

Nobody Nowhere: The Extraordinary Autobiography of an Autistic Study Guide

**Nobody Nowhere: The Extraordinary Autobiography of
an Autistic by Donna Williams**

(c)2015 BookRags, Inc. All rights reserved.



Contents

Nobody Nowhere: The Extraordinary Autobiography of an Autistic Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Page 3 through 14.....	4
Pages 15 through 29.....	5
Page 30 through 44.....	6
Page 45 through 59.....	7
Page 60 through 74.....	8
Page 75 through 89.....	9
Page 90 through 104.....	10
Pages 105 through 119.....	11
Page 120 through 134.....	12
Pages 135 through 149.....	13
Pages 150 through 164.....	14
Pages 165 through 189.....	15
Pages 190 through 198.....	17
Afterword.....	18
An Outline of Language in.....	19
Characters.....	20
Objects/Places.....	23
Themes.....	25
Style.....	27
Quotes.....	29
Topics for Discussion.....	30



Plot Summary

"Nobody Nowhere - The Extraordinary Autobiography of an Autistic" is the story of the struggle by Donna Williams to leave the "world" she had created in her mind and enter into the alien "real world." The title is based on her own mother's assessment of her that she was "nobody" and had "nowhere" to go. Beginning life in an existence in which there was only a white field filled with billions of tiny dots, her battle was one which proved to be lifelong but ultimately life-changing.

Donna's parents thought that Donna's behavior was eccentric. Her caring father was hopeful that she could change while her cruel and abusive mother called her "crazy" and "mad." Her older brother joined in their mother's favorite pastime, calling Donna a spastic or a moron. Donna's physical health as a young child was revealing. Her gums bled, she bruised easily, and she was ashy white. Her parents suspected leukemia and took her to the doctor who found that the child did not have the cancerous blood disease. Many years later as an adult, Donna found that she had multiple food allergies. There is some research that indicates such allergies can contribute, if not cause, some degree of autism.

Even though she had to face the strong headwinds of poor physical health, abusive relatives, and existence in her strange world, Donna was intelligent enough to do fairly well in primary and high school. She even was able to attend a university where she did well, especially in classes that did not require a strict adherence to laws and rules, such as math. It is obvious that Donna was a highly-functioning autistic.

Like all autistic children, Donna created ways to cope with life as she knew it because she lacked conventional and inherent coping skills. When she felt in danger, she would summon up "Willie," a violent creature of her imagination who would protect her when she felt in danger. A young girl named Carol brought Donna home with her one day, like a stray cat. She was so taken with Carol that she invented a "Carol" persona of her own who would laugh and smile and be socially acceptable. She would use Carol when social events or relationships were impossible for Donna to deal with.

Donna went through a series of relationships. Something within her wanted a friend and even a best friend, although she herself did not know how to be one. She had several boyfriends most of whom took advantage of her vulnerability and sponged off of her or used her in other ways. She did meet several young men who had some of her same characteristics and who truly cared for her.

Donna put her life story on paper and conducted wide-ranging research about autism. Writing such a book, organizing information, and conveying the account of one's life and its struggles, would be a monumental feat for any individual. However, completing such a task for a person with autism it is nothing less than a miracle.



Page 3 through 14

Page 3 through 14 Summary and Analysis

As a child, one of Donna's first memories is of seeing light which, when she looked closely, contained many spots. While trying to observe and inspect this matter in peace, she recalls being interrupted with words like "Stop that!" and often with a sharp slap to the face. Still, she continued to see those spots. Although she could not respond to the words she heard, she was able to repeat them exactly which just brought on more slaps. She is "echolalic" or repetitively said words until she reaches four years old. Donna remembers hearing words relating to her toilet training problems. She recalls the great fear she has about the bathroom. She puts off going because of her fright.

There are signs of malnutrition in the young Donna. She is frail, bruises easily, and her gums bleed. Her parents take her to the doctor suspecting she has leukemia. They also tell the doctor that she seems to be deaf. When they walk up behind her and make a loud noise, she fails to respond.

Donna counted only a few people who are not her enemies such as her grandparents, her father and her Aunt Linda. She cherishes the memories of these people. She often splashes eucalyptus oil around her house to replicate the smell of her grandmother's camphor to feel her comfort again. She recalls how her grandfather played special games with her. He seemed to recognize she was in her own world and figured a way to join her, at least temporarily. She remembers her mother as harsh and abusive. The fights Donna's parents had over her fractured their relationship. Her mother preferred her brother who was normal and did not embarrass her.

Donna recalls how her mother would comb through her hair knots with a vengeance while her Aunt Linda would gently brush her "fairy hair" for hours. Her mother eventually deteriorated from isolation and alcohol. Her mother's only friend was her older brother. Together they decided that Donna was a spastic and a retard. Their stand against her backfired somewhat as other relatives blamed her for Donna's condition. Her mother and father fought about her constantly. Her mother wanted to place Donna in a home.

As far as friends, as a little girl Donna had two imaginary friends. They were the wisps and a pair of green eyes she called Willie who hid under her bed. The wisps were tiny and transparent creatures that hung over her bed. She had trouble sleeping which could explain why these "friends" were centered around her bed. Special stars also appeared around her bed when the wisps began to gradually disappear. The "stars" still appear to her even as an adult. While the stars and the wisps comforted her at night, Willie protected her from intruders. Although she feared Willie, she finally took to sleeping under the bed and at times would become Willie.



