer, known as the 'mother of neurodiversity', originally conceptualised it in 1996, as a corollary to biodiversity, for affirming the variety of cognitive and sensory neurotypes that make up the human species.[12] Pen lives in a neurodiversity-affirming home supported with a range of survival strategies which are about accepting, not suppressing, her needs, and appreciating and managing her natural responses to stimuli – whether stimming, echolalia or other echopraxias.

Despite this, her life involves daily camouflaging of different intensities when in public spaces, and we meet her on a day on which she needs to 'save her strength for all the ways she will have to be not-like-herself today',[13] in order that the novel can explore the damaging disbursement of masking and camouflage from the point of view of someone surviving a neurotypical-shaped world. Pen is attending an Extinction Rebellion march, a trope that appears to walk Pen straight into what that Anna Stenning calls the autistic 'ecological saint' narrative, which 'presents autistics as ahistorical beings and as symbols of naïve, pre-Industrial attitudes to nature, rather than as historically and spatially enacted human beings'.[14] However, this stereotype relies on representing autistic people as 'precluding agency or introspection',[15] while Pine depicts autism as 'not inherently disabling'. Rather, it becomes a disability in certain contexts, particularly the social realm produced by a majority non-autistic world.[16] The novel's depiction of Pen's inner world view supports the autism-affirming idea that autism is congenital with unique but highly variable 'traits' and 'behaviours', as well as the neurodiversity-affirming position that such indices can also in part be understood as evidence of stress and trauma responses to neuronormative corralling such as the neurobullying endured by Pen, when she was tricked and locked in a wardrobe.[17]

[11] The neurodiversity paradigm includes autism, ADHD (where currently exists a 60–70 per cent overlap), OCD, Parkinson's disease, schizophrenia, bi-polar and many other conditions that 'diverge' from the neuro-majority.

[12] See Julie Singer, *Neurodiversity: The Birth of an Idea* (Kentucky: Singer, 2017).

[13] Emilie Pine, *Ruth & Pen* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2019), 62. Hereafter given as (RP page).

[14] A. C. Stenning, 'Misfits and Ecological Saints: Strategies for Non-normative Living in Autistic Life Writing', *Disability Studies Quarterly* 42:1 (2022).

[15] Stenning, 'Misfits'.

[16] Stenning, 'Misfits'.

[17] Jurgen De Wispelaere and Judy Walsh, 'Disability Rights in Ireland: Chronicle of a Missed Opportunity', *Irish Political Studies* 22:4 (2007): 517–43.

Ruth & Pen was published just one year after Ireland voted to repeal the Eighth Amendment, giving women reproductive rights for the first time in the state's troubled history,[18] and only one year after Ireland finally ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) in March 2018.[19] The novel examines how the extractive logics of capitalism and colonialism reproduce themselves by instrumentalising the labour of others,[20] and how the pro-natalist and neurotypical norms of the Irish state operate to shame a woman/assigned female at birth (AFAB) whose body does not produce children, or children fit to represent the state. *Ruth & Pen* unpicks how re/productive shame is carried by the bodies of those whose value as citizens was not assured in the 1937 Constitution; Pen, who in Ireland is medically defined as disabled, would have been prohibited, until 2015, in Irish law from reproducing (under the 1821 Lunacy Act). The shame at work in the interpellation of the protagonists is not their own but, nonetheless, it marks how they occupy spaces including that of their own bodies.

Shame has, as Jacqueline Rose points out, 'a visceral quality about it' such that people are 'turned red' with it, 'flooded' by it, and she notes how Freud considered it a 'trauma'.[21] *Ruth & Pen* is built from acute observations of sensory experience as each character navigates her own 'big T' trauma; Ruth is in recovery from the repeated bodily violations inflicted by invasive reproductive technologies, while Pen is also in recovery from acute trauma experiences at the hands of bullies.[22] Each also shares the low-level trauma of living as AFAB in a state of hyper-vigilance due to the pervasive threat of sexual or verbal assault. Pen also endures 'small t' trauma of having to handle neuronorms and having a minority sexuality, and Ruth's infertility

[18] See Cara Delay and Claire Bracken, eds, 'Women's Health and Reproductive Justice in Ireland', *Éire-Ireland* 56:3 (2021): 5–20; Sinead Kennedy, '"No Country for Young Women": (Re)producing the Irish State', in Oona Frawley, ed., *Women and the Decade of Commemorations* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2021), 267–83.

