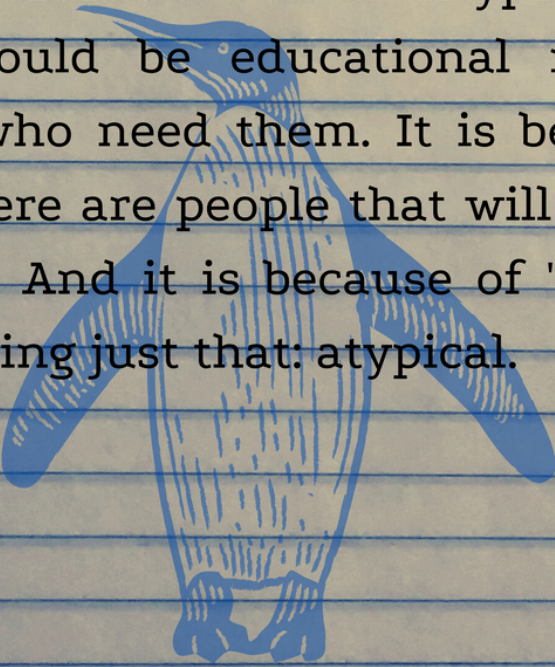
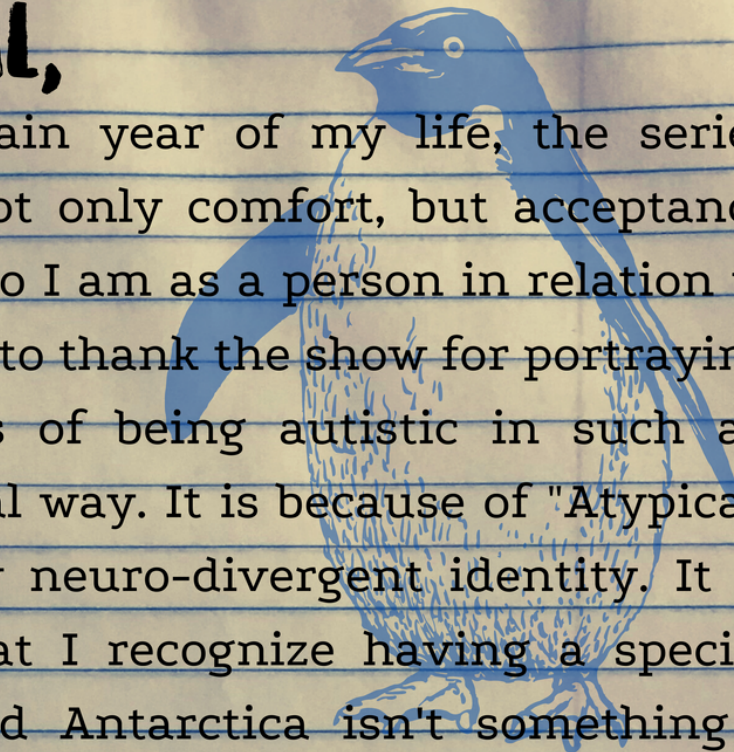



# DEAR ATYPICAL,

During the most uncertain year of my life, the series "Atypical" brought me not only comfort, but acceptance and understanding of who I am as a person in relation to the world I live in. I want to thank the show for portraying the day-to-day obstacles of being autistic in such an authentic and educational way. It is because of "Atypical" that I have accepted my neuro-divergent identity. It is because of "Atypical" that I recognize having a special interest in penguins and Antarctica isn't something I should be made fun of for. It is because of "Atypical" that I now see that there should be educational resources available to the people who need them. It is because of "Atypical" that I know there are people that will love and accept me for who I am. And it is because of "Atypical" that I am at peace with being just that: atypical.



**SINCERELY,  
A HUMAN FEMALE**

# LIVING AT AN ANGLE

Unable to read any non-verbal facial cues when people have masks on

COVID-19 leads to even more isolation for neuro-divergent people

Online education doesn't allow the opportunity to pick up on social cues that autistic people usually rely on in person

The unpredictability of public health guidelines and abrupt changes in routine are challenging to manage

Special education classes are being separated from the standard education system due to the pandemic; we have lost decades of inclusivity progress

Neuro-divergent people have asked for online forms of education for years and were ignored. Now that it is a necessity for the majority of neuro-typical people, education options are being implemented easily

# ANTARCTICA

Students who were high-achieving and constantly praised for their intelligence in younger grades are now part of a wave of burnt-out youth facing the harsh realities of "Gifted Kid Syndrome" in high school, post-secondary education, and adulthood. Students who are considered gifted are encouraged to overwork themselves in high school, never learn basic life skills, fail to adapt to the gap closing between them and their peers, and suffer much higher rates of physical and mental illnesses as a result. What causes "Gifted Kid Syndrome" and what responsibilities do educators across the western world have to stop this epidemic of ruining otherwise brilliant young minds?