Pages 15 through 29

Pages 15 through 29 Summary and Analysis

Donna has fleeting memories of being in the park on the see-saw. She loved a little girl in her neighborhood named Lina. She loved Lina's mother, too, who treated Donna in a sweet and gentle way. Another neighbor, Carol, finds Donna in the park one day, swinging from a tree. Carol brings Donna home with her where Carol's mother washes the garish make-up that Donna had applied to her face. She has a drink with Carol and is destroyed inside when Carol brings her back to the park. She never sees her again but she keeps Carol as her friend by making her the "girl in the mirror" and later, Donna even became Carol. She wants her mother to turn into Carol's mother but that does not happen.

Since "Carol" comes from the mirror, Donna tries for years to enter the mirror to be with Carol. Of course, she fails and realizes it is her utter physicality that stops her. Her mother is delighted when Donna takes on Carol's personality. Donna seems much more normal when she acts as Carol. Around four years of age, Donna attends a special needs school where she learns to draw but no progress is made in her interaction with the other children. After another child hits Donna on the head with a large rock, Donna's time at the school abruptly ends.

As Carol, her family enjoys her ability to participate in dancing. Since she is a contortionist, her brother can twist her legs like arms of a clock as she lay on the floor. Her mother and brother like her better as Carol because Carol laughs when they laugh. She becomes a prized showpiece. She has to stop dancing at eleven when she contracts painful rheumatism in all her joints.

Donna does well in primary school, surprisingly becoming a good reader although she depends on the pictures that accompany the stories to understand the words. She is good at spelling but struggles through math. Donna makes a few girlfriends in school but is never anyone's "best" girlfriend. When Donna is six, her little brother Tom is born. He later is diagnosed as super hyperactive, which explains why she gets along so well with him. Donna eventually develops her own language and symbolism, which no one else understands. Donna, who is afraid of being touched by anything, is too frightened to walk down her street where the low-hanging branches of large trees seem to try to reach out to her. She begins walking down another street, which is where she meets Trish.



Page 30 through 44

Page 30 through 44 Summary and Analysis

Donna pretends that Trish is her older sister as they have fun doing the same things. Donna can even look straight into Trish's eyes without feeling frightened. Donna stays overnight with Trish and becomes frightened. Trish lets her sleep in her bed and cuddles her. Although the touching terrifies Donna, she allows it. While still with Trish, Donna gets up in the middle of the night and gets dressed because she does not feel "neat" enough in her nightie. Trish's mother finds her sitting on her bed and helps her back into her nightgown and back into bed. She tells Trish's mother she "wants to go." The woman responds that there is nowhere to go. That phrase, "nowhere to go" stuck with Donna as she felt that it aptly described her life. Although Trish fades from her life, the memory of that night and those words stay with Donna for decades.

Donna becomes friends with an older girl, Terry. She does not know how to approach her initially so she begins calling her every foul name she heard her mother ever yell out. Terry chases her down and tells Donna she should have just talked to her instead of calling her names. Terry is not a good influence as she teaches eight-year-old Donna to smoke and swear, although she had learned plenty of bad words already from her mother.

On the home front, Donna's father is drinking heavily and holding drunken parties that devolve into brawls. Although the violence in her family surely affects the young Donna, she does not replay the violent scenes in her head until she is much older. Contrary to other children, gentleness and acts of kindness frighten her as a child and she replays those terrifying episodes in her mind. Violence is black and white. To Donna, a kind act might be masking some horrid scenario. Since she connects to her little brother, Tom, he scares her because he makes her feel real. Tommy has some of the same characteristics as Donna but it is obvious that he will outgrow them and is developing normally.

Donna falls into a year's depression after transferring to Terry's school. Terry, being older, begins to ignore her for her other friends and Donna is unable to make new friends. At nine years of age, after a fight with her mother, Donna mutilates her face with a broken shard of china. Donna becomes more socially isolated at school but begins to like books about collections and animals. She likes reading phone books and directories because of their order and structure. She finds comfort in repeating activities that are systematic in nature.



Page 45 through 59

Page 45 through 59 Summary and Analysis

Donna is frustrated because she always has to catch up with the other kids. She tries to slow her world down in several creative ways by blinking and talking compulsively both help her achieve this. As she nears puberty, Donna becomes increasingly frustrated, violent, and self-destructive. Her teacher is having a lot of disciplinary problems with her. At home, night terrors begin. She has horrid nightmares, which include sleepwalking. Fortunately, Donna's new teacher, Mr. Reynolds, is kind and tries to understand her. He compliments her on what she does well without comparing her to other children.

Mr. Reynolds tells Donna that to pass, she must do well on the final exam since she had not done well during the school year. To everyone's surprise, Donna has the highest score of the girls in the class and only is only two points lower than the highest boy's score. Donna has proven that she is not a "retard." Donna is confused when she sneaks a look at Mr. Reynold's class book where the comment "Donna is disturbed" is written.

One of Donna's most obvious problems is her inability to communicate. She can prattle on for an hour but she does not talk directly to anyone nor does she expect or want a response or comment from others. It is almost impossible for her to address someone directly. Generally, if she wants to know something, she just starts talking in the proximity of someone else in hopes that she will get answers to her questions. Her mother and older brother ridicule her unmercifully.

In high school, she quickly earns the reputation of troublemaker and ruffian, often getting into physical fights with other students. In class, she copies math problems from the book and she writes reports on topics other than what she is given. As Donna develops and becomes more attractive, her mother's physical abuse of her increases. Her mother has started to party with old friends and does not like the competition of a pretty, although disturbed, teenage daughter. Even though Donna is unable to feel actual pain, the violence becomes so intense, that for her safety, Donna is sent to the country to stay for a while.