[19] De Wispelaere and Walsh, 'Disability Rights', 517.

[20] Ndlovu Sibonokuhle, 'Humanness and Ableism: Construction and Deconstruction of Disability', in Melissa Steyn, ed., *Decolonising The Human: Reflections From Africa On Difference And Oppression* (William Mpofu: Wits University Press, 2021), 65–85.

[21] Jacqueline Rose, 'Introduction: "Shame"', *On Not Being Able to Sleep: Psychoanalysis and the Modern World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 1.

[22] Lamora Ash, '*Ruth & Pen* by Emilie Pine – a tale of two lives', *The Guardian*, 19 May 2022. https://www.theguardian.com/books/2022/may/19/ruth-pen-by-emilie-pine-review-a-tale-of-two-lives

means she is chronically traumatised by the pervasive 'compulsory motherhood' narrative, the state *raison d'être* for women:

> She tries to enter the doctor's room smiling, because you have to pretend you don't hate this, don't hate sitting in your coat, too hot, too female, too scared to say anything other than yes and no. It must be strange for the doctor too, strange to have only patients with vaginas, strange to say, if you could just undress, to a parade of women, strange to have to pretend you can't see their shame. (RP 100)

Finding eye contact agonising is a common neurodivergent experience, and the novel highlights how eye-avoidance is also a normalised aspect of women's reproductive health experience.

Ruth & Pen creates a slippage between being a woman/AFAB and neurodivergence, through the vector of shame and, while the reasons for eye avoidance may differ, the actions overlap. Ruth notes how the women waiting for news about the health of their reproductive organs in the waiting room at the National Maternity Hospital avoid each other's eyes: 'the worst thing is to catch someone's eye, to share that tight grin that says, I see you and you see me and we will pretend that we do not see each other, that we do not share this thing inside us' (RP 99). A form of somatic communication saturates the room, in which shame is produced though the deferred action of being seen. Rose also points out that 'shame requires an audience [u]nlike guilt, which can fester quietly inside you, shame only arises when someone knows, or fears, they have been seen'.[23] The waiting room audience do not shame another because they confer on each other the dignity of not seeing, but are shame-faced nonetheless because the constitutional collapse of mother and child into the one person is reflected in the medical space in which maternity and gynaecological services are provided. Thus, the space of the National Maternity Hospital itself, standing in for the state, is the seeing audience where Ruth's most intense experience of shame occurs, and it also functions as a symbolic locus for the connections and breakages of the maternal intergenerational links the novel explores. For Claire, her most intense articulation of shame is also related to seeing and mothering, in her case, what she thinks of as her failure to see and be a 'good' mother: she feels 'ashamed of how long it took her to *see* [my emphasis]. Her lovely girl. Her difficult girl' (RP 109).

Claire's slowness to see that Pen is autistic gestures to the collective and historical inability to actually see autistic women and girls, because of masculinist biases in health care and sciences, and

[23] Rose, 'Introduction', 1

because women are socialised to be highly masking within patriarchy.[24] Pen is not high masking, but still feels acutely that she is 'not like other girls' (RP 10), while Ruth masks to conform to binary gender norms created by a set of practices that Judith Butler calls performativity. When Ruth 'feels suddenly aware of her make-up-less face' (RP 14) we are reminded by the novel that being feminine is associated with masking, and that it is also, fundamentally, a survival strategy, employed by those at a structural disadvantage. For, as [sarah] Cavar reminds us in 'The Queer Aut of Failure', masking, 'like other methods of "passing", is not a marker of privilege but an indication of embodied danger'.[25] Women/AFABs and girls are, after all, actually expected to 'mask', to daily make-up another face, to be placed on top of our own, in order to achieve 'femininity'. Joan Rivière's 'Womanliness as Masquerade' (1929) identifies a form of exaggerated femininity, especially evident in intellectual or otherwise high-achieving women, which hides rivalry with, and deflected retaliative behaviours from, men. From a neurodiversity perspective, this is suggestive of high-masking autistic women who camouflage to survive, and whose fear of retribution is not from men but from neuronormative society at large.[26]

Recent research that has taken women/AFABs as their subjects, along with neurodivergent-led community knowledge, has transformed understandings of autism from a narrowly defined 'disorder' and dis/ability associated primarily with white middle-class boys to seeing it as an aspect of a much more prevalent neurodivergent profile that is considerably under-assessed across all populations, especially women and girls, racialised minorities[27] and disadvantaged populations which have historically been more likely to have been diagnosed with various personality disorder and other antisocial behaviours, with negative outcomes that include early death, lack of employment, incarceration, institutionalisation and homelessness.[28] *Ruth & Pen*, by centring Pen 'when characters who are autistic are

[24] The Neurodivergent Woman, 'The History of Neurodivergence', 7 February 2002. https://omny.fm/shows/the-neurodivergent-woman/the-history-of-neurodivergence.