High school is challenging enough as it is, especially when within only the past decade, the public-school system has become even more detrimental to students, specifically those who are gifted. Now, more than ever before, students are subjected to harder work, more standardized testing designed for failure, and adults constantly reminding you that you won't amount to anything if you don't go to post-secondary school. Not only are we expected to have exceptional grades, we're expected to be in every extracurricular activity, have a job, learn to drive, have our entire futures mapped out, and have a social life. We're hypocritically told to be independent in the same breath we're told that we need to raise our hand and ask for permission to eat, drink, and use the washroom. At the least, adolescents need nine hours of sleep each night; this is impossible to do when the majority of students are unable to go to bed, much less fall asleep, before eleven at night due to their job or homework, and then are expected to be awake, sometimes at six in the morning or earlier, to catch the bus, a sports practice, or other extracurricular functions. Simply put: the school system was never designed with those who actually attend it in mind. For gifted kids, this is even worse. These are the students who stay up even later trying to balance their community volunteering with their job, their sports practices with their band rehearsals, and a barely adequate self-care regimen while trying to maintain their 100% average. "Gifted Kid Syndrome" forces these students to feel like they need to do it all, and believe me, they do, but at some very high costs.

"Gifted Kid Syndrome" begins early in elementary school and has lasting social, physical, and psychological effects on students throughout high school, post-secondary education, and adulthood, impairing their ability to function and to develop a self-effacing personality. Personally, I was reading at a twelfth-grade level in grade three; I would borrow, read, and return three to five novels from the school library each day, and I was always done classwork in less than half the time given. My teachers didn't know what to do with me, so they either let me borrow three to five more books or walk laps in the hallways for the remainder of class. I never learned the material; I learned the process. I learned how to complete assignments with minimal effort in minimal time and still constantly receive nothing short of 100%. Nothing was ever challenging. Nowadays, I struggle to have the attention to read a menu at a restaurant. Suddenly, you're ten years old before you learn to tie your shoes, fourteen before you learn how to load a dishwasher properly, and sixteen before you learn how to do your own laundry. The gifted kids now spend their days isolated

# ANTARCTICA

and huddled under weighted blankets because nobody bothered to teach "the smart kids" basic life skills or street smarts to survive in the real world.

By high school, the gifted kids fail to adapt to their classmates catching up to them academically. They have this constant and overwhelming pressure to be exceptional which eventually makes them crumble. When all you've ever been known as is "the smart kid" it is incredibly damaging when you find out that there will always be a smarter kid. When "smart" is all you've ever been, what are you now if you're not the best? What could have been some of the world's most brilliant people, suffer from burnout by age eighteen, sixteen, or fourteen, and then develop severe mental health issues that people don't care about or seem to notice because "the smart kid" is always perfect, right? It comes as no surprise that gifted students are twice as likely to develop mental illnesses and three times as likely to develop physical illnesses such as allergies, asthma, and auto-immune disorders, compared to the average person. Among the gifted kids, the ones with the poorest mental health are those who are gifted in the arts; their "Gifted Kid Syndrome" is encouraged, by teachers, to create artwork, poetry, solos, or scenes fueled by, and romanticizing, their plummeting mental and physical health.

Currently, schools and teachers are not equipped to support the educational needs of these exceptional young people who are surpassing their peers' intellect from a very young age; changes to the education system for recognizing and teaching gifted kids could prevent the decline in well-being of these students and make being gifted a blessing instead of a curse. As a gifted child in elementary school, I would have been thrilled to have someone listen to my educational needs and challenge me. Individualized plans for the needs of excelling students as well as early intervention from teachers is necessary for the future of a student so they don't suffer the same fate as similar young people before them. There is also a danger in labeling a student as gifted without questioning why. 2.5% of the world's population is considered to be gifted (requiring an IQ above 130) with 0.2% of these gifted people (nearly 11.5 million people worldwide) having Autism Spectrum Disorder. When teachers don't question why someone is gifted, underlying issues go unnoticed which could interfere with a student receiving the education and support they specifically need to reach their potential until it's too late.

How do we want this new generation to fare in the future? How much longer until teachers and entire school systems realize that the way things are right now, aren't working? Students who are gifted need to have an environment in which they are taught how to healthily reach for their academic goals while learning essential skills for life. Gifted students' minds and bodies should not have to suffer due to the misguided raising of their exceptionalism. Having superior intellect is useless, and even very harmful, when there is nothing in place to promote the growth of students in a productive way. To my fellow classmates: please stop and think before you say: "It's so much easier to be smart", and then don't say it.

# THE SILENCING PROPERTIES OF SNOW

i love when it snows through the night into early morn,  
and waking up before the sun has risen to keep that day's  
chilled air slightly warm,  
before the cars stretch and yawn,  
before the traffic lights put a pot of coffee on;  
before the town is awake and crawls of out bed,  
and before it is alive;  
like the white specks dancing round,  
resting in my open-faced palm,  
landing silently and with care.

[Sam] Most people don't give much thought to snow.

But I do.

i love when it snows and it absorbs all the static noise in  
the air;  
the best soundproofing for all of the people whose worlds  
are  
a little too much all at once.

no chatter.

[Sam] When it snows, it gets really quiet because snow actually absorbs sound.

no horns honking.

no windchimes alerting stores to customers coming through  
their doors.

no crunching of snow beneath tires.

So when you get a snowstorm,

just snow;

falling in endless sheets,

remaining untouched until it's not,

the beauty broken by a single footprint.

it's like soundproofing for the entire planet.

i love when it snows in mid to late december.

sometimes i wish it would snow and just never stop snowing  
but what makes things special is their rarity.

snow lets me experience what everyone else's world is like.

i get a taste of normal melting on my tongue  
and catching on my eyelashes.

Sometimes I wish it would snow and just never stop snowing.