Page 60 through 74

Page 60 through 74 Summary and Analysis

Donna is frightened when she enters the country home where she stays for a brief time. The continuous carpet seems like long snakes to her. It is difficult for her to tell if she is talking or the words or just in her mind. The country life is good for her. She begins to fall in love with the sky, the flowers, and the trees. She can actually feel pain when she pulls her hair. Her stay is short and her mother comes for her. Unhappy to be home again, Donna uses the carpet in her room as her urinal. When her mother discovers it, she buys a baby's potty chair and insists she use that. She refuses to and begins holding as long as she can as a means of keeping control.

At a new school, Donna wanders into the wrong classes frequently and remains there until she is removed. She sometimes stares at the same spot on the floor for an entire lunch break. Other kids start to refer to her as "mad." When a student gets too near to her one day, she slings a chair at her. She is asked to leave the school. She had lasted only two weeks. Donna is given one last chance at another school. At fourteen, if she fails at this attempt, she will be sent to a children's home.

Donna swings between silent and vegetative to wild and harmful and finally to just plain strange. She is continuously sent to the counselor's office. The teachers and administration are more understanding however at this school than her previous academic experiences. When Donna becomes disruptive, they calmly lead her to one of the offices where she is allowed to draw by herself. She begins to like her art class although she displays weird behavior there. She and another friend with behavior problems, Stella, wander around to different classrooms and even leave the school grounds on occasion.

Donna becomes more withdrawn, fearing that interacting with others will be the first step in losing control. Her motivation to interact however, is to avoid being institutionalized. Donna's inner world consists of colors, rhythms, and sensations. This state of mind holds comfort for her and interacting with others disturbs this harmony. Donna has a difficult time following rules and an equally difficult time understanding why she should. Donna stays over at her friend Robyn's quite often. Robyn's mother takes a liking to Donna and tries to help her with her manners and hygiene. Robyn's mother insists on hugging Donna goodnight. Donna tolerates the closeness. She learns a lot from Robyn's mother some of which she retains.



Page 75 through 89

Page 75 through 89 Summary and Analysis

From her first memory, Donna always heard music in her mind and in other noises, especially intriguing to her is the sound of metal on metal. The family gets a piano and Donna shows interest in learning how to play. She doesn't want to learn from to play from sheet music; rather, she creates her own classical waltz. Donna's mother is jealous of her daughter's creative abilities and her ability to play by ear. What could have become a source of shared enjoyment between mother and daughter devolves into a bitter competition.

Donna shares some poetry she wrote and some of her art with her father. Her father is proud of her but makes the mistake of telling her mother about Donna's artistic endeavors. Her mother demands to see her poetry and mocks the words and the grammatical errors and calls her daughter "mad."

Donna's biggest fear is of being sent to a children's home. She sees that possibility as the end to control of herself. Donna realizes that she must act normal to avoid being sent away. However, doing so she begins to lose a sense of herself and of her world. She has the usual problems at school but does begin to like one of her teachers. Donna makes a special effort on a report she makes for the class and receives an "A" from the teacher.

At fifteen, Donna gets a job as a seamstress. Her first assignment is to put buttonholes in garments. She is fired when the boss finds that she is putting buttonholes on the collar, the arms, and back panel, literally everywhere one would fit. Her next job is working as a clerk in a department store. She likes this job because it is her responsibility to put everything in order—one of her favorite pastimes. However, she ignores customers and is sometimes rude to them. The way she speaks to customers is disconcerting as well. She sometimes speaks in an accent, changes pitch up and down, and at times sounds like Elvis or Mickey Mouse.

Donna is sent to work in the storeroom due to her inability to interact with customers. She likes the storeroom where her only responsibility is to keep everything neat and tidy. Donna meets a young man, Garry, one day while she is skating. He becomes interested in her and starts kissing her and telling her he loves her. He tells her he would like to live with her one day. She takes that as invitation, packs up all her belongings and moves in with him. He really did not want her to move in but she winds up staying. They have sex. She does not feel involved but knows she must comply in order to stay with him. Life with Garry is no better than that at home. He takes all the money she earns and starts beating her regularly. Garry's sister feels sorry for Donna and invites her to stay with her.

Page 90 through 104

Page 90 through 104 Summary and Analysis

Like her brother, Garry's sister takes most of Donna's earnings. There is never much food in the house and Donna has no money to buy food at work. Fellow workers notice she is not eating and share their food with her. Their kindness brings Donna to tears. Donna returns home for a short time before her mother insists that she move by herself to a flat. She is harassed one night by three boys after which she attempts suicide by cutting her wrists. The cuts are not deep but when she visits Robyn, her mother notices the cuts and takes her to the hospital. There, she is required to visit a psychiatrist named Mary. Mary tells her that there is a very frightened little girl living inside her.

Donna moves from one flat to another, never staying more than two months in any one place. Several young men she meets wind up staying in her place using it to entertain other girls. Donna is complacent during this period since she is playing the role of the personable Carol. Donna does not recognize Tommy, her younger brother, when he comes to visit because when Carol is present and Donna is not. After a while, Donna is unable to maintain the Carol persona. She becomes unable to work and finds it difficult to even leave her flat. A young man, Chris, lives with Donna on and off. She does not like him but she looks to him as her only protection. When Chris leaves for a weekend, Donna is destroyed and feels abandoned. She visits the hospital to see Mary again. The orderly insists she does not need to see Mary. Willie resurfaces and becomes violent and starts throwing things after which Donna is allowed to see Mary. After their first conversation in which Willie will not allow Donna to say anything, Mary tells Donna to come back the next day. Carol shows up for that appointment, but Mary soon removes that façade and Donna is reduced to tears. Donna begins seeing Mary twice a week. Mary works with Donna on her depersonalization, prompting her to use "I" instead of "you" when referring to herself. Mary sees that Donna has a preoccupation with staying in control.



