

Orphans and Aliens: Gendering Autism in Kathryn Erskine's *Mockingbird* and Lynn Miller Lachmann's *Rogue*

In this essay, I will explore the troubling connection between trauma, empathy, and autism in Kathryn Erskine's *Mockingbird* (2011) and Lynn Miller Lachmann's *Rogue* (2013). Both novels use the plot device of a tragedy within the community, a school shooting and the discovery of a local meth lab respectively, in order to force their characters into a position that demands an empathic response. Whereas Erskine's narrator is at risk of being isolated from the other characters in her story, as well as the reader, due to her emotional distance, Miller Lachmann's protagonist is able to connect with the reader and other characters using an alternate form of empathy. The question for both of these authors, however, is why the female autistic protagonist is required to empathize at all, since the question almost never arises in the over forty children's and young adult novels featuring male autistic protagonists written to date. Mothers of girls with autism express frustration that the expectations for girls differ from those for boys in that girls are still expected to behave in traditionally feminine ways despite their cognitive disability. From this perspective, the novels' stress on empathy, a quality most often associated with traditional femininity, and one which all children with ASDs struggle to understand, becomes somewhat oppressive. In addition, there is a risk that the reader may misunderstand the traumatic event to be autism itself rather than a school shooting or the abuse of a child.