[25] [sarah] Cavar, 'The Queer Aut of Failure', *Lateral* 11:2 (Fall 2022):.

[26] Joan Rivière, 'Womanliness as Masquerade', in Russell Grigg, Dominique Hecq and Craig Smith, eds, *Female Sexuality: The Early Psychoanalytic Controversies* (London: Routledge, 1999), 172–82.

[27] Angela Willey, Banu Subramaniam, Jennifer A. Hamilton and Jane Couperus, 'The Mating Life of Geeks: Love, Neuroscience, and the New Autistic Subject', *Signs* 40:2 (Winter 2015): 372

[28] See Malcolm Matthews, 'Why Sheldon Cooper Can't Be Black: The Visual Rhetoric of Autism and Ethnicity', *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies* 13:1 (2019): 70.

more often than not male',[29] links to the radically paradigm-shifting, unprecedented and recent efflorescence of research on autistic woman/AFAB and girls,[30] which is being called a 'mental health revolution' and shows how neurodivergence in women can be hidden in plain sight. Stimming and avoiding eye contact are normalised within acceptable – and expected – behaviour codes of commodified femininity, especially white femininity. Because women are hypersexualised by patriarchal cultures, it is considered 'feminine' to look away and/or down as a mark of submission, while certain stims can be camouflaged by conversion into performative actions that signal availably or vulnerability, and conform to restricted and repetitive – what Butler calls 'iterative' – actions that produce binarised gender norms, such as flirty hand movements, hair-twisting and flicking, as of which have contributed to the under-assessment in women and girls with lower-support needs.[31]

In Rivière's estimation of the hyper-feminine masquerade, the subject was neither fully homosexual nor heterosexual. Today, she might be called queer. Centring Pen's character as lesbian challenges Simon Baron-Cohen's contested male brain theory of autism, in which the 'neuroqueer' dimension is under-researched. Baron-Cohen's model autism has been criticised for implicit gender bias and reification of the gender binary.[32] There is a statistically significant overlap between gender and neuro-diversity, and female-identified neurodivergent people have the highest rate of identifying as asexual.[33] Pen's crush, Alice, is asexual (ACE) and, although not openly identified in the text as neurodivergent, can be thought of as neuroqueer, as she says she 'felt *different* to everyone else' (RP 229), describing herself in tropes such as being alien,[34] adopted, a changeling,[35] or from another planet or

[29] Saunders, 'Emilie Pine'.

[30] In 2023, for the first time in the USA, autism among white children was assessed lower than other racial/ethnic groups. See 'Autism Spectrum Disorder'.

[31] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1996).

[32] Simon Baron-Cohen, 'The Extreme Male Brain Theory of Autism', *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 6:6 (2002): 248–54.

[33] Nick Walker, *Neuroqueer Heresies: Notes on the Neurodiversity Paradigm, Autistic Empowerment, and Postnormal Possibilities* (Fort Worth: Autonomous Press, 2021); Hilary Bush, Lindsay Williams and Eva Mendes, 'Brief Report: Asexuality and Young Women on the Autism Spectrum', *Journal of Autism Developmental Disorders* 51:2 (2021): 725–33.

[34] Emily Paige Ballou, Sharon da Vanport and Morénike Giwa Onaiwu, eds, *Sincerely, Your Autistic Child* (New York: Beacon Press, 2021).