Pages 105 through 119

Pages 105 through 119 Summary and Analysis

As clever as Willie and Carol are in shielding Donna, it is essential that Donna be present during therapy since she is the only one who understands her world. Donna is insulted when Carol is given a prescription for schizophrenia. Carol takes a handful of the pills and drinks a dangerous amount of Cognac after which Mary takes Donna off the pills. Donna becomes so panicked one day that she rushes away from work to find Mary. When she gets to her office, she initially cannot say or even remember Mary's name. Mary tells Donna that she had a panic attack. Donna sobs as Mary stirs memories of the three-year-old Donna who felt abandoned by her father and grandfather.

At the age of eighteen, Donna has been seeing Mary for a year. She wants to go back to school and get her diploma so she can get a respectable job at a bank. Donna is becoming aware of how unstable she is. Donna rejoins high school to finish her last year and receive her diploma. Donna sees very little of her family during this period. She hears that her mother is telling anyone who knew Donna that she moved away on her own and that she has become a slut and drug addict. Donna's father does start stopping by on occasion and seems to enjoy himself.

In school, Donna takes biology, sociology, and the mandatory English class. She has an unusual writing style, with periods every five words and capital letters placed randomly throughout words and sentences. Donna takes philosophy even though she does not know what it is. Once in class, she lasts only a few weeks. The teacher talks her into coming and she winds up liking the class because there was no right or wrong in philosophy.

Mary begins to recognize that there is a difference in Donna's "world" and the "world" at large. Donna eventually takes psychology, which she comes to live for. Donna begins to learn that understanding her mind would provide a measure of self-protection. Donna does well, getting the highest grade in the class on one of her reports. Both Mary's biology teacher and math teacher seem to understand Donna and are helpful and patient with her.

Page 120 through 134

Page 120 through 134 Summary and Analysis

Donna is seeing Mary once a week. Sometimes the meetings seem more social than professional. Carol and Willie often show up to complicate things. Donna is earning only \$20 a week while her rent is \$35 a week. She gets another part-time job at a food shop. All she has to eat is discarded food from the shop each day. Donna graduates from high school with average to high marks but she fears what her future holds. To her surprise, one of her classmates writes her after graduation telling her how her struggles and success had inspired her. Donna is deeply moved.

After graduation, Donna stops her sessions with Mary but promises to keep in touch. Donna, without a job and an unknown future, enrolls in a university. By the time her second year begins, Donna is enrolled in the School of Social Sciences. There are more fees than Donna had figured and she is destitute. No longer able to afford a flat, she is at times homeless. Donna has problems in her philosophy class where the professor refers to her as a moron. She does much better in linguistics because of its orderly structure. Donna is able to buy an old piano and begins writing music through which she feels she can express her true self.

Donna begins having night terrors again. She learns from an aunt that she was going to adopt Donna when she was small but her grandparents became her legal guardians. Donna's aunt feels that her mother caused all her problems. She tells Donna of a horrible incident when Donna's mother stuffed a rag down her throat and almost choked her. Donna begins to recollect the incident herself. Still attending the university, Donna moves to a house in the country. She is happy with her piano and animals including some cats and a goat. She is feeling at home there.



Pages 135 through 149

Pages 135 through 149 Summary and Analysis

In her third year of college, Donna abandons the idea of emulating Mary and tries to learn about herself. She struggles to free herself of the remnants of Willie and Carol that still remain. Donna meets a young man, Bryn, who seems to understand her immediately. He instinctively knows how to exist in her world. Still the old demons haunt Donna. After a year as friends, when Bryn holds her hand, she is terrified. Although Bryn had communication problems and went to a special school like Donna did, he does not suffer from hallucinations. His parents suspected he was schizophrenic. Bryn seems to have coped better than Donna. She realizes that she was only able to cope by allowing other characters to communicate for her.

Donna, deciding to face the past, learns from her father than some doctors had thought Donna was autistic. Although she tries, Donna is unable to find out much about autism. After she moves back to the city, the Carol personality takes over. She begins to party, laugh and dance a lot. Bryn had been getting too close to the real Donna. Their relationship frightened her so much that she had to run from him.

Donna meets Tim, a medical student, who shares her love for music. Since Donna is displaying the Carol persona, she allows Tim to hear the music she has written. Donna and Tim move in a house together but the relationship is platonic. In some sense, they are both three-year-olds who enjoy each other's company. When Tim gets more serious, Donna panics and Carol emerges once again. A well-meaning friend interferes in Tim and Donna's relationship and fractures it.

Donna graduates from the university. For her senior thesis, she chooses the topic, "Deviance and Normalcy." Her behavior is bizarre during this period. Although she likes the professor she chooses for her senior thesis mentor, she refuses to allow him to review her work so he can evaluate her progress. Donna decides to try to secure a job in social services. Donna only keeps her first job a few weeks but she meets David, a young man who is struggling with life. David contacts Donna after she leaves. The young man turns out to be a compulsive liar and master manipulator. He presents a challenge that Carol and Willie are powerless to face, not to mention Donna.



Pages 150 through 164

Pages 150 through 164 Summary and Analysis

Within each person, there is a fight or flight mechanism. Carol represents Donna's flight mechanism. When Donna is unable to deal with a situation, she flees and allows Carol to take control. When Donna feels cornered, Willie takes over to fight it out. In an effort to sabotage Donna's relationship with Tim, David announces in front of both of them one day that he and Donna are engaged. Donna does not understand that it is a cruel joke and she allows Carol to emerge, charming and empty. Karen, a friend who lived with Donna and David at the time, sees through David but is unable to convince Donna. David creates a schism in Donna's relationship with Karen and he and Donna. They move out and are once again homeless.

