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## Review of Look Me in the Eye: My Life with Asperger's.

Robinson, J. E. (2007). *Look Me in the Eye: My Life with Asperger's*. New York, NY: Crown Publishing.

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This straightforward autobiography chronicles the life of John Elder Robinson and his journey living with Asperger's syndrome. The author was encouraged to share his story by his younger brother, Augusten Burroughs, who wrote the memoirs *Running with Scissors* and *You Better Not Cry: Stories for Christmas*. Robinson writes chronologically about his strange childhood, his young adulthood, and finally his Asperger's diagnosis at age thirty-nine. He explains the most common symptoms of Asperger's syndrome and how they affected his daily life. At times it is difficult to decide whether Robinson is simply writing his autobiography, or whether he has alternative agendas- to raise awareness of Asperger's disease or even potentially shed light on an unsuspecting reader's own Asperger's.

Robinson describes Asperger's as "... not a disease. It's a way of being. There is no cure, nor is there a need for one" (p.6). People with Asperger's are born with it, and studies show that 1 in 150 people have Asperger's or another autism spectrum disorder. Asperger's syndrome was added to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders in 1984, after being discovered by Austrian psychiatrist Hans Asperger (p.3). It is often characterized by professionals as a high functioning version of autism, although among Aspergians there are differently levels of functionality. According to Robinson, "Asperger's exists along a continuum -- some people exhibit the symptoms to such a degree that their ability to function alone in society is seriously impaired" (p.3). On the other hand, some Aspergian children display rare gifts, such as high intelligence level or musical ability.

In the prologue, the author explains some of the personal symptoms he displayed as a child that would suggest an autism spectrum disorder. He didn't have the ability to empathize with others, and he often felt uncomfortable or out of place in social situations. Robinson describes constantly thinking he was different from other children, but neither he nor his parents gave much thought as to why. One of the biggest bones of contention he had with his father and his teachers was the inability to look them in the eye (hence the title). Robinson had trouble making friends in school, much like the many Aspergians that have problems playing well with other children, because they are often not skilled conversationalists and lack the necessary communication and social skills needed for "normal interaction". He says, "people with Asperger's or autism often lack the feelings of empathy that naturally guide most people in their interactions with others" (p. 11).

The first few chapters chronicle Robinson's experiences as a child, and his interactions with his parents. It's easy to empathize with Robinson's difficulty making friends with his fellow classmates, because of subpar conversation skills. Something he didn't understand until young adulthood was that "successful conversations require a give and take between both people. Being Aspergian, I missed that. Totally" (p. 11). He has few friends throughout his childhood, and often prefers playing alone. He doesn't have much of a relationship with his mother; in fact she is absent throughout much of his childhood. His father, an abusive alcoholic, lashes out at him for some of his antisocial behavior, and at other times respects his privacy and leaves him alone. Perhaps the most interesting thing about Robinson's young adult experience is his own perception of his Asperger's (although he was undiagnosed at the time). He is fairly confident in his thinking processes, explaining how he must "put things in perspective" (p.32). A notorious prankster, Robinson enjoys deceiving his younger brother as well as the rest of the community, but often in sadistic ways. He never seems to feel remorse for his actions, but rather justifies them because if no harm comes to anyone he doesn't feel he's done anything wrong. Throughout his young adulthood, he explains that "as I got older, I found myself in trouble more and more for saying things that were true, but people didn't want to hear. I did not understand tact" (p.32).

After leaving home at the age of sixteen, Robinson discovers a passion for electric wiring, and fixing musical equipment such as guitars and amplifiers, in particular. His aptitude for math is common of many Aspergians: more abstract subjects like English and history are much more difficult because they are less logical and concrete. The author describes his life fixing amps for various bands gratifying because "...I think I can relate better to a good machine than any kind of person" (p.151). His quirks and idiosyncrasies can be endearing at times, but his self-righteous attitude and the way he describes them may turn the reader off as well. It can be difficult to relate to some of Robinson's thinking processes, but the book is

enlightening nonetheless and must be taken with a grain of salt. With the risk of spoiling the book's ending, Robinson does end up better off than where he started, and actually settles into a life that fits his personality traits, Aspergian and all.

**Look Me in the Eye** addresses a lot of common misconceptions about people with differences such as Asperger's syndrome. Robinson explains his own thoughts, feelings, and perceptions about Asperger's and then elaborates on his own symptoms to shed light on a commonly misunderstood autism spectrum disorder. The autobiography is both informative and moving, and opens the door for more candid discussion of personal differences that affect our everyday lives. Readers can be encouraged by the fact that Robinson has begun to view his Asperger's not as something that holds him back, but rather makes him stand out in a positive way. In his own words, "... I'm not defective. In fact, in recent years I have started to see that we Aspergians are better than normal!" (p.240).