



The Speed of Dark

Elizabeth Moon

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In the near future, disease will be a condition of the past. Most genetic defects will be removed at birth; the remaining during infancy. Unfortunately, there will be a generation left behind. For members of that missed generation, small advances will be made. Through various programs, they will be taught to get along in the world despite their differences. They will be made active and contributing members of society. But they will never be normal.

Lou Arrendale is a member of that lost generation, born at the wrong time to reap the awards of medical science. Part of a small group of high-functioning autistic adults, he has a steady job with a pharmaceutical company, a car, friends, and a passion for fencing. Aside from his annual visits to his counselor, he lives a low-key, independent life. He has learned to shake hands and make eye contact. He has taught himself to use “please” and “thank you” and other conventions of conversation because he knows it makes others comfortable. He does his best to be as normal as possible and not to draw attention to himself.

But then his quiet life comes under attack. It starts with an experimental treatment that will reverse the effects of autism in adults. With this treatment Lou would think and act and *be* just like everyone else. But if he was suddenly free of autism, would he still be himself? Would he still love the same classical music—with its complications and resolutions? Would he still see the same colors and patterns in the world—shades and hues that others cannot see? Most importantly, would he still love Marjory, a woman who may never be able to reciprocate his feelings? Would it be easier for her to return the love of a “normal”?

There are intense pressures coming from the world around him—including an angry supervisor who wants to cut costs by sacrificing the supports necessary to employ autistic workers. Perhaps even more disturbing are the barrage of questions within himself. For Lou must decide if he should submit to a surgery that might completely change the way he views the world . . . and the very essence of who he is.

Thoughtful, provocative, poignant, unforgettable, *The Speed of Dark* is a gripping exploration into the mind of an autistic person as he struggles with profound questions of humanity and matters of the heart.

From the Hardcover edition.

The Speed of Dark Details

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From Reader Review The Speed of Dark for online ebook

Wealththeow says

I was intrigued because this book was mentioned several times at WisCon'06 as an example of disability in science fiction and autism in general. Congoers had varying opinions—some touted it as the Best Writing About Autism Ever, while others said it was unrealistic. I have little experience with autism (besides being in fandom and reading *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*), so I can't comment on how realistically Moon recreates an autistic experience. As a book, it's quite good, albeit overly simplistic at parts (the ending feels rather at odds with the rest of the book, as well). There's not a whole lot of plot, but there is a good deal of character development.

Spider the Doof Warrior says

For some reason I couldn't like this book. The good things about it was the main character and how his autism was portrayed, but other than that, it just bothered me.

The main thing that bugged me is, what is normal in the first place? This book takes place in the future, how far it takes place, I don't know, but I would think that by the future we'd understand autism better and wouldn't just dismiss it as abnormal but would try to empathize with people with autism and to understand their point of view.

In this book you have a man with a life that's already rich and full of fencing, people who like him and respect him (and one enemy, but you get to that later). He has a good job, sure he has to do things like bounce and have pinwheels around, but why is that a big deal? It's hard for him to appreciate himself with this concept of normal hanging over his head.

Could the world in the future expand to except other concepts of normal? Or will differences and variations be "cured" instead of taking care of the more difficult symptoms? This main character, after all, was incredibly intelligent, able to understand information about the brain the "normal" folks around him couldn't understand totally.

But the main frustrating thing about this book is simply, even in the future, there's no way something like this would even be allowed. No way can a corporation FORCE a person to accept a cure or experiment on their brain because that sort of thing is just not ethical.

So too many things about this book frustrated me.

Rereading *Flowers for Algernon* makes me realize just how frustrating this book is compared to that book. And it makes me take away a star.

For one thing, the character in *Flowers for Algernon* was more impaired than this main character in this book. As I said up there, he was autistic, but that's not the same thing as an intellectual disability. This character could function, think, remember. His brain functioned differently, but he could understand all sorts of books about neurology. So why did he have to be cured?