David does not want to work and forces Donna to sell all her belongings. He plans to use the money to travel around the countryside. Although she tries to deny it, Donna realizes the mistake she made and longs to see Tim again. They wind up broke on the other side of Australia. Donna earns a room at a boardinghouse for them in exchange for teaching English to the owner's son. Donna is weak, suffering from severe malnutrition. Remarkably, Donna finds the strength to write to Tim and leave David. David, however, has grown used to his free ride and returns with Donna who has to sell her car to make the return journey.

Donna has brief contact with Tim but he has moved in with another girl. With money earned from her factory job, Donna buys a trailer and she and David begin traveling again. Bolstered by encouraging letters from Tim, Donna sneaks out with just her personal belongings and leaves David. She had wasted over a year with him. She stays with Tim and his girlfriend for a short time and then gets a place of her own. She meets a young man who has communication problems similar to her own. Their relationship, which is only sexual, lasts only a few months. Donna has a terrifying experience in which she is lost and can't find her way in the city where she was born and raised.

Donna is ill and visits a naturopath who feels that she is not absorbing vitamins possibly due to a food intolerance. After going through a full range of screenings, it is discovered that Donna is suffering from multiple food allergies and severe hypoglycemia. Placed on a diet free of the troublesome foods, Donna experiences immediate change. Her sometimes manic behavior decreases significantly. The owner of the shop where she works is amazed at the transformation. Still lingering, of course, are her emotional and communication problems. On a whim, Donna decides to move to England temporarily



Pages 165 through 189

Pages 165 through 189 Summary and Analysis

Donna is given a free course in comedy writing by agreeing to appear in skits at a comedy club. Carol takes over for Donna on a script co-written by Donna in which her "world" is explored. The skit is well-received and she is offered a paid job to join a comedy act but declines feeling it would exploit her purpose which is to familiarize people with her situation. Donna then travels to South Wales. During the three-hour train ride, Donna becomes acquainted with a young man who seems to have the same self-doubts and communication problems as she. They spend many hours together in a town by the sea. Donna feels she made more progress on herself in that night than the rest of her life. Even though she experiences panic and fears, she does not allow Carol or Willie to take control. For once, Donna faces the real world by herself. The two, who seem to be mirror images of one another, part ways but promise to keep in touch.

Donna receives a letter from the man, inviting her to his family home. There they share a kiss which reduces Donna to tears as it is the first kiss she experienced while she was actually "there," actually Donna. She and the man part not knowing if they will see each other again. Donna travels onto Europe. The man had given Donna an empty bottle full of hugs to take with her. Donna first visits Holland, winding up in a hostel in Amsterdam.

Donna runs out of money in Amsterdam and is broke until money can be transferred from England. It takes a few days, but the hostel owner allows her to work in the kitchen for her stay. She is not able to find employment because of the language barrier but makes a few dollars singing on the street. After her money is transferred, she and a roommate at the hostel travel to Germany where she falls in love with the Black Forest region. Donna meets Julian, a musician and poet, who amazingly sees through her façade, asking her when her performance will stop. Donna seems to connect with him and is able to look directly into his eyes.

Donna gets a job as an English tutor and leases an attic room. She begins to have night terrors again that recall the horrors of her childhood. Her renewed fears are brought on by Julian's directness and his ability to make her "feel." When she tells him goodbye, for the first time in her life, she initiates touch and she hugs him several times. He tells her to come back. Donna heads back to Wales and to her friend there whose name is Shaun. He is drunk and ignores her during the entire day of her visit. He takes her to the station and gives her a crumpled note when she exits his car. In the note, Shaun tells her to keep in touch and that she is the best friend he ever had. On the phone, Shaun tells Donna he is in love with her after which she never sees or hears from him again.

Donna puts her thoughts on paper and writes a book of all her recollections. In her research, she comes across a book on autism and identifies with most of the symptoms. She takes the book she wrote to a child psychologist who reads the book and refers it to

an autism expert. Donna is encouraged to send her work to a book publisher as it could prove to be a help to millions of people.

Pages 190 through 198

Pages 190 through 198 Summary and Analysis

Donna realizes she must stop relying on her characters. She begins to recognize herself as an individual, referring to herself as "I." She buys a stuffed toy to carry with her and the toy hopefully takes the place of Carol and Willie. Donna comes to terms with the real world, which it is not a victory it is a truce. She begins to accept that she is autistic. When she looks at old photos, a picture of her when she was just weeks old shows her propensity to not look directly at anything which tells her that she was born with her condition. She may have been made more miserable by a cruel mother, but her mother did not cause her condition. Her research confirms that she is a "high functioning" autistic.

Donna meets Kath who has an autistic son named Perry and is also a teacher of autistic children. Kath invites Donna to meet other autistic children at a special camp. Donna identifies with one little girl, Anne, who resembles her in appearance and behavior. To help the frightened Anne fall asleep, Donna lets her hold her brush and run her fingers through the bristles giving her a sense of security from the repetitive motion and the almost imperceptible sound of the bristles.



Afterword

Afterword Summary and Analysis

Donna does not feel that being sane or intelligent is superior to being insane or retard. They both just provide different perspectives of the same world. Ironically, it was her mother's abuse and cruelty that forced Donna to find her own way. Not that loving parents can't be a positive force to autistic children—but parents need to learn to approach and understand their autistic child from his perspective. By building the child's trust in the adult, he can learn to live in the "real world."

