



# The Language of Difference: *Saving Danny* as a Neurodiverse Narrative

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## Abstract

*To witness a neurodiverse narrative is to enter a world where silence speaks, gestures become language, and difference refuses to be contained within the borders of normal. Such texts disrupt the linearity of conventional storytelling, replacing it with fractured voices, pauses, and unconventional rhythms that mirror the lived realities of neurodivergence. Cathy Glass's Saving Danny belongs to this tradition of narrative difference, where the child's struggles are not simply deficits to be corrected but signs of an alternative subjectivity. By tracing Danny's journey through the lens of neurodiversity, the narrative invites readers to reimagine care, identity, and belonging beyond the confines of normative expectations. It affirms that literature does not merely represent lives but also reshapes the way we understand what it means to be fully human. Contemplating Cathy Glass's Saving Danny through the lens of neurodiversity, positioning the text as a narrative of difference that disrupts normative assumptions about childhood, family, and care. By foregrounding Danny's behavioral struggles and communicative barriers, the narrative stages can be read as a semiotics of neurodivergence, where silence, tantrums, and fragmented speech acquire symbolic weight. This paper puts forth three innate aspects and intrinsic feature in determining the text as neurodivergent text. Semiotics of neurodivergence is the first quintessential trait in determining the narrative as neurodivergent. Parenting as praxis within the shades of support, structure and empathy is the second integral dimension in marking Danny the leading role as cognitively diverse kid. The third defining attributes in the language of difference is the polyphony and presence that reframes the neurodiverse child. Moreover, this discourse unravels into the realization that the narrative functions as a neurodiverse text one that decenters the normative child and instead privileges multiplicity, difference, and the transformative potential of care.*

**Keywords:** Neurodiversity, semiotics of difference, narrative empathy, childhood otherness, life writing

Unconventional minds and neuro-atypical subject are critical jargons employed to articulate the broader framework of neurodiversity. The phrase unconventional minds can be used to describe how Danny's way of thinking, perceiving, and expressing himself diverges from what society expects of a "normal" child. His silence, tantrums, and fragmented communication are not signs of

failure but expressions of a different cognitive logic an alternative way of processing the world. Danny embodies an unconventional mind, one that resists the smooth linearity of language and behavior that conventional narratives demand. His pauses, refusals, and unpredictable rhythms become markers of a neurodiverse subjectivity. Cathy's caregiving shows that to live with an unconventional mind is not to lack



meaning, but to require new forms of interpretation, empathy, and narrative space. Unconventional does not imply deficiency it emphasizes difference and novelty which portends the quality of being new or divergence from the norm. In the context of *Saving Danny*, Danny's silence, tantrums, and fragmented speech represent a divergence from the norm of childhood communication. Rather than seeing this as deficiency, the text reframes it as an alternative semiotics of being a unique way of expressing and existing in the world. In a nutshell unconventional mind signals the novel's reimagining of childhood difference, where Danny's struggles reveal not deficiency but another form of intelligence and presence. Neuro-atypical subject can be used to describe Danny as a character whose cognitive and emotional processes deviate from the neurotypical norm. This divergence is not simply a clinical label but also a literary and semiotic device through which the novel explores difference, communication, and relational dynamics.

Plural mode of signification, disruption of conventional plot structure, embodied structure, multiplicity of perspective, resistance to pathologization, relational dynamics, ethical dimension of care, hybrid genres, metaphors of difference are the elements stating this text as neurodiverse narrative. Plural modes of signification, where meaning is generated through multiple, often overlapping semiotic registers rather than a singular interpretive code. In this piece of work, meaning is not carried only through the verbal narration but also through Danny's behaviors, silences, and nonverbal cues. Danny often communicates distress, need, or joy through gestures, withdrawal, echolalia, or routines, rather than through conventional speech. These actions function as semiotic registers in their own right, generating meaning beyond language. For instance, Danny's reluctance to make eye contact or his retreat into solitary activities can be read not simply as absence of communication but as signs of his internal world. Cathy's interpretive role as a foster carer highlights how different signifying practices overlap Danny's embodied expressions. The text constantly negotiates these multiple channels of signification and medical discourse interprets Danny's traits as deficits, while Cathy reframes