[35] Caitriona Lally's *Eggshells* (New York: Melville House Publishing, 2017) has been read as a novel with a possibly autistic protagonist who see themselves as a

universe, terms that are familiar in the self-authoring of neurodivergent people, even those who are lovingly supported and affirmed.[36] When Pen 'could see Alice and her in the mirror at the same time', she noted that 'Alice smiled, a real smile, not like the fake- mirror-posse one' (RP 33), suggesting a pattern of camouflaging that resonated with Pen's own survival strategies. Moreover, even while sitting beside Pen, Alice prefers texting to talking to Pen; texting or exchanging voice messages can be a preferred mode of communication as telephone calls and face-to-face talking can be more exhausting and difficult. Although Pen admires Alice as the person she knows who 'least cares about what people think', Alice has still internalised the language of deficit and lack, indicated when she says, 'it's like the bit that connects looking to feeling doesn't, like, work in me' (RP 229). The novel orients the reader to Claire's parenting practices when Alice describes how her parents are not like Claire, but just made her keep a diary of her 'feelings as if it doesn't really matter' (RP 229).

The privileging of Claire's perspective and neuroaffirming mothering intervenes with the interfaces examined in Catherine Tan's *Spaces on the Spectrum: How Autism Movements Resist Experts and Create Knowledge*,[37] where the differing needs and experiences of parents and carers of autistic children come into conflict with adult autistic-led activism.[38] Claire is explicitly not an 'autism mom', and the novel counters the 'warrior mother' discourse so prevalent in the media, where autism is largely framed as a tragedy, penance and cross to bear for the embattled 'autism mom' who seeks to 'save' her child from autism.[39] To be a mother in a pro-natalist and industrialised culture who has 're/produced' a child who may not *produce* or *reproduce*, is implicitly shameful'[40] for not being 'enough' and not re/producing 'enough'; this powerful ideological conscription to patriarchal capitalism is resisted by the novel when Ruth is able to accept she is 'enough' in herself, challenging her fear that Aidan believes

changeling. See Molly Ferguson, 'The Changeling Legend and Queer Kinship in Caitriona Lally's Eggshells', *Irish University Review* 51:2 (Autumn–Winter 2021): 296–311, and Kathleen Costello-Sullivan's essay in this volume.

[36] Joanne Limburg, *Letters to My Weird Sisters* (London: Atlantic Books, 2021).

[37] Catherine Tan, *Spaces on the Spectrum: How Autism Movements Resist Experts and Create Knowledge* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2024), 12.

[38] Meghan Ashburn and Jules Edwards, *I will Die on this Hill*: *Autistic Adults, Autism Parents, and the Children Who Deserve a Better World* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishing, 2023).

[39] Mary Barbera, *Turn Autism Around: An Action Guide for Parents of Young Children with Early Signs of Autism* (London: Hay House, 2021).

[40] Tan, *Spaces on the Spectrum*, 39.

'that without children she is not enough', and when Pen texts Alice to say, 'you are enough' (RP 172).

Claire and Pen's relationship is contrasted with the neurodivergent-coded shadow story of Ruth's fractured relationship with her mother.[41] The novel highlights a trauma-frame as Ruth digests instances of her mother's emotional abuse, but the episodes recounted intimate the trauma origin as Ruth's mother struggles to survive in a neurotypical world; Ruth's character is neurodivergently drawn. Her mother calls her a 'drama queen' (RP 75) and tells her there is '*no need to make everything a production*' (RP 3). Ruth's mother's 'thing' – which was 'not getting tea' in a café or elsewhere, because 'you couldn't ensure the water was just boiled or scald the pot or chose the mug' (RP 91), is suggestive of neurodivergent sensory experiences, and when Ruth describes her 'mother's constant fury' (RP 78), it indicates not only the meltdowns and anxiety that arise from negotiating neurotypical expectations, but also a compensatory parenting pattern to quell her fear that her daughter will suffer as she has, so she seeks to shame Ruth into neuroconforming,[42] as shown by this poignant account of the repression of Ruth's echolaliac joy:

> [Ruth] must have been about five, and she'd sung (delighted with herself) over and over, the song about the bear going over the mountain to see what he could see. But her mother had hated it, told her to shut up, and when Ruth had kept going, she had stopped the car, made her get out, told her to stand by the side of the road, 'don't move, now'. Ruth had not dared move, had only stood and watched as her mother had driven away. She'd come back, of course she had, but Ruth had learned her lesson. (RP 91)

Terrifying her daughter into suppressing her vocal stim, as well as dismissing Ruth's feelings as 'dramatic', all so that the family stage could be reserved just for acting out her own psychodrama, is illustrative of the intergenerational trauma load that can get passed down and imprinted via shame behaviours when parents are misunderstood, under-resourced and unsupported. Alison Kafer, in *Feminist Queer Crip* (2013), explores the shame carried by the body that 'echoes

[41] Devon Price notes links between ABA and the controversial 'Pray the Gay Away' therapy used to 'cure' homosexuality. Devon Price, *Unmasking Autism: Discovering the New Faces of Neurodiversity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2022).