Chemical and hormonal responses in the brain lead the child to hypersensitivity which in turn can lead to developmental lags. Donna's condition was heightened by her multiple food allergies. It is unclear what role severe food intolerances may have in brain damage or autism. Phenol intolerance is particularly associated with autism. Metabolic problems may have a causal effect in cases of autism. Evidence points to the possibility that autism results from the dysfunction of the mechanism that control emotions. In the world of autism, there is hope of reaching one's potential and overcoming some problems.

An Outline of Language in

An Outline of Language in Summary and Analysis

Like many autistics, Donna developed her own language which consisted of symbols and gestures. This way of "speaking" was her only means of communicating, of saying what she thought. The ordering of objects and symbols brought more comprehension to Donna. By blinking incessantly, she could become more detached from a situation and head-banging was a way of providing order and calming down manic behavior.

Donna provides a few hints on how people can understand and get along with autistic people. A few examples include talking to the autistic person indirectly, speaking to the child through visual symbols, and, allowing the person privacy and space.



Characters

Donna Williams

Donna Williams is an individual who has autism. From the age of three, Donna suffered from the inability to communicate with the outer world. Although it seemed to many, including her cruel mother, that she was just behaving badly, in her world she was reacting in the only way she could. To cope with being in a strange world forced on her by autism, she had to develop ways in which to cope and survive because that world was nested within the larger "real world."

Donna's first recollection was a landscape that was pure white, broken up into billions of small dots. Donna focused on those dots because it was all she could recognize. When a slap in the face from her mother interrupted her observation, it was merely a bump in the road. After recovering from a sensation she did not comprehend, she merely continued on with her fascination with the dots. When she visited a building with red carpets, to her they looked like snakes that were ready to pounce. When she would eat with other people, all she could see were suspended hands holding forks, disconnected from their bodies.

Amazingly, Donna was able to battle these demons and at least partially exist in the real world. It was obvious that she was highly intelligent. Otherwise, she could have never been mainstreamed in primary and secondary schools and she even attended a university. Donna had to battle not only a mother who was uncaring and abusive but was forced to withstand friends who took advantage of her vulnerability. She only was able to do so by inventing the "Carol" personality who was sociable and easy-going when faced with a relationship issue or become the combative "Willie" who would emerge when Donna was fearful and cornered.

Donna was a highly-functioning autistic person who somehow gathered herself enough to organize and write a book that is the account of her life-long journey. The book, although not technical in nature, provides direct testimony of what the world of the autistic person consists of and of the unending battle to exist with "normal" people in an alien world.

Donna's Mother

Donna's mother was abusive to her daughter beginning in Donna's early years. Donna was lost in a sea of nothingness, scrutinizing the infinite dots dancing before her. The slap that came from her mother and landed on her cheek was an intrusion into her world but did nothing to change it. Her mother would comb her hair, roughly combing through knots and all. By contrast, when her aunt would comb her hair, she took care to gently remove the knots. It seemed as though her mother enjoyed hurting her, although it was difficult for Donna to directly connect with the pain she felt from having her hair pulled.



Donna's mother had no idea what was wrong with her daughter and probably cared less. She summed up her daughter's behavior as crazy and "mad." She and her older son would mock and ridicule Donna, calling her spastic and a retard. When Donna matured into an attractive teen, her mother would beat and kick her and pull her hair.

Several mentions were made of the mother's drinking problems. Perhaps she drank to drown her fears and discomfort with her daughter's condition. She made no secret that she was shamed by her daughter's behavior. Ironically, Donna feels that since she was basically abandoned by her mother, she had to struggle herself to find her way. That struggle, she feels, made her all the stronger for it.

When Donna was sixteen, it seems as though her mother totally gave up on her. She told her to pack her things and get her own place. Her mother basically saw Donna very little after she moved out. Donna probably didn't understand at the time but being taken from an abusive relationship could never be anything but positive. Donna, with all the barriers one could fathom, did quite well without her mother. In fact, she did better in life than did her mother.

Donna's Father

Donna's father was kind and gentle. He seemed to really care for his daughter but was weak against the will of his wife. Donna's father, like his wife, suffered from alcoholism.

Donna's Brothers

Donna had two brothers. Her older brother was in league with his mother. They would gang up on Donna and ridicule her and call her names. Donna loved her younger brother, Tommy, who was hyperactive and shared in some of the same bizarre behavior as his sister.

Willie

Willie was a violent character that Donna created. He was basically a pair of scary, green eyes. He would emerge whenever Donna was scared and needed to be protected.

The Wisps

The Wisps were translucent little fluffs that hovered over Donna's bed at night. They were protective beings who were eventually replaced by twinkling stars.



Carol

Carol is a persona that Donna would assume whenever she was in a social situation that required a pleasing and easygoing personality. Donna based "Carol" to a young girl named "Carol" who was kind to her.

Mary

Mary was Donna's psychiatrist for nine years. Donna at one time wanted to become a psychiatrist like Mary. Later, they ended their relationship amicably because they had become too close for the therapy to be effective.

David

David was a young man who lived with Donna for a little over a year. He did not like to work and sponged off of Donna. He was a liar and very manipulative.

Shaun

Donna met Shaun on a train ride to Wales. Shaun displayed many of the same characteristics that Donna had. After he called her to tell her he loved her, she never saw him again.

Julian

Donna met Julian in the Black Forest region of Germany. He was intrigued by Donna and saw through the "Carol" façade she was presenting. He asked her when her performance was going to end. He was the first person that ever reached her enough to make her feel.



Objects/Places

Australia

Donna Williams was born and raised in Australia where she lived with her parents and two brothers.