Is this just wishful thinking on the part of someone who has a child with autism? That they find a cure and they become normal which doesn't really exist? Why can't you be an astronaut even WITH autism?

Why can't folks learn more about autism rather than trying to wipe it out to the point that all you have are people who are normal when it doesn't exist? The spectrum must expand. Much as sexuality is narrowed in the minds of so many people to only encompass heterosexuality when you have a spectrum that goes from asexuality to bisexuality, normal must be expanded to include other people whose minds do not work the

same way because there's really nothing wrong with that!

Also, too many of my reviews, especially negative ones turn into rants.

I also must add, what is wrong with Lou? He seems like a nice guy, he has cool hobbies like fencing. I'd hang out with him. I just didn't see that there was something wrong with him that needed to be cured. Maybe I am biased, but there really was nothing wrong with this guy. Now I could see if this was interfering with his life, his job and making it difficult, but there was nothing like this at all. The ending is satisfying for people who see autism as a horrible affliction you need to get rid of as soon as possible, but not for people who see autism as more of a human variation than a tragedy.

Sandi says

I may need to review my top-ten shelf and see what can be bumped. "The Speed of Dark" book moved me like few books ever have. I cried, I laughed, I didn't want it to end. Elizabeth Moon does an absolutely amazing job of making a reader walk many miles in someone else's shoes. In this case, the reader becomes Lou Arrendale, an autistic man in an era when autism can be cured in childhood. Unfortunately, he was born too soon for the treatment. A new treatment is developed for adult autists and he has to decide whether or not to participate in the clinical trials. At the end, I don't know that I agreed with his decision, but I understood it.

I now understand the term "genre ghetto". I think this book should be more widely read, but it probably won't be because it's classified as science fiction. Believe me, it's not a space opera or a tech-geek novel, it's a novel with real heart that would appeal even to those who never set foot in the science fiction/fantasy section of the bookstore.

Nancy says

I was very impressed by *The Speed of Dark*. Lou Arrendale is autistic and employed by a large company that requires his special skill of recognizing patterns that can't be seen by other people or computers. Despite the fact that he is gainfully employed and a brilliant fencer, autistics have a different way of interacting socially and perceiving the world.

The author has written about autism with a lot of knowledge and sensitivity.

J.G. Keely says

This book is about as 'sci fi' as an episode of CSI. Moon basically takes 'Flowers for Algernon' and hacks off the ending. The writing was alright, and there was some interesting characterization, but I suspect it only got the Nebula and Clarke because award committees love nothing as much as political correctness. This book is the equivalent of an actor making an Oscar bid by playing a mentally-challenged character.

I know Moon is a sci fi author, but in this book, it feels like she just stamped on the 'Sci-Fi' label in order to draw an audience, or perhaps because her publisher refused to authorize a genre switch. I hope that isn't true,

because that's always a cheap move. This is just modern pop-fiction, an 'emotionally confessional' book with a veneer of 'vaguely near-future'.

This wouldn't have been a problem if Moon had used this opportunity to explore human psychology, which was how 'Algernon' and 'A Clockwork Orange' treated this same theme, but she didn't. She rehashed half of an interesting idea, and failed to capitalize on it.

Speculative Fiction has always been obsessed with what makes us human, and how much we can change before we stop being human at all. While that should be the main theme of this book, it goes almost unexplored.

The climax is rushed and inauthentic. We never actually see the character change, we don't witness the effects as they happen, instead they are lightly explained in choppy montage at the end. Compared to the rest of the book--an internal, step-by-step presentation of a fairly different mind--this sudden, convenient, external ending is disappointing and jarring.

The denouement following the climax is particularly tidy, with all the subtlety of the end of an 80's college movie where we learn through super-imposed text that "Barry went on to win the Nobel prize" to the strains of Simple Minds.

And it's a shame, because the story leading up to the climax is interesting enough, presenting the psychological workings of autism. Moon researched this disorder much better than Mark Haddon in his laughably flawed 'Curious Incident Of The Dog In The Night Time', but then, Moon's son is actually autistic.

