

Portia Iversen: *Strange Son: Two Mothers, Two Sons, and the Quest to Unlock the Hidden World of Autism*

Simon Schuster, New York, 2006, \$14.68, Audio (Abridged)

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Published online: 13 November 2009
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Strange Son is Iversen's first person account of her family's quest to find answers to their son Dove's profound autism. She and her husband became driving forces behind the organization Cure Autism Now (CAN). Iversen learns of a boy from Bangalore, India, also with profound autism, who has what appear to be savant skills in the area of writing and specifically in the area of writing poetry. She arranges for the boy, Tito, and his mother, Soma Mukhopadhyay, to fly to America in order to meet with a team of researchers and neuropsychologists. Iversen hopes to learn from Soma, how she taught her son to communicate and write. Iversen distills the essence of Soma's technique, couples it with what she has learned from research and begins to teach others Soma's method. Through the retelling of her tale, Iversen explains to the listener the theories and research in the field of autism in an easily understandable manner.

Jane Kaczmarek's reading of Iversen's memoir is compelling. Hearing the despair and hope in the voice of a narrator adds to the experience. Iversen with the help of Soma and Tito not only begin to help researchers understand that some individuals with autism are not visual learners, but rather are auditory learners. She also manages to demonstrate to researchers that Tito and her son have intellectual abilities beyond what was previously assumed. One of the most poignant moments is when Tito is troubled by the researcher's assumption that he was intellectually

defective and not able to understand everything that was happening around him. It is a reminder to professionals and researchers who serve this community of the importance of treating individuals on the spectrum with respect and to examine our own biases and assumptions. The book also provides professionals with ideas for new avenues of research and treatment. Unfortunately, the evidence for this particular technique to communicate with individuals with autism is merely anecdotal.

One disappointing aspect of the book is mentioned in passing. The listener is left with the impression in the beginning of the book that the development of her son's autism occurred shortly after he received an inoculation. This causal impression does a disservice to families. Despite having mountains of data finding no causal link between vaccines and autism, this careless remark may convince some readers not to inoculate their children against preventable and sometimes fatal childhood diseases. Comments like these linger in the minds of the public and make it difficult to dispel the vaccine causing autism myth. The heart-felt first person accounts making these claims are more memorable than dry and boring research studies. The incorrect conclusions coupled with strong emotions make changing the public perception difficult.

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