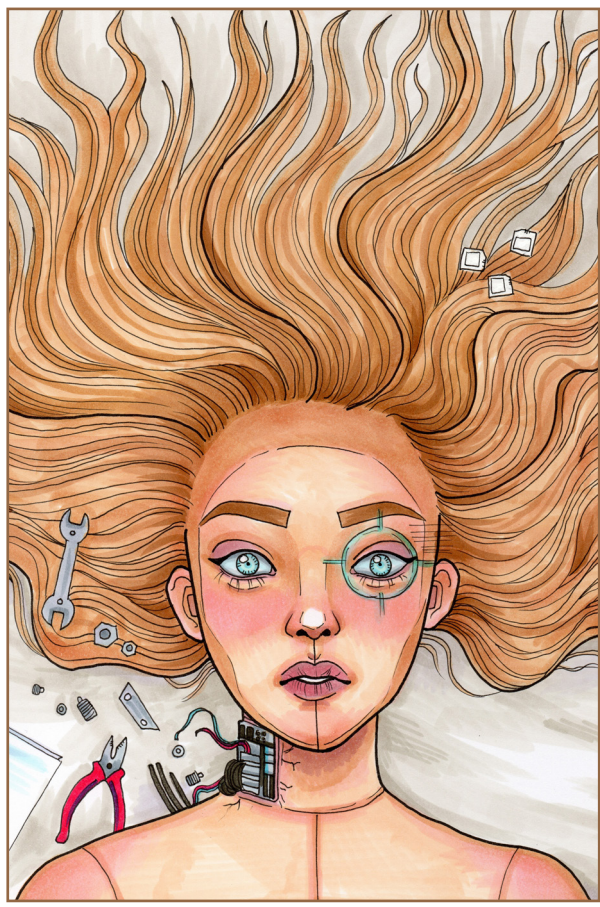


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Writers helping writers



DECEMBER 2017 A Writer's Journey No 12: Naomi Moore

Counting your lucky stars



Matthew Schwass counts his lucky stars every day, and in his autistic world there is a vast universe of phenomena, far-away suns included, for which he gives thanks to God.

Matthew stands for a long time in front of a tree and takes in the shape and shift of each leaf: its veins, its reach for the light, its connectedness to a frail branch or a strong trunk, its nourishment to a caterpillar, and shelter to a family of thrush.

In water, he sees a reflection of himself.

In the face of people, he sees their thoughts and beliefs: their lack of understanding of someone 'not normal'. In their voice, he hears fear. In the line of their mouth, he recognises anxiety, and amusement. Looking into their heart, he sees the goodness and light within.

What goes on in the mind of an autistic man who can't communicate verbally and who, by his own admission, is trapped in a body that doesn't always do what his mind wills?

Matthew communicates by using an old light-writer device. His poetry book *Thoughts Twinks & Truths from Me to You* was written on this basic but effective machine. Years of observations contained in a 106-page volume of poems. As you read this Midpoint, *Thoughts Twinks & Truths from Me to You* is hot off the press and launched from a backwater New Zealand town called Te Puke, into our imperfect literary world.

The mystery of what goes on inside Matthew's mind is laid out in black and white. There are no grey areas. However, don't be fooled by outward appearances. Mattie, as his family and friends call him, has a BA in English Literature from Massey University.

Creative writing has long been advocated as a healing tool for people with physical and intellectual disability, mental illness, and personality disorder. Write-to heal programmes are valuable avenues for self-expression, without a doubt.

But let's consider the broader social and psychological implications. Using creative writing as a key to unlock the door to hidden inner worlds (solitary, sometimes dark; often not) is a potent eye-opener. In this way, we can discover, learn from, and enjoy the 'secret world' of those who live an alternate reality.

For example, Naoki Higashida is a highly-acclaimed Japanese poet, novelist and essayist. For most of his life he struggled to make himself understood by people around him. His book, *The Reason I Jump: One Boy's Voice from the Silence of Autism*, was published in English in 2013, it's been making waves ever since and is now available in over thirty languages.

Like Naoki, Mattie was diagnosed with severe autism (ASD) when he was young – only three years old. Like Stephen Hawking, Mattie also has cerebral palsy, though on a lower spectrum.

I started mentoring Mattie with his poetry in 2015. I had previous experience working with people with disabilities in expressing themselves in creative writing, yet the opportunity to work alongside Matthew came out of the blue. As before, I had no idea if Matthew could even hold a pen, let alone string two comprehensible sentences together.

As it turned out he *couldn't* hold a pen, his syntax is imperfect, but his writing makes more sense and has a bigger impact than some 'normal' writing I've pulled off the bookshelf.

I know Mattie got joy and satisfaction out of our collaboration. What I got out of it, was a valuable lesson in not underestimating the power of the human heart or spirit, and the ability and potential of those with a 'disability.'

Matthew's poetry book is not published as writing by an autistic man; it is published as creative literature in its own right by a man who loves to write poetry. I would like to think it will be read, and not judged, as such.

Regardless, whether *Thoughts, Twinks & Truths from Me to You* is a literary success is of no consequence. Now it has been launched, if it hits the moon, then Diana, goddess of the hunt, nature and the night, will be enriched and enlightened. If it misses and flies out to the stars, it will be Mattie's shining light.