There was also a part about fencing, which excited me at first, being a former competitive fencer and coach, but instead, it was just weird SCA dressup boffing. Not that I have anything against SCA dressup boffing (or do I?).

It's an alright read, goes pretty quick, and it might give you some insight into brain disorders, but it doesn't tie human experiences together; which is really a shame, because other sci fi books have successfully used this topic to ask some very difficult and profound questions about how the future of technology might change the way we think, and about the different ways people process information.

'Flowers for Algernon' tackled the exact same themes and was written sixty years before Moon's less profound attempt. You'd think we'd have something more to say after sixty years of neurology and psychology, but apparently not. It also pales in comparison with 'A Clockwork Orange', another good light sci fi which explores the morality of changing the way that people think.

This book was light and fluffy, especially given its subject matter, and while it will probably make soccer moms feel proud of themselves for reading something so 'different', it doesn't endeavor to change the way they think about humanity, the mind, or the possibilities within us.

Alex says

The Speed of Dark is an eloquently written examination of the internal life of an autistic man, as he considers whether or not to try an experimental cure for his condition. It is told from the first person point of view of Lou Arrendale, and his voice is so strong and unique that I found myself becoming personally

involved in his dilemma. I didn't want to lose his voice, or any of his uniqueness. Through the window of Lou's experience, the novel examines the consequences of the medicalization of human difference and the increasing ability of modern medicine to treat or cure neurological and psychiatric conditions.

The novel has plenty of flaws, however. It's more speculative fiction than true science fiction, a sort of *Flowers for Algernon* for autism. The narrator is obviously very high functioning, and doesn't represent the reality of most autistic people's experience. Many of Lou's limitations and abilities ring completely true, but some fall far outside the usual autism spectrum. The ending is less than satisfactory, and could be taken to imply an easy solution to what is, in reality, a very complex problem.

But, *The Speed of Dark* presents us with many questions that are worth answering. I am glad to have read it, I thoroughly enjoyed it, and I would recommend it to anyone with an interest in the genre or the subject.

Jim says

Moon has an autistic son, which clearly informed her writing of this book. *The Speed of Dark* tells the story of Lou Arrendale, an autistic man living in a near future very similar to our own time. The back of the book blurb focuses on:

"...an experimental "cure" for his condition. Now Lou must decide if he should submit to a surgery that may change the way he views the world—and the very essence of who he is."

But the book is so much more. This isn't an action or adventure novel, and the treatments and potential cure for autism is pretty much the only real SF element in the story.

The most powerful thing, to me, is the way Moon brings you into Lou's perspective:

It is hard to drive safely in the hot afternoon, with the wrong music in my head. Light flashed off windshields, bumpers, trim; there are too many flashing lights. By the time I get home, my head hurts and I'm shaking. I take the pillows off my couch into the bedroom, closing all the shades tightly and then the door. I lie down, piling the pillow on top of me, then turn off the light.

This is something else I never tell Dr. Fornum about. She would make notes in my record about this...

As the father of a boy on the high-functioning end of the autistic spectrum, I spent a fair amount of time reminding myself that Lou's experiences aren't meant to be a universal representation of autism. Lou works with other autistics, doing pattern-analysis for a large corporation, and Moon does a very good job of showing Lou and the other characters as individuals. Autism is a significant part of who they are, but it doesn't define them.

Moon shows many of the challenges Lou faces, both the internal and the external. A new supervisor wants to eliminate the "special accommodations" Lou and his unit receive at work. A man from Lou's fencing group blames Lou for his problems, accusing people like him of stealing jobs from "normal" people. (Sound familiar? Much of this book could be set in today's world.)

And then there's the potential cure, the chance for Lou to be normal, whatever that means. Moon does a decent job of exploring the moral messiness and complexities of "curing" autism, though I would have liked

to see more of this part. Should we cure someone who's able to function? What about someone we define as low-functioning? How many of the challenges autistic people face are inherent to the condition, and how many of those challenges are externally created?