London

On a whim, Donna Williams, in her early twenties, decided to strike out on her own and move temporarily to London, England, where she spent many months working in a temporary job.

Wales

When Donna decided to leave London, she traveled to Wales. On the train ride to that country, she met Shaun who exhibited many similar behaviors to her.

Amsterdam

After leaving Great Britain, Donna spent some time in Belgium. She had a difficult time there. She was broke and could not get a job because of the language barrier.

Germany

After getting enough money to leave Amsterdam, Donna moved to Germany with some friends. They stayed with an acquaintance of one of Donna's friends.

Black Forest

Donna spent some time in the Black Forest region of Germany. She fell in love with the area and met Julian who saw through her façade and made her feel real emotions for the first time in her life.

Tropical Region of Australia

Donna traveled with David to the tropical side of Australia. It was there that the two totally ran out of money. Donna had to sell her car to pay for her travel back home.



Storeroom

Donna had a job at a retail shop. However, she did not work out as a sales person because of her inability to interact with customers. She was transferred to the storeroom which she loved because her main responsibility was to get everything neat and in order.

Costume Shop

Donna worked in a costume shop for a brief stint. She loved putting on the different costumes and the patrons found the eccentric clerk fascinating.

University

Donna attended a university in Australia. Only a very highly functioning autistic like Donna would be able to adapt to higher education. Although she was not the typical student, she did well at college.

Themes

The Challenges of Autism

Donna Williams' first memory is around three years of age. She recalls an all-white existence that, when she looked closely, was comprised of billions of dots. This was her reality and what she saw. However, she did not see the disapproval of her mother who did not understand her strange behavior. However, the slapping, hair-pulling, kicking, and name-calling did not make that all-white existence disappear. The slap to Donna was just an interruption in her world but it neither changed nor improved her abilities to function in the real world.

Those who do not suffer from autism find it difficult to understand how a basically normal appearing person cannot communicate in a conventional manner, cannot react emotionally in an expected way, and has fears that seem baseless. Those fears, as an autistic child, include the fear of being touched, fear of looking directly in someone's eyes, fear of loss of control, and fears of many other everyday situation that most people would not even notice. As an autistic matures, the struggle against these fears remain but more complex fears develop along with them such as the fear of being thought of as stupid or insane or of being put away in an institution.

Although an autistic individual cannot convey emotions in the normal way, they have the same feelings as everyone else and they just view them in a different light. A highly functioning autistic like Donna is aware of the demands that are part of the "real world." Although it would be a difficult journey to leave the safety of what she had grown accustomed for the frightening "real" world, she still wanted to be a part of it. Her challenge was to try to marry her abilities with what was expected in that other world. She was not willing, however, to denigrate what she viewed as positive and important to an autistic and sought to educate people on how those from these different worlds could successfully live together.

Abuse of the Autistic Child

Although Donna Williams provides some excuses for her mother's abusive treatment of her where she was embarrassed and overwhelmed by her daughter's behavior, there is no excuse for abusing an autistic child or any child. Not being aware of autism, a condition that gained recognition in later years, Donna's mother was hard-pressed to understand or have sympathy for the child who did not develop in the same way as her other children.

Donna's mother abused her in physical, emotional and psychological ways. It was obvious that Donna was having chronic physical problems at an early age. Her parents suspected that her bleeding gums and ashen appearance could be signaling leukemia. When that disease was ruled out, they seemed to have dropped the pursuit of learning if



their child did indeed have a physical impairment. Much later in life, Donna learned that she had multiple food allergies that not only kept her from getting the proper nourishment but could well have contributed to her autism.

Donna's mother combed her daughter's hair in a rough manner, through knots and all. One of the first sensations Donna remembers is the slap that her mother would plant on her cheek when she was not behaving normally, which was quite often. Donna's mother would slap and punch her, kick her, and pull her hair. Part of her mother's actions could be attributed to her frustration but certainly the real blame must be laid at the feet of a cruel and uncaring person.

Donna's experience with an abusive mother was not a singular experience as the sadness and confusion that parents of an autistic child experience lead some to punish the child for their own lack of ability to cope or accept them.

Coping Skills of the Autistic

In the last portion of Donna Williams' book on her lifelong struggle with autism, she describes the reasons why autistic people create their own ways of communicating and coping with their condition. As Williams often remarks in her account, autistic people divide the existence into the "world" of autism and the "real world." While they are cognizant of what the majority of people view as the "real" world, the world of the autistic is for the most part their reality.

Since autistic people do not "feel" physically or emotionally in accepted ways, they must create methods in which they can convey their needs. They are comforted by repetitive motions which represent to them the implausibility of something surprising or scary occurring. Generally, autistic people do not like to be touched. Since they do not understand the sensation of being touched, they do not know what to expect next which sends up alarms. They are not able to say, "Are you going to touch me again?" or "Why did you touch me?" In place of those questions, they use other symbols and signals to convey their inner fears about what might come next.

By repeated "blinking," the autistic person feels that he is slowing things down, thus making a situation less frightening. When an autistic person seems obsessed with matching objects, he is trying to make a connection between things. When an autistic person either drops things repeatedly or jumps from a stair or ledge, he is proclaiming his freedom.

There is no guidebook for the way autistic people communicate. Therefore, it is noteworthy that most autistic people use similar means to communicate.

Style

Perspective

The autobiographical book, "Nobody Nowhere" by Donna Williams, is written in the first-person narrative. No one other than the author could convey the pain and fear that she experienced throughout her life due to the debilitating condition known as autism. Although Williams does not provide a clinical nor medical analysis of the condition, she provides a personal description of autism that to many remains mysterious in nature and to others is unknown at best or vastly misunderstood at worst.

