



# **Elijah's Cup: A Family's Journey into the Community and Culture of High-Functioning Autism and Asperger's Syndrome**

*Valerie Paradiz*

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Faced with her two-year-old toddler's precipitous bout with epilepsy and his puzzling behaviors, Valerie Paradiz took a bold and unusual path, coming to terms with and ultimately embracing the strange beauty of her son Elijah's special neurological disorder, which was diagnosed as Asperger's syndrome, a form of autism.

In *Elijah's Cup*, Paradiz tells the powerful story of her family's struggle with her son's disease, one characterized by social awkwardness, literal-mindedness, and a fixation with particular subjects and interests. Like attention deficit disorder (ADD), dyslexia, depression, and obsessive-compulsive disorder, Asperger's has exploded in diagnosis in the last decade, reconfiguring the known incidence of autism in the population with estimates as high as one in fifty people.

Ever since autism was "discovered" by researchers in the 1940s, the disability has been under the strict purview of professionals in medicine, psychiatry, and education. Like the deaf community, autistics themselves have had little voice in expressing their real experience and needs. They were framed as too "sick" to be conscious of their own internal lives, too "mentally ill" to possess an identity. All this has changed.

Today there is a blossoming movement of autistic self-advocacy groups and alliances that pose challenging questions to the medical status quo. A fascinating, independent expression of another way of life, full of quirkiness, hardship, and humor, has emerged. *Elijah's Cup* is a provocative and pioneering book that pushes the envelope of what we know about autism. Were Andy Warhol, Albert Einstein, and the comedian Andy Kaufman, whom we usually think of as brilliant eccentrics, autistic? Can these figures serve as role models to this community?

*Elijah's Cup* offers a refreshing take on mental disability from the perspective of civil rights, history, and the arts. From encounters with the founders of the first civil rights organizations for autistics, who guide Paradiz and her son toward a sense of community and self-respect, and with visual artists, who share with Elijah their special ability to "think in pictures," Elijah reaches extraordinary heights in his sociability and emotional well-being.

In this utterly absorbing and inspiring narrative, Paradiz also reveals her own shadow syndrome, which afflicts many family members of autistics. She is a "cousin," a genetic link to her son's autism. Standing as she does on this cultural borderline, Paradiz is a sensitive translator between two worlds, revealing a groundbreaking insider's view of the beauty of minds hidden in the shadows of autism.

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