[42] Sara Gibbs documents the shaming labels she endured growing up autistic in *Drama Queen: One Autistic Woman and a Life of Unhelpful Labels* (London: Headline Publishing Group, 2021).

what nobody wants to hear',[43] and thus we can read the shaming that is involved in the extraordinary efforts: to repress, supress and reduce echolalia and repetition, the bodily self-soothing and expression of stimming to fit with neurotypical social interactions as a violating resistance to a set of knowledges – epistemologies and indeed ontologies – that disrupt, extend and 'queer' received knowledge of human value. Ruth's early trauma primes her to live in a body that seems to 'echo what nobody wants to hear', and she wrestles with being both 'difficult' and 'infertile', exceeding both designations, but not before she confronts what it could mean when Aidan called her 'not easy' (RP 172).

When Ruth muses that 'Aidan is right, Ruth has never figured that out, a way to be *easy* around others', it suggests that neurotypical socialising is hard for her, and her description of music as a 'shield' reads as a neurodivergent assimilation tactic that allows one to be in the group yet safely apart, because 'you were always liked if you could play an instrument, you were called on at parties, and you were given space and brought close, all at the same time'. Ruth wonders if 'music was a mask, like any other', and whether 'playing an instrument is maybe more of a shield than a mask' (RP 41), and she describes the 'pure joy of wholly being themselves with each other' when with Aidan (RP 173). Although 'masking' is the umbrella term most commonly used by autistic people, masking is more precisely considered a subset of 'camouflaging'.[44] Camouflaging is broadly comprised of compensatory behaviours such as using social scripts, suppressing neurodivergent behaviours and assimilation, fitting in with others to avoid the pain of social exclusion; not all neurodivergent people mask, and many simply remain their authentic selves.

Neurodivergent masking is differentiated from style shifting – the general social practices of assuming different behaviours in different contexts – because camouflaging involves hiding so-called deficits and unacceptable characteristics across all dominant neurogroup contexts. It involves a relentless cognitive and emotional cost. It is more akin to racial and cultural code-switching, where racially privileged socio-cultural norms are mirrored to avoid adverse consequences (which also means of course that masking black and brown neurodivergent people are even more adversely effected). When Ruth 'looks in the mirror, sees her still creased face, sees her body in the

[43] Alison Kafer, *Feminist Queer Crip* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013).
[44] Eva Silvertint, 'Embrace Autism', accessed 24 June 2024, https://embrace-autism.com/autism-and-camouflaging/

Navy suit, thinks, oh, this is who I am' (RP 4), she is guided by these external coordinates; her not asking for help 'was to do with shame, usually' (RP 54), as to do so would negate the point of camouflaging: the point of which is to hide so-called deficits. Ruth relies heavily on social and professional scripts and, as a psychotherapist, has an occupation that self-selects highly for neurodivergent people (human behaviour as a special interest).

Ruth's description of normally having 'more margin' (RP 70) suggests the edge of autistic burn-out, and while her realisation that 'she has no clothes for who she is meant to be today. Counsellor. Patient. Wife' (RP 3) might suggest code-switching, her internal musings tend more towards 'not losing face'/mask, when she tries to 'summon the calm face, the blank canvas, the friendly manner' (RP 44), and she 'hates' that she is 'caught out' by Lisa, when 'a flash of worry' crosses 'her face' (RP 127). Ruth also displays multi-sensory engagement: 'her clothes still feel strange on her, reminding her of the body underneath' (RP 115); she wakes up with a 'sticky after-feeling' (RP 1) and notes that 'the hand soap dispenser feels sticky' (RP 144); she 'listens to the growing boil of the water' (RP 18), her hairdryer 'roar' (RP 4) and enjoys the huge sensory hit from her food, which is 'crispy, salty, cheesy'; she demonstrates a strong sense of smell, noting 'the scent of olives or spices' (RP 18). She seeks out windows, which provide not only a source of natural light but also a multi-sensory corrective to the assault of fluorescent and artificial light on the body/mind of neurodivergent people, and as Ruth keeps vigil with her dying mother she thinks 'still it was nice to be by a window' (RP 81). Moreover, Ruth directs herself through the day with an internal monologue comprised of instructions, imperatives and exhortations. When she crosses Pen's path, Ruth is pleased 'with acting on feeling' (RP 87), which not only implies she acts a lot 'on script', but also insinuates that she felt an inter-bodily recognition of a familiar neurotype.