them as meaningful expressions of his unique way of being. Thus, *Saving Danny* exemplifies a plural mode of signification because narrative meaning arises through the interplay of language, silence, gesture, professional terminology, and maternal interpretation rather than a single, uniform interpretive code. The narrative does not build toward a singular dramatic climax; instead, it is structured around Danny's small, incremental steps of adjustment and healing. Each incident Danny's initial withdrawal, his gradual trust-building, his struggles at school, his tentative connections with Cathy operates as a narrative fragment that contributes to the overall story but resists traditional linear progression. Embodied structures of narration spells that in the narrative is often told through Danny's actions, feelings, and body language rather than just words. His silence, gestures, and small changes in behavior become part of the storytelling, showing what he feels and how he grows. Multiplicity of perspectives bespeaks the narrative is shown from different viewpoints, not just one fixed voice. The reader hear Cathy's voice as a carer, but also understand Danny's feelings through his actions, and even the views of teachers, social workers, and doctors. This mix of voices gives a fuller picture instead of one single version of events. This combination of voices allows the narrative to present a more complete and layered understanding of Danny's experiences, rather than reducing them to a single version of events. Resistance to pathologization intends that Danny's behavior is not treated only as an illness or a problem. Instead, the story shows his differences as part of who he is, with their own meaning and value, rather than seeing them as something wrong that needs to be fixed. Relational dynamics, emphasizes intersubjectivity, caregiving practices, and the co-construction of identity. Ethical dimensions of care, foregrounding patience, empathy, and recognition in parent-child and caregiver-child relations are the defining attributes of relational dynamics. Hybrid genres, blends autobiography, case study, and fictional techniques to resist easy categorization. Metaphors of difference, which render neurodivergence intelligible through figurative language without reducing it to stereotype. Drawing upon literary concepts such as heteroglossia, otherness, and narrative empathy,



the analysis explores how Glass constructs Danny's subjectivity not as deficiency but as an alternative mode of being. The foster mother's role is interpreted through the paradigm of scaffolding and affective labor, which highlights the interplay between parental praxis and the child's gradual emergence into voice and agency. Furthermore, the text's testimonial quality underscores the ethical imperative of storytelling in representing marginalized identities, situating *Saving Danny* within a broader discourse of disability studies and life writing. Ultimately, this paper argues that the narrative functions as a neurodiverse text one that decenters the normative child and instead privileges multiplicity, difference, and the transformative potential of care.

Semiotics of neurodivergence is the first quintessential trait in bringing the select narrative as a neurodivergent one. Semiotics of neurodivergence brings neurodivergence as sign structure. To reflect upon neurodivergence through the lens of semiotics is to enter a space where signs, gestures, and silences carry layered meanings that stretch beyond clinical description. Semiotics, the study of signs and their signification, reminds us that every outward expression whether a repeated phrase, averted gaze, or rhythmic movement is not a mere symptom but a signifier awaiting interpretation. In neurodivergent experience, these signifiers often resist the fixed meanings imposed by medical discourse and instead invite more nuanced readings that acknowledge cultural, personal, and narrative contexts. A hand flapping, for instance, may be pathologized as self-stimulatory behavior, yet in another interpretive frame it becomes a language of joy, regulation, or self-expression. Thus, the semiotics of neurodivergence unsettles dominant codes of normality, opening literary and cultural spaces where difference is not erased but read, translated, and valued as meaningful in its own right. In *Saving Danny*, Cathy Glass does not merely recount the life of a foster child but stages a narrative in which neurodivergence itself becomes a system of signs to be read and interpreted. Through the lens of semiotics, Danny's silences, avoidance of eye contact, echolalia, and repetitive behaviors function as signifiers that refuse singular meaning. In a medical discourse, these gestures would be coded as pathological markers signs of developmental

delay or disorder. Yet within the narrative, these same signifiers acquire alternative signified Danny's silence becomes an index of trauma, his stammering an embodied mode of self-soothing, his fragmented speech a symbol of resilience struggling to articulate itself.

In Saussurean terms, the relation between signifier and signified is arbitrary and context-bound, then Danny's behaviors illustrate how meaning is always mediated through interpretive frameworks. Saussure defines the linguistic sign as the arbitrary relation between the signifier (sound-image) and the signified (concept) (Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, 67). As Chandler notes, for Saussure the relation between signifier and signified is contingent and socially constructed (Chandler, *Semiotics: The Basics*, 2002, p. 18). Peirce's semiotic triad further enriches this reading as Danny's behaviors function as icons which portends mirroring internal affective states, and indices portends pointing to hidden histories of neglect and abuse, and symbols intends culturally inscribed markers of difference. Barthes defines myth as a system of signification that transforms history into nature, obscuring its constructedness (Barthes 129). Barthes critique of mythologies allows us to see how the cultural script of "normal childhood" naturalizes Danny's divergence as lack, while the narrative disrupts this myth by re-signifying his behaviors as meaningful, even communicative, in their own right. Danny's outburst disrupts the myth of "normal childhood," reclaiming difference as a site of meaning rather than deficiency (Barthes 129). The semiotics of neurodivergence are articulated through behaviors that operate as signifiers, whose meaning is mediated through interpretive frameworks. When Danny "can only speak in short sentences and has a delay in understanding what is said to him" (56), the narrative positions fragmented speech not as pathology, but as a communicative modality. Saussure's sign model orients us toward seeing that the signified which portends developmental lag and fragility is not intrinsic but constructed through caregiving and cultural lenses. Similarly, Danny's meticulous sorting of food "separated by colour and texture" (54) is not disorderly repetition but a self-created system of coherence. Under a Saussurean reading, the signifier



