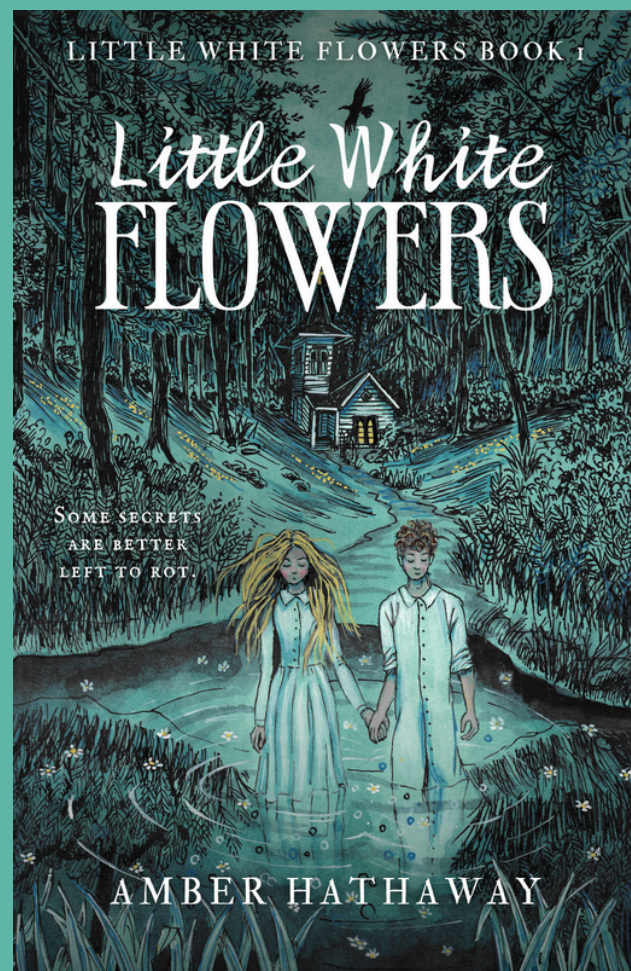
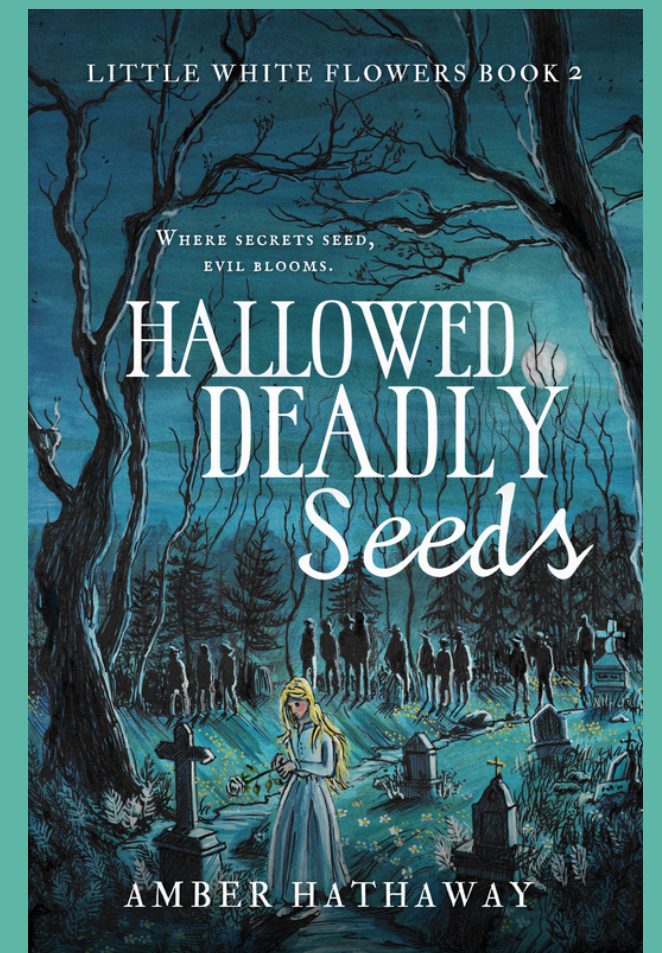


# GENDERED FICTIONS ABOUT AUTISM: WRITING BETTER REPRESENTATIONS OF AUTISM INTO FICTION



By Amber Hathaway,  
author of *Little White Flowers*



# AUTISM IN THE 90S

- Autism was one of several pervasive developmental disorders now encompassed under the autism spectrum umbrella.
- The term “autism” reserved for people with higher support needs.
- Concept of autism heavily masculinized, in part because much of the early autism research was conducted predominantly or exclusively on boys.
- Autistic traits heavily influenced by gender, leading to underdiagnosis in folks socialized as girls.