When, in *Divergent Mind: thriving in a World that Wasn't Designed for You*, Jenara Nerenberg wrote that 'women walk around with unnecessary amounts of shame, guilt, depression, and anxiety [since] our reality has not been properly validated',[45] she referred to the health cost carried by generations of women shamed for multiple health issues, many of which now increasingly appear to be related to neurodivergence: the pain in a woman/AFAB's 'mind' now appears to be 'in the body' after all. Research on the nervous and sensory as well as the musculoskeletal systems has identified co-occurring conditions

[45] Nerenberg, '*Divergent Mind*', 33.

due to the actions of myelin and collagen in the bodies of neurodivergent people that suggests a whole body and brain structural design. For instance, autistic communities fondly refer to 'T-Rex arms', a signature neurodivergent way of holding the hands which relieves the unconscious sense that shoulders may be dislocating due to joint lability; researchers are now also exploring how the different collagen structures of neurodivergent bodies and brains may account for signature cognitive patterns.

The high co-occurrence of Ehlers–Danlos syndromes, as well as generalised joint hypermobility, with neurodivergence, is being explored as a common aetiology for seemingly unconnected endocrine and gynaecological conditions such as endometriosis, fibroids and unexplained infertility (as experienced by Ruth), auto-immune diseases, fibromyalgia, CFS/ME and chronic joint pain.[46] Ruth, who isn't described as hypermobile, does do 'Yoga' (RP 91), has 'fibroids' (RP 90–1) and is hyper-aware of her joints and her flexibility: when Ruth wakes up, 'Her right hip is stiff, knuckles massage the part where the edges – is there something wrong with it? With the bone, the socket, the joint? (RP 3) and, in the National Gallery, her 'neck is sore from being bent back' (RP 14), where she not only looks at the paintings but also finds herself in them. In the gallery, Ruth has a full-body encounter with Mainie Jellett's painting *Decoration* (1923), where she 'imagines herself in it, being held within it'. The novel spotlights the gallery artwork label, which includes the detail that it was bequeathed by the stained-glass artist and painter Evie Hone in 1955. Ruth finds herself enfolded in this 'painting that looks like a collage, like the outline of a house, like the inside of a person' (RP 152), which, like much modernist art and writing in its time (like the queer woman artist who painted it), challenged inherited norms. When first exhibited it was called 'subhuman art',[47] by George Russell (aka 'Æ'). Inti Guerrero, curator of the 2018 EVA International biennial, noted that Russell's medicalised language is comparable to '[degenerate] art, the pathology given by the Third Reich to modernist artists'.[48]

Ruth's synesthetic response to this 'de-generational' picture with its historical and eugenic undertones of sub-humanity, its materiality noted – made from tempera, an egg medium – as well as the neuroqueer echo-phenomena of the window art of Hone (Jellett's partner)

[46] See Barb Cook and Michelle Garnett, eds, *Spectrum Women: Walking to the Beat of Autism* (London: Jessica Kingsley, 2018).

[47] George Russell, 'Irish Statesman', 27 October 1923, 207–8.

[48] Sarah Bochiccio, 'The Female Painter whose Modern Art Shocked Ireland', *Artsy*, 18 April 2018.

all contribute to what Melanie Remi Yergeau terms 'resonance'. This autistic-led concept describes a multimodal form of communication or recognition, a form of 'interbodily knowing' and 'reverbing', a perceptibility that is also expressed by Pen when she says that 'people vibrate too' (RP 204).[49] Jellett's argument, in 'An Approach to Painting', also 'reverbs' in this moment: her view that the 'artist' was 'a special person, an exotic flower set apart from other people is one of the errors resulting from the industrial revolution',[50] parallels the increasing marginalisation of 'un-productive' or un-abled – read neurodivergent – people since industrialisation. 'Resonance' can extend the interpretive paradigms available to readers of cultures, visibilising autistic experience while refusing to partake in the patronising and illusory 'unified field paradigm of autism: whether social first theories (like theory of mind or mirror neuron), phenomenological theories (like weak central coherence), or neurosensory theories (like intense world syndrome)',[51] so powerfully identified by Valente. 'Resonance' operates as a counter to symptomatic thinking, and constitutes what Yergeau calls an 'autistic heuristic',[52] with its refusal to excise the body from the picture, and it draws on Sara Acevedo's theory of 'embodiminds',[53] which opens the possibility of representing neurodiversity while resisting the reliance on the dehumanising and contradictory lists of what Valente has termed 'symptomatic markers'.[54]