The Speed of Dark is a book that makes you think. Lou is a wonderful, sympathetic, beautiful protagonist. This isn't a plot-oriented, action-packed book, but it's one I definitely recommend reading.

Stephen says

5.0 stars. This is an incredible novel and one that I highly recommend to anyone one liked Flowers for Algernon. Emotionally powerful science fiction at its best. Superb writing, excellent plot and an unforgettable main character.

Nominee: Arthur C. Clarke Award for Best Science Fiction Novel

Nominee: Locus Award for Best Science Fiction Novel

Winner: Nebula Award for Best Science Fiction Novel

Lyn says

Speed of Dark by Elizabeth Moon tells the story of an autistic man in the near future where advances in medical technology have cured many diseases. The protagonist is in a small group of people who were born just before these advances and so have grown up in a world where their disability is a close anachronism.

This is a subtle, introspective work that focuses on psychological, philosophical and theological questions about normality and quality of life. I could not help but cast actor Jim Parsons, from The Big Bang Theory, in the role of the hero, and throughout the book his was the voice and face that I imagined as Lou. I also was led to compare this work to Look Me in the Eye: My Life with Asperger's by John Elder Robison, his non-fiction autobiographical work about his life with Asperger's Syndrome as well as Philip K. Dick's work Martian Time-Slip.

There is some very thin characterization, almost straw man, that weakens the larger credibility of the narration, but the ending is very good and well worth the time reading.

Apatt says

Amazon's e-book samples are too short, only about 18 pages in length, good luck applying that ol' "50 pages rule" here. Fortunately *The Speed of Dark* (2003 Nebula Award winner) is immediately intriguing and I was sold on it by the end of the short sample. I keep hearing good things about Elizabeth Moon and Elizabeth Bear in sci-fi websites and forums, I get them mixed up a lot as I have not read either one until now. Elizabeth Moon surpasses my expectations with this book, hopefully Elizabeth Bear can do likewise very

soon.

The title *The Speed of Dark* has a very sci-fi ring to it, it is actually a phrase to contrast the speed of light. The idea is that there is always darkness before light, therefore darkness must somehow travel faster than light because it is always ahead. This is a metaphor the author is employing to represent knowledge illuminating ignorance, so it not some kind of crazy bad science.

The book is set in the near future, the protagonist Lou Arrendale is an autistic man working in a department of a company that exclusively employs autistic people for their superior concentration, greater pattern recognition or other cognitive abilities. Lou copes admirably with his autism and is generally happy – if not quite content – with his life, then one day he is informed that there is a cure for autism and his life immediately changes even without before the cure becomes available to him.

The Speed of Dark is often compared to the classic *Flowers for Algernon* as both books deal with improvement of the brain through neuroscience. Both books are also poignant, brimming with compassion and tug at the heartstrings. Don't worry about having your heart broken by the author though, Elizabeth Moon is not Thomas Hardy. Prior to reading this book I knew next to nothing about autism, not having met any autistic person. I can not claim to know a lot about it now as this is a work of fiction but Ms. Moon's son is autistic so I believe her depiction of autism to be realistic. In any case her portrayal of autistic characters has the feel of verisimilitude.

Most of the novel is told in the first person from Lou's perspective (with the occasional switch to a few secondary characters where Lou is not privy to what is going on in his absence). This is the first book I have ever read that take me inside the head of an autistic person. The very clever first person narrative of Lou is fascinating in and of itself. Lou's stilted use of language is very formal, polite and precise. Here is an example:

"Don can be a real heel," she says.

"Don is not a heel; he is a person. Normal people say things like this, changing the meaning of words without warning, and they understand it. I know, because someone told me years ago, that heel is a slang word for 'bad person'. But he couldn't tell me why, and I still wonder about it. If someone is a bad person and you want to say that he is a bad person, why not just say it? Why say 'heel' or 'jerk' or something? And adding 'real' to it only makes it worse. If you say something is real, it should be real."