(“sorting”) arbitrarily acquires a meaning that resists traditional norms. Peirce’s triadic model further enriches our understanding: the behavior becomes an icon of internal state, an index of sensory regulation, and a symbol of relative stability amid disordered contexts. To an absolute extend, without a doubt Danny’s meltdown about George his pet rabbit is pivotal. The tantrum initially seems disproportionate, but reveals a profound attachment: George serves as a vital emotional anchor. Interpreted through Barthes, this moment disrupts cultural mythologies of childhood normalcy. The narrative encourages us to read the outburst as expressive, not simply symptomatic that is a reclaiming of meaning through affective signs.

Parenting is never a fixed formula but a living practice, an art as much as a responsibility. It unfolds in the everyday rhythms of care, where patience, guidance, and understanding converge to shape a child’s growth. Seen as praxis, parenting becomes more than routine; it is a reflective act, a constant negotiation between what a child expresses and how an adult interprets and responds. Parenting as praxis is best understood as a reflective practice that moves between thought and action, continually reshaped by the child’s needs. Within this framework, Vygotsky’s concept of scaffolding becomes especially relevant. Scaffolding emphasizes the adult’s role in providing guided support, temporary structures that allow the child to develop new skills and forms of self-regulation. In *Saving Danny*, Cathy’s caregiving demonstrates this praxis, she does not simply enforce rules, but reflects on Danny’s behaviors, interprets their meanings, and adjusts her strategies. Establishing routines at mealtimes, creating predictable daily patterns, and offering patient guidance in moments of emotional distress all function as scaffolded interventions. These actions show praxis in motion as Cathy reflects on what Danny needs, translates theory into practice, and gradually withdraws control as Danny gains confidence. Thus, scaffolding is not just a pedagogical tool but an enactment of parenting as praxis, where support, structure, and empathy converge to nurture growth. Vygotsky (1978) describes learning as a social process in which children achieve more with guidance than they can alone. He defines the Zone

of Proximal Development as “the distance between the actual developmental level ... and the level of potential development ... under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (86). In *Saving Danny*, Cathy’s patient routines and step-by-step guidance function within Danny’s Zone of Proximal Development: “What the child is able to do in collaboration today he will be able to do independently tomorrow” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 87). These moments illustrate how scaffolding operates as parenting praxis, where reflection and action converge in supportive caregiving.

The essence of polyphony lies precisely in the fact that the voices remain independent and, as such, are combined in a unity of a higher order than in homophony.” Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of polyphony celebrates the coexistence of multiple, equally valid voices within a narrative, none of which is silenced or subordinated to a single authority. In *Saving Danny*, this idea comes alive, Danny’s fragmented speech, repetitive behaviors, and silences are not voids to be filled, but voices in themselves each carrying its own logic, rhythm, and meaning. His obsession with patterns, his insistence on the presence of “George,” or his sudden emotional eruptions speak in ways that defy conventional interpretation, demanding attention and response. Interwoven with Cathy’s reflective narration, the perspectives of caregivers, social workers, and family form a chorus, a polyphonic web where no single truth dominates. Danny’s presence resists being defined or contained by medical or institutional discourse; instead, his difference adds texture and resonance to the narrative, transforming disruption into dialogue and silence into meaning.

*Saving Danny* illuminates the intricate rhythms of a neurodiverse world, where difference is not deficit but a distinct language of presence. Danny’s fragmented speech, silences, and patterned behaviors resonate as polyphonic voices, speaking truths that evade conventional understanding and challenging the monologues of institutional and societal expectation. Cathy Glass’s parenting emerges as praxis in motion an artful weaving of empathy, structure, and reflective action where each gesture, routine, and patient response transforms ordinary caregiving into a space of dialogue, recognition, and



growth. The narrative demonstrates that to witness, interpret, and respond to neurodiverse expression is to engage with the profound complexity of human experience. In giving voice to Danny's difference, the text not only reframes childhood and caregiving but also invites readers into a literary space where presence, voice, and care intersect, reminding us that understanding is cultivated through attention, patience, and the courage to listen beyond the expected.

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