Claire's parenting could be read as an example of what Valente calls the 'normativity Mom', who, by 'shifting to a celebration of the triumphant aspects of autism itself', makes a 'more explicit gesture in the direction of neurodiversity',[55] but given Claire's slowness to 'see' that Pen is autistic, it could equally have been because she didn't relate 'neurotypically' to her daughter. In other words, perhaps Claire didn't 'notice' because associational and interbodily reverberation created a 'resonance' with each other in the relationship they

[49] Melanie Remi Yergeau, *Authoring Autism: On Rhetoric and Neurological Queerness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).
[50] Mainie Jellett, 'An Approach to Painting', in Angela Bourke et al., eds, *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing, Vol. V, Irish Women's Writing and Traditions* (Lawrence Hill, Derry, Northern Ireland: Field Day, 1991–2002), 1,085–6.
[51] Valente, 'This Disability', 37.
[52] Yergeau, *Authoring Autism*, 302.
[53] Sara M. Acevedo Espinal, '"Effective Schooling", The Age of Capital: Critical Insights from Advocacy Anthropology, Anthropology of Education, and Critical Disability Studies', *Canadian Journal of Disability Studies* 9:5 (2020): 265–301.
[54] Valente, 'This Disability', 35.
[55] Joseph Valente, 'All Better? Recovery Anxiety in the Writing of Autism', *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies* 12:4 (2018): 493.

shared.[56] Increasingly, neurodivergence is identified as a heredity, and so neurodivergence is likely to be a pattern in Pen's family. The playwright Jody O'Neill, who served as a consultant on Pine's novel, and whose plays include *What I (Don't) Know about Autism* and *Yellow*, has spoken how, while 'researching autism on account of her son's diagnosis in 2016', she 'became fascinated with the subject and saw similarities between herself and her child'. O'Neill 'describes her own diagnosis of autism at the age of 39 as an overwhelmingly positive experience',[57] and this follows an increasingly common pattern whereby parents of neurodivergent children come to an awareness of their own, as well as ancestral, neurotypes, through their children's assessments. Claire makes her living through having a professional special interest ('SpIn'). It is not a leap to describe academic specialisation as a version of 'hyper-fixation', given the hyperfocus and niche interest that is needed to complete a PhD, or subsequent research, and this seems a more likely alignment with neurodivergent monotropism[58] than with the wider, more consistent and less intense range of evenly distributed neurotypical interests and cognition.

Claire is highly trained in 'reading', in decoding and seeing the patterns across texts and subtexts, and *Ruth & Pen* abounds with literary self-reflexivity – Cristin Leach obverses that it's a story of 'things misheard, not heard, not said, and misunderstood',[59] ironically, a description that appears to reflect the array of supposedly autistic deficits in communication that still form part of the diagnostic processes today, but which also leads us into the terrain of literary criticism,[60] particularly post-structuralist-inflected literary criticism, in which all readings are misreadings. Claire notes that Pen is better at English literature than her school teacher, and 'Pen thinks of the way words touch the surface of things, sliding across the world and your tongue. Some words can make you feel loved and soft, and others dent and damage' (RP 23). But far from mishearing, not saying and misunderstanding, *Ruth & Pen* resonates and ripples with meaning. Claire wishes she 'could change' the other people, not her

[56] Damian Milton, 'On the ontological status of autism: the "double empathy problem"', *Disability & Society* 27:6 (2012): 883–7.

[57] Jody O'Neill, 'In the arts, more and more people are presenting as neurodivergent', *Irish Examiner*, 13 June 2002.

[58] A. Grissom, E. Fink and E. Zane, 'Verbal Fluency and Autism: Reframing Current Data Through the Lens of Monotropism', *Autism Research* 17:2 (2024): 24–337.