The astonishing fact that a person with obviously severe autistic disabilities can communicate to millions of people for now and into the future by virtue of the book she wrote. She is a highly functioning autistic person but to be able to overcome such barriers and organize her thoughts enough to write a book with clarity is mind-bending. The vocabulary she uses and the understanding of a condition that can even elude the experts is nothing less than miraculous.

Although there are professionals in the medical field that theorize and provide speculation about autism, it is only someone who has the condition who can confirm or deny that which is discussed or written about it. No better testimony about autism could be obtained than that provided by author and autistic Donna Williams.

Tone

Part of the torment that people suffering have from autism is the overwhelming fear they experience from seemingly everyday interactions and situations. Donna Williams successfully conveys the depth of that fear and the paralyzing affect it has on its victims in the account of her journey through life as an autistic person.

Although her whole life has been one of struggle and at times limited progress, Donna Williams displays very little, if any bitterness. She successfully and consistently displays an honesty and genuineness in tone and context. There is every indication that she has told her story in a truthful and deliberate manner which shines light and brings clarity to a disability that is unknown to many and mysterious in nature to others.

By showing such bravery in discussing the private and painful portions of her life which to this day remain a struggle, engenders more sympathy from readers than had she shown anger and bitterness over her fate. By her honest and calm approach to such a serious issue, she has no doubt spread understanding and empathy to many who lacked knowledge and understanding about autism.

Though admittedly, Donna Williams is a highly functioning autistic person, the fact that she could organize and write her autobiography flies in the face of the perception that



autistic people cannot communicate. By virtue of her ability to write such an account, displays the potential of people who society might otherwise write off.

Structure

The autobiographical book, "Nobody, Nowhere," by Donna Williams recounts her journey from the "world" she invented as an autistic person to the "real world" in which she lived and which she could not ignore. There are no chapter breaks. However, Donna's story is presented basically in chronological order, beginning with her first gauzy memories at three and a half years old to adulthood in her twenties. The main account follows a section entitled, "Afterword," in which Williams provides a non-medical analysis of the condition known as autism and her conclusions, through much research and her own experiences as to its root causes.

Autism causes a dysfunction in the individual's communications abilities which is addressed in the last section of the book entitled, "An Outline of Language in "My World." In this portion, Donna explains the somewhat complex way in which she coped with her disability. She provides insight into the mysterious world of the autistic and the lengths they go to in order to communicate. For example, clapping conveys laughter for the autistic while tearing paper is a way to say good-bye. A fascination with patterns indicates the comfort that continuity represents and switching lights on and off provides protection and reassurance.

In the last brief section, Williams provides tips on how others can understand and reach out to autistic people. Included in these guidelines respect the autistic person's fear of being touched, talking in an indirect manner; and trying to understand the unconventional ways in which they communicate.



Quotes

"This is a story of two battles, a battle to keep out 'the world' and a battle to join it" (Author's Note, pg. xix.)

"I thought I felt a whisper through my soul, everything is nothing, and nothing is everything. Death in life and life in death of falsity" (pg. 5.)

"My mother used to say: 'If you really want to hurt someone, be nice to them' Perhaps she had learned that lesson from watching the way it often affected me" (pg. 34.)

"It was as though awareness were a puppet, the strings of which were set firmly in the hands of emotional stress" (pg. 46.)

"I don't think I was made, but I was certainly very distant and too far away to be reached" (pg. 65.)

"The bare floor, wall-to-wall mirrors, the barred windows, and the hoard of untouched, unwanted dolls spoke of who I was. My mother stood there among the rejected dolls and, so she told me, cried for the first time" (pg. 87.)

"I didn't know why I was there, and I had to get out. I grabbed for my bag and bolted out of the shop. The city street was a nightmare: moving walls of people, my feet surrounded by feet everywhere" (pg. 108.)

"Yet, as all relationships existed within me rather than between myself and others, there was only one way to bring this attachment inescapably into my own world. Willie compulsively set about becoming like this person who symbolized protection, strength and self-control" (pg. 121.)

"Each side of me had begun to become more closely aligned to my true self, though they were still miles apart from one another. It was as though they were all one continuum and my real self was kept protected, unexpressed, within the middle" (pg. 134.)

"Ours was a path with black holes everywhere you stepped. Into each one you could fall down and down for what always seemed like a deathly forever. This was a path where we walked alone and smiled our well-trained smiles as the world passed by and we looked out from what felt like a world under glass" (pg. 186.)

"Autism is not a form of madness. If anything, autism is an extreme example of a mechanism that acts to protect sanity" (pg. 204.)

"Autistic people are not mad, not stupid. They are not fairies, not aliens-just people trapped in invisible, crippled emotional responses" (pg. 205.)



Topics for Discussion

What are some of the main symptoms of autism? What did Donna mean when she referred to her "world" and the "real world?"

What kind of relationship did Donna have with her mother? How did the relationship with her mother impact her condition? What relatives did Donna have strong relationships with?

In addition to autism, what other physical conditions did Donna suffer from? How did she discover that she had physical conditions that may have exacerbated her condition?

How did men take advantage of Donna? What type of men did Donna make real connections with? How and why did her relationship with Julian transform her?

Who did Donna "invent" Carol to handle situations when she was cornered and fearful? Who did Donna summon up when she had to appear cooperative and socially acceptable? What psychological condition do these coping skills mimic?

What type of jobs did Donna have? What responsibilities did Donna have at some of her jobs that she really liked and did not like? How did Donna react with customers when she worked in a retail shop?

What did Donna's autism hold her back from accomplishing? What is the cure for autism and what are some of the possible root causes for it?