More importantly Lou's narration enables me to feel the gulf between himself and "normal" people. Social nuances or cues are entirely beyond his ken, as are voice intonations and most facial expressions. He is also hopeless with colloquial terms, idioms and metaphors. All the characters in this book are very believable, the autistic characters are particularly vivid and sympathetic. They all seem to have a pure heart, I don't know if this is true for all "autists" in the real world but the selfish and prejudiced "normals" they come across raises the question of whether normality may be overrated. After all, only a "normal" person would consider hurting someone who has never done them any harm.

Most of the book reads more like contemporary mainstream fiction than science fiction, the sci-fi component of it only comes into play well into the second half of the book. This is not a sci-fi thriller, this is not a page turner, I did not want to turn the pages quickly to find out what happen next, I wanted *absorb* the story page by page and hope that Lou will be alright. From what I have heard Elizabeth Moon generally writes action packed military sci-fi or fantasy so I guess this book is atypical of her works. It appears to be a heartfelt story based on her own experiences with her son that she wants to share with us. I feel privileged to have read it, it

is a beautiful book that I will never forget.

J.K. Grice says

One of the most brilliant books I've ever read. This novel still haunts me. I hope more people will discover THE SPEED OF DARK.

Colin says

The last forty pages of this fucking sucked. Up until that point, it was an awesome anti-ableist critique of normalcy and "cure" with what felt to me like a pretty authentic narrative voice. Then, rather inexplicably, the main character does an about-face and decides that in order to truly fulfill his dreams of being an astronaut and be able to date, he needs to be cured. Sick. It totally knocked it down from a 4 star to a 2 star. I'm still giving it 2 stars because this horrible ending was tacked onto the end of what otherwise was a pretty amazing book. Moon, the parent of an autistic son, totally let her "parental fantasy of cure" win out in the end. Soooo disappointing. I'd actually still recommend it to people with a serious caveat about the last 40 pages. The rest of it rocks though.

Phrynne says

This is a very interesting book set in the near future when advancements in medical science have made autism curable in child hood. The story revolves around a group of adults with autism who were too old to be treated when the cure was found, making them the last of their kind. Eventually a possible 'cure' is found for the adults and the debate is raised whether they need to be changed or whether they are who they are and should stay the same

There are lots of similarities between this book and the wonderful Flowers for Algernon. I also saw much of Don from The Rosie Project in this book's main character Lou. Lou actually holds this book together. For much of the time he is the narrator so the reader gets to view the world from his often very unusual stand point. It is an interesting, informative and often entertaining book and I enjoyed it very much.

Sarah says

What does it mean to be normal? This book explores this concept much more than it tells a sci-fi story.

It's interesting to me that we spend the early part of our lives rebelling against normality (Why be normal, right?) only to want so desperately to be normal when our normality is *not* in our hands. Lou is born autistic, and even with the advantages of a future where more is known about the illness, there is still an enormous amount of prejudice towards people with autism.

I have strong objections to the word "normal" anyway. Watching what Lou went through throughout this book was heartbreaking. First the forced pressure to be cured and, on the other side, does he want to be? It's very difficult to watch this struggle and to see how he's been made to feel *less* and *other* all of his life.

I loved that author allowed Lou to do research throughout the book that allowed us to better understand autism. I wouldn't really consider this to be a sci-fi story so much as a study of what makes a person who they are and what would happen if that could change. Would it change who they are? And how much would a desire to be normal shape this decision?

Stephanie Campi says

Me resultó muy atractiva la temática: un futuro en el que el autismo puede ser curado y el dilema de el grupo de autistas que aún no saben si curarse o seguir tal cual están. Tiene reflexiones y puntos de vista que te llevan mirar el mundo con otros ojos.

Bradley says

This is one hell of a fantastic SF and it hit me in all the right feels. It's not flashy, either, just really well made.

It's also custom-made for anyone wanting to see and feel what life would be like as a high-functioning autistic. Its set in the near future, with talk of highly advanced treatments and AIs, but the real joy is in the narrator's outlook, the focus on patterns in everything, everywhere.

