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Monje, M.S., Jr. (2015). *Defiant*. Fort Worth: Autonomous Press. ISBN 978-0-986-183508.

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Defiant is the latest addition to Michael Scott Monje Jr.'s *Shaping Clay* series, which features neuroqueer protagonist Clay Dillon, as he¹ navigates educational barriers, intimate experiences, and workplace accommodations in an ableist world. Taking place 23 years after Monje's previous *Shaping Clay* novel, where first-grader Clay dealt not only with finding the words to express otherness but their own familial site of trauma, Monje critically leaps forward in *Defiant*, providing an essential read for anyone interested in affect, trauma, and autism and providing material ripe with potential for further analysis within disability and mad studies.

Clay, now 30 years old and a part-time professor of graphic arts, is first introduced in the office of Dr. Jeannie Williams, the psychologist Clay has been assigned following his recent autism diagnosis. Believing he may now know why he has always felt different, Clay begins to process his own history while navigating the challenges that confront him. Through centring Clay, Monje crafts a unique point of view that captivates the reader and is grounded in disability.

The character Dr. Williams serves as *Defiant*'s antagonist: a psychologist who works harder to rid Clay of his coping mechanisms than to help him comprehend the trauma he has experienced without support from others or language for difference. Williams's characterization is limited in part due to the book being structured entirely from Clay's perspective, but she is given new complexity in Nick Walker's Forward: "When I read *Defiant* through my autistic eyes, Dr. Williams is the book's villain...[but] through the eyes of a teacher of psychology, Dr.

¹ While Monje refers to Clay several times as she in their blog, the pronoun used for Clay within the novel is he. I have chosen to reflect the author's chosen pronoun for Clay within this review, despite the pronoun use outside of Monje's novel.

Williams seems more tragic than malign” (7). Dr. Williams for all intents and purposes is not a character that needs to be protected from criticism, and it is interesting that Monje provides a Forward that shifts away from Clay’s position to generate sympathy for the woman who terrorizes him. While there may be pleasure for many neurodivergent readers in literature that strictly and without complication showcases the harms of psychology, *Defiant* is served well by this gesture of empathy, as it pushes the reader beyond such quick characterizations and toward greater self-reflection. Walker’s reading of Dr. Williams from varied perspectives, and Monje’s interest in including Walker’s analysis as an introduction to his work, reflects Monje’s strength at exploring institutional psychology as a multifaceted enterprise.

Clay’s sessions with Dr. Williams also greatly affect his relationship with his wife Noahleen. Known for instruction that provides more problems than solutions, these meetings take a toll on the couple’s communication, only causing Clay further stress as he tries to determine whether to disclose his diagnosis to his university. As Clay emotionally pulls away from his wife due to his own grieving, Noahleen must navigate both managing household duties and her own aspirations for employment complicated by her own history of seizures. Their relationship comes to a head when Noahleen confronts Clay about what support he really needs. After several nights of miscommunication, Clay finally feels safe enough to be vulnerable and they are able to renegotiate their relationship, reimagine intimacy, and establish greater support between partners. Their communication calls into question the separation between pleasure and pain through an incorporation of kink, enabling a queer interdependence that stabs back at heteronormativity.

While much of the novel revolves around whether Clay will disclose his diagnosis, the book is less about the act of disclosure and more about Clay’s contemplation. By utilizing Clay’s

thoughts to move plot along, Monje consistently exposes the structural ableism of academia and psychology, making explicit the trauma that these institutions can inflict upon individuals under the guise of help. Because Clay is adrift in thought, panic, and concern, readers are also exposed to his cognitive processes, wherein Monje carefully and mechanically abstracts insightful truths. The author's method here provides an opportunity to explore Clay's feelings toward his body and his gender, which take the form of unease, loathing, confusion, and at times, love, as he alternates between self-harm and coping mechanisms. These emotions are most apparent in erotic scenes, which feature self-harm, consensual practices of BDSM,² and several moments that appear to be far from consensual for both characters. As the novel progresses, Clay denies these feelings of unease to his wife, instead diving into internal reflection to disentangle his own neuroqueerness. These passages exploring Clay's neurodivergence and its affects on his conception of gender are masterfully crafted, featuring detailed descriptions that may not be easily digested but still seem purposeful. Monje, in the quest to build a world for Clay, has brought the reader into the most intimate and ugly moments of Clay's life, enhancing verisimilitude at the expense to reader comfort.

These more difficult moments between Noahleen and Clay are so deeply disorienting because they dig deep into the experiences of trauma that stitch the many passages of *Defiant* together. This is no accident, as Monje shares that, "*Shaping Clay* is the story of trauma, and of being repeatedly traumatized until you lose your sense of self" (2014, para. 9). *Defiant* is a story of neuroqueerness and also an affective reading of the quotidian effects of trauma, autism, and queerness upon the body. By focusing on the trauma and the internal dialogue of his main character, Monje writes through twists and turns of a narrative that reads against

² Bondage, domination, sadism, and masochism.

heteronormativity and ableism.

And while Monje's attention to detail around gender and disability is particularly excellent, readers now familiar with Clay's world may feel disoriented by how neatly the finale ties *Defiant* up. As the novel progresses, Monje's nuanced prose veers into a nearly homonormative coming-out narrative, featuring Clay curiously assuaging fears of safety for the comforts of campus celebrity. This marks a distinct shift in tone and pacing that treads toward greater fantasy. That is not to say that Clay does not deserve a happier ending, but it is in stark contrast to the majority of Monje's text.

Overall, the book is important for any classroom that means to teach about gender, transness, and disability, or about the paths available to those without health care. It is critical theory put into practice. Part of *Defiant's* appeal is its constitution of short passages that are woven together to create a broader story. This has the benefit of being easily assignable, directing the reader to moments that count, while at rare times creating fragments that feel more like a blog than a novel. Primarily, however, the reader is absorbed in the unyielding pace of *Defiant*. In one manner, it makes the trauma of the book feel consuming. *Defiant's* basis in Clay's rapid cognitive world makes its pace feel exactly that: non-stop, without break or breath. For neuroqueer readers themselves, this may be an incredible experience to finally see themselves mirrored on the page, allowing them to connect with characters.

It is not just the subject matter that is so emblazoned with defiance, as even Monje's writing style depicts this distinction, opting to provide physical details and internal reactions over the typical visual descriptions readers would expect. Here, Monje focuses on Clay's reactions to people rather than describing them, further cementing the voice's defiance of typicality by detailing the feeling of Noahleen's nails in Clay's skin rather than any descriptors of the

characters themselves. Such a methodology is a crucial development, challenging normative notions of narrative and imagery. Unfortunately, Monje's approach seems to have forgotten conversations of race or whiteness. Hopefully in future works, they will provide space for these discussions.

In *Defiant*, Michael Scott Monje, Jr. has produced a critical text that serves as an essential read for anyone interested in how autism may manifest as difference in an ableist world. Through its use of emotional and physical detail, that's visceral sans visual, Monje's novel feels unique in its storytelling, portraying protagonist Clay Dillon as a complicated character in dynamic relationships with himself and those around him. Featuring gender unease, institutionalized oppression, and self-loathing, Monje's story is not one to be read lightly, but it is a necessarily exhausting read—one that reflects the truth of Clay's growth toward more fully embracing his own neuroqueeness.

References

Monje, M.S., Jr. (2014). *Defiant Is Coming (I Got a #book Contract)*. *Shaping Clay*. Retrieved November 4, 2015, from www.mmonjejr.com/2014/12/defiant-is-coming-i-got-book-contract.html?m=1.