An autistic woman resumes her tale of trying to make sense of life.

**SOMEBODY/SOMEWHERE**
Breaking Free From the World of Autism.
by Donna Williams.

By Deborah Tannen

WHEN I received Don­
na Williams’s book “Somebody Som­
ewhere,” my first re­
action was: “She’s already told her story. What more is there to say?” “Somebody Nowhere” was a fascinating memoir of growing up with a viciously abusive moth­
er and a brother who tormented her. That book ended with her awakening at 25, when she dis­
covered a name for what had isolated her — autism. How could she match that extraordin­
ary achievement?

But I knew after the first few pages of “Somebody Some­
where” that I had misjudged. By illuminating her own unique autistic perceptions, she allows us to understand our own percep­
tions as never before.

As Oliver Sacks has said, medicine can provide invaluable insight into chemical and biologi­
cal aspects of illness, but only patients can tell us what their diseases are really like.

Ms. Williams tells us that in her ex­
erience autism is not a lack of aware­
ness of the world, but a heightened awareness of it. Ms. Williams encounters once as a child, learned her lines from sit­
tucoms, Ms. Williams does not seem to think of them as male and female principles, but they are in fact caricatures of stereo­
typical behavior.

Because in her autism she was dissociated from herself, Ms. Williams was able to pick up and imitate both male and female behaviors and speech, demon­
strating, at least in her case, that sex-linked or “gendered” pat­
terns of behavior are not inher­
ent but are learned by watching others.

When “Somebody Somewhere” opens, Ms. Williams is 25 years old and living in London. She has
given up her characters but not yet learned how to function in the world without them: “Willie wasn’t there to help me understand, de­
personsalize, and deny. Carol
wasn’t there to make me laugh and pretend nothing mattered.”

There is as yet no direct link be­tween feeling and expression. Returning to Australia, she en­
rolls in an elementary-school teaching certification program, and she rents an apartment on a farm owned by a couple who be­
come her surrogate family. From them, and from a thera­
pist specializing in autism, she gradu­
ally learns to live in “the world” as her own self, and not a series of performances.

The lessons are extraordinary as they show the complexity of our own daily sense-making.

When Ms. Williams writes that her manuscript would “live” in a tea chest in London, for her this was not a metaphor. She had to learn that objects did not have feelings as humans do — and that humans have feelings in a way that objects don’t. She stands paralyzed before a tiny closet because she cannot bear what she “would have to inflict upon” her clothes by squeezing them in. She apologizes to them as she hangs them up. Realizing that objects are not aware of her existence, are not really “compa­
ny,” leaves her terribly alone.

... … … …

When she could no longer just replay memorized scripts, she had to learn to hear “with mean­ing,” and learn that language is not a weapon with which to at­
tack or a shield to hide behind, but a means of communication.

Small talk was the hardest: “I knew the meanings of the words they used. I could even make meaning of many of their sen­tences. I could have tried to make a match with some infor­
mation I had linked to key words they used. But I didn’t under­
stand the significance.” I suspect the reason is that the signifi­
cance of small talk is not in the meaning of the words but in the desire of the speakers to be con­
ected to one another — a desire Ms. Williams did not have. Just the opposite, she writes, “I was allergic to words like ‘we,’ ‘us’ or ‘together’ — words depicting closeness” because “closeness made earthquakes go off inside of me and compelled me to run.”

Only at the end, in a special Friend­
iship (which she calls a “specialship”) with an autistic man named Ian, does she discov­er that “together” was not a dirty word and ‘we’ did not mean “you plus my body minus me” —

Prodigiously talented, Donna Williams paints, composes, sings, plays piano and guitar, and writes. And oh, can she write. The windows through which she allows us to view her experience are metaphor (“I was like an appliance during a power surge”), perfectly rend­
ered details and wonderful, sur­
prising phrasings. One of my fa­
vorites is: “I sprang into order.”

The memoir ends with the greatest loss and the greatest gain. The loss: Ian forces her to accept that her reflection in the mirror is not another person who can keep her company. The gain is.

... … … …

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New York Times Book Review

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—CHRISTOPHER TILGHMAN, Boston Globe

All the stories are set in the Key West that Hersey knew intimately — the Key West of the past and the Key West of today. And, moving against its jumbled streets and “bright blooming greenery” artists and swap rats, professors and drifters, sailors, swindlers, preachers, anglers, wind surfers and a President of the United States — poignantly, vividly, wittily, ironically drawn.

A splendid finale to a splendid writing career.

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