[59] Cristín Leach, 'Book of the Week', RTÉ, 4 June 2022. https://www.rte.ie/culture/2022/0604/1302320-book-of-the-week-ruth-and-pen-by-emilie-pine/

[60] Julie Brown, *Writers on the Spectrum: How Autism and Asperger Syndrome have Influenced Literary Writing* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2009).

daughter; Claire's name relates to 'illustrious', being clear and bright, and she dares us to shame her beloved daughter, warning us too not to 'fall for that old shame trick'. As an English professor and professional interpreter of texts, she provides perspective and serves as an orienting point of view for the reader, when she asserts that, as far as Pen's life is concerned, 'all she can do is watch' (RP 111); on her 'watch', she guards against and deflects the shame willed on her daughter by 'other people' – who turn out to be us. She not only neurodiversifies the world for her daughter, but also does the same for her students, the 'aliens' (RP 108) in the classroom, and for us as readers. As a literary scholar, she functions to emphasise the need for narrative refiguring so that readers in the future will be less likely to ask 'what's the point of having an autistic character'.

The recurrent motifs of windows and mirrors highlight what can be made visible in inherited interpretative epistemological frames. When Ruth and Pen's paths cross, Ruth asks to take Pen and Alice's photo – on her camera phone, a technology that reproduces images via refraction of light through a window onto a mirror (RP 86–7). Although, when the 'the girls move into frame', Ruth has no intention of keeping the picture thus framed, and we are moved into a new unframed space (RP 87) which represents the ongoing resituating of knowledge via bodies and space, tallying with Rebecca-Eli M. Long's argument that 'neurodiversity should not only refer to many types of "embodiminds", but also a diversity of knowledge-making practices, including cripistemologies [. . .] made at moments of crises'.[61] In *Ruth & Pen*, when each embodimind makes their way through the spaces of Dublin, cripistemologies are created at moments of epistemic crises, and the city is neurodiversally remapped (quite differently from *Ulysses*) and the metrics of their steps aligns with Stenning's exploration of walking as a form of embodied autistic cognition.[62] The novel invites us off the two-dimensional flat page of the book into multi-dimensional spaces, including the National Gallery, where Ruth sensory merging with Jellett's contemporaneously transgressive painting and Pen's nervous system reset represent moments of deshaming.

The text thus reads as the novelistic corelative of Jos Boys's and Zoe Partington's 'DisOrdinary Architecture', which aims to redesign

[61] Rebecca-Eli M. Long, 'Security Blanket: Neuroqueer Knitting in Pandemic Times', *Lateral* 11:2 (2022).

[62] Anna Stenning, 'Autism and Cognitive Embodiment: Steps Towards a Non-ableist Walking Literature', in David Borthwick, Pippa Maryland and Anna Stenning, eds, *Walking, Landscape and Environment* (London: Routledge, 2019), 149–67.

urban and built space to accommodate those currently disabled by public environments.[63] The novel pays unusual attention to the spaces between bodies and objects, substituting the more usual prepositions and persons/people terminology: Ruth is acutely aware of 'no other bodies in the building' (RP 74), Claire, 'looking at the bodies in front of her' (RP 108) and Claire 'puts an apple on the table in front of [Pen's] body' (RP 12). Each character 'misfits' environments, and while herself in space remaps norms by proprioceptively remapping their own embodimind in the city's spaces.[64] For instance, Ruth may wish to be the 'home' Aidan comes home to, her final choice not to continue with the IVF, makes her unhomely, unheimlich, according to the coordinates of woman and home in articles 41, marginalised and misfitting, as does the medical language about her womb, that designates it a 'hostile environment' (RP 196). Ruth becomes home to herself, and her relationship, as the novel 'unravels experiences' of 'architectural misfitting across built, conceptual and disciplinary spaces reveal shared patterns of invisibility and marginalization, as well as differences and tensions in how othering is made concrete',[65] demonstrating Yergeau's argument that including the phenomenological as an 'autistic rhetoric' extends our range of understanding of multiple planes of communication.[66] *Ruth & Pen* remaps not so much the spaces of Dublin but knowledge making through multimodal communications across its spaces, creating cripistemologies that have potential to undo the binary on which what Valente calls the 'auttype' can continue to produce harm.

[63] Jos Boys, 'Call to Action', *Journal of Architectural Education* 74:2 (2020): 171.
[64] Stenning, 'Misfits'.
[65] Boys, 'Call to Action', 171.
[66] Yergeau, *Authoring Autism*, 302.