# GENDER AND AUTISM

- Autistic people of any gender can have any set of autistic traits.
- Autistic people often have a complicated relationship with gender and are less likely to follow gendered norms than their neurotypical counterparts. (See *We're Not Broken* by Eric Garcia for more on autism and gender.)
- Nonetheless, gendered socialization plays a significant role in which autistic traits a person develops.

# GENDER AND AUTISM

- Pressure for girls to be good at socializing.
- Folks socialized as girls, especially those with lower support needs, more likely to mask, that is, to mimic neurotypical social behaviors.
- Girls are more likely to be punished for being disruptive and taking up too much space. May lead to quieter stimming or suppression of stimming behavior, for example.
- Gendered socialization influences which special interests a person develops.

# AUTISM AND ME

- Started showing signs of autism at 6 months.
- Many of my autistic traits viewed as positive/constructive or at least non-disruptive.
- Obvious social deficits—unlike many autistic girls with lower support needs, I did not mask much (perhaps due to familial support/acceptance).
- Was placed in speech and language therapy in second grade to help with my social skills.

# MY DIAGNOSIS JOURNEY

- Started suspecting I was autistic in my mid-twenties after reading an article by an autistic woman about masking.
- Binge watched YouTube videos about autism during the early part of the pandemic.
- Had my first autism evaluation in 2021 and was diagnosed with social pragmatic communication disorder.
- A second autism evaluation in 2022 gave me my autism diagnosis.

# AUTISM REPRESENTATION

- Very limited autism representation in media, heavily stereotyped. (E.g., Annie Wheaton in *Rose Red*.)
- I was an avid reader and watched a lot of movies with my family. I rarely found characters like me.
- Notable exception: Milo Thatch in *Atlantis: The Lost Empire*.
- Found more characters I connected with as I grew older. Most of these characters were men.

# AUTISM AND MY WRITING

- As a teen, I was praised for my “quirky” characters.
- Inadvertently wrote autistic traits into my characters.
- Example from an unfinished story I wrote when I was about 15:

Rachel had a habit of playing with her hair. She'd play with it when she was nervous, bored, or when she was thinking about something. It had become so much of a habit that sometimes she didn't notice when she was playing with her hair.

# LITTLE WHITE FLOWERS

I wrote a rough draft of LWF when I was 19. Even in the early drafts, Alice showed signs of autism:

- Socially awkward. Clicked with Riley but struggled in her interactions with the rest of Evanston.
- Intense interests in writing, math, and genealogy.
- Deeply empathetic with strong sense of justice.
- Anxious, although her anxiety grew with successive drafts.
- Upset by change, e.g., running out of soda.
- Feels out of place and like there's something wrong with her.

# DIAGNOSIS AND REVISION

- When I realized I was likely autistic, I started noticing signs of autism in Alice.
- I was more intentional with her autistic traits in later stage revisions.
- Informed by my own experiences as an autistic person. E.g., blank facial expression when panicking.
- Focused on social interactions, selective mutism, strong sense of justice, stims.

# GENDER AND AUTISM IN LWF

- Alice quiet and largely non-disruptive, exemplifies the shy, smart girl stereotype.
- Very concerned about how others perceive her.
- Flipped gender dynamics with Andy as the heavy masker.
- Encouraged in all her pursuits, leading to special interests in both stereotypically feminine and masculine disciplines.
- Less prone to explosive emotional outbursts than her brother.
- Incensed by Evanston's rigid gender roles.

EXCERPT

# GOOD AUTISM REPRESENTATION?

- Autistic people are whole people, not a diagnostic checklist.
- Autism influences every facet of a person's life.
- Identity matters! Consider gender, race, social class, concurrent disabilities, etc. (See *We're Not Broken* for a good starting place, combined with WGS knowledge.)
- Characters can still defy these expectations.
- Anything can be a special interest.
- Seek out information from autistic people.

# EXAMPLES

Here are four fiction books written by autistic authors that include femme autistic *POV* characters.

- *Into the Drowning Deep* by Mira Grant
- *Experimental Film* by Gemma Files
- *Even if We Break* by Marieke Nijkamp
- *The Kiss Quotient* by Helen Hoang

QUESTIONS?