For while this novel is pretty soft-SF, it actually has a hard-SF feel because of the character. And even though he goes to work, has hobbies, thinks about having a love life, and continually strives to be better, the difference within his perception of things is a real joy.

I love this book. I really love this book. It's not even one I would have normally picked to love, either. It just slammed into me from out of nowhere. It even has sword fights. :) Well, fencing. And bombs! Um, dangerous pranks and jilted lovers. :)

Yes, it is a joyous celebration of differences in humanity, but more than that, this novel is also a great story. :)

I totally recommend it for anyone, anywhere.

Even those of us who already "think differently". :)

Kaethe says

I thought the author did a great job of presenting a character with autism, but the idea of a cure is weird to me.

Kelly H. (Maybedog) says

This book is outstanding. Moon's believable hero is a genius trapped in an autistic shell. The characterization was vivid and touching, I grew to love the man and feel very strongly about the things he dealt with. I even found myself getting angry with the bad things people were doing thinking, "they can't do that!" even though the book was just fiction. It was outrageous and yet believable. I loved how the author didn't relegate the autistic man to being stupid or unable to comprehend big words. She clarified the difference, making me think about the how we think intelligence means being able to think and process quickly when capacity is even more important.

The only problem I had with the book was the ending which I felt was rushed and unsatisfying. While I didn't agree with all the choices the characters made, that wasn't the problem. I just felt that the ending was too pat, too cut and dried and it left me discombobulated.

It wasn't enough to dissuade me from giving the book five stars. I really loved the book and wish there were a whole series based on this character. Of course, the nature of the issue in the book is necessarily a one-book plot. Alas.

Ine says

[As the book progresses, the narrator be

Libby Chester says

Lou Arrendale is a high functioning autistic main character in 'The Speed of Dark' by Elizabeth Moon. I was very interested in Lou as a main character; my grandson having Williams Syndrome may have something to do with that. Lou works in an office, has a car, and takes part in a fencing community. He has autistic co-workers but is very drawn to 'normals.' Being engaged with the Williams Syndrome community, I have learned to question the use of the word 'normal.' The word typical is used more frequently. In this novel nowever, normal seemed to do a better job of drawing contrasts between Lou and others, but increasingly I wonder what is normal and who gets to decide and why do they get to decide.

The big question Lou faces is whether to participate in a research project that will make him 'normal.' He would no longer be autistic. Would he be the same person if he was no longer autistic? Lou is very intelligent and seeks to understand what's going to happen to his brain as he undergoes brain engineering. I've been interested in questions of neuroplasticity, attention control, and consciousness for some time, so I felt like I was in partnership with Lou on his journey.

I enjoyed this book very much. I know what it's like to have loved ones who are devastated by a diagnosis that alters every aspect of what is considered normal life. My grandson's first year of life must have felt at times to my son and daughter-in-law like a waking nightmare. It's not that you don't come to grips with it; it's just a lot of dark days before you do. While they were trying to deal with their adjusted view of life, there was a cranky newborn who couldn't be soothed who also had a heart defect as well as neurological compromise. The lack of elastin caused by a genetic deletion affected his heart, his brain, muscle tone, and had many other consequences. All that in one little not so typical package.

My little grandson is nothing like Lou, but somehow I felt his echo in all Lou's travails. Like Lou, my grandson has his own distinct personality. And I must confess to at times wondering who he would be if he didn't have Williams Syndrome. Just as Lou wonders who he would be if he wasn't autistic. Most of the time, I just love my grandson for who he is. It's like there was a trajectory, and suddenly someone said, no not that way, here is your path.

Should Lou decide to take the risk of becoming normal? Should science be able to make these kinds of changes in people? Moon attempts to tackle the question of what Lou stands to lose and what he gains. Having an autistic son gives her a unique perspective. Perhaps autism is just a wee bit romanticized in this novel, but I enjoyed the character very much.
