Kate Fox

Dr Kate Fox is an autistic woman, poet, and comedian.

When were you diagnosed as autistic, and what made you seek a diagnosis?

I was diagnosed in the summer of 2017 when I was 42 years old.

The thing that sparked me to actually get the diagnosis was performing at the Autism and the Arts Festival earlier that year at the University of Kent. I met a lot of autistic women about my age who were also performers, and I really identified with them. I think that was the first time I'd met diagnosed autistic people who were like me – people like Annette Foster and Georgina Watts. They were very political and talked about the lost generation of autistic women and how people need to speak out about it. I thought, 'I can't speak out about it if I'm left undiagnosed'.

I think self-diagnosis is valid. But what had been something in the back of my mind for several years became something I wanted to solidify.

So, I kind of pursued a diagnosis for political reasons, but I also just wanted that certainty. It was no longer enough for me to just go, 'I think I'm autistic'. I wanted to get it nailed down.

What is being autistic like for you?

Being autistic for me is being different from the majority of people. It’s part of my identity, but it’s also a new, developing identity – having only been diagnosed in 2017.

If I compare myself to non-autistic people, I seem to be a bit more obsessive and intense in my thoughts, I seem to have a few more sensory issues, my brain seems a lot busier, and I seem to be unusual in how I present myself and how I talk at times.

Being autistic is a work in progress! This develops the more I interact with other autistic people who are open about their identity and conscious of who they are.

Why do you think so many autistic women go undiagnosed or struggle to get the support they need?

I think the key reason why it’s still hard for autistic women and girls to get a diagnosis and support is that most of the initial research came from studies of autistic boys and men.

I don’t think there’s an inherent difference between autistic men and women. What there is a difference in, is how society treats and socializes males and females.

I’m glad there’s a lot of research on masking and camouflaging, and a recognition that a lot of autistic people (men, women, and non-binary people) will desperately try and fit into the environment they’re in. Many of us are really good at it. It so happens that a lot of women will mask, and then they don’t get diagnosed.

I would also say that the theory of the ‘extreme male brain’ is the least helpful thing that’s ever happened! I think it’s based on outdated science, and scientists generally don’t think of gender and neurology like that anymore. I think this still permeates the medical and psychiatric discourse around autism, even though it has largely been debunked.

This is why, as a society, we need ideas like neurodiversity to take over from these rather old-fashioned ideas.

Congratulations on your upcoming poetry collection, *The Oscillations*. Could you tell us a bit more about the book and how the project came about?

As a professional poet, I'm always working towards my next collection of poems. Not long after I was diagnosed, I was approached by Jane Commane, the editor at Nine Arches Press. She said she'd always wanted to publish me, and I'd always wanted to be published by her!

I started pulling together the poems I had. At that time, a lot of them were about being from the north of England. I was looking to explore a sense of entwined place and identity. I was kind of happily getting on with that.

Then my marriage broke down, and I started writing a bit about that. Then the pandemic hit! Some poets wouldn't have felt the need to respond immediately to the pandemic but I've always been a fairly topical writer, so I couldn't not write about what was happening.

A lot of these poems felt like they were about being autistic, even if it's not explicit. The word 'autism' isn't in the poems or the collection. But I was writing about that sense of always having to work out how close or how far away I had to be from people. This is a big question for anyone, but particularly for autistic people. This then became very literal during the pandemic. So those things came together.