**Breaking Out of the Box**

*by*[*Gary Jason*](http://www.libertyunbound.com/node/382)  |  Posted January 31, 2011

It is a priori unlikely that a movie would enlighten viewers on subjects as different as autism and animal welfare, but there is such a film — a fine bioflick that aired on HBO last year and is now available on DVD. It’s the moving story of Professor Temple Grandin, its eponymous heroine.

Even today, autism is not well understood. It is a neurodevelopmental disorder that usually manifests itself in the first two to three years of a child’s life. It is typically characterized by severe difficulty in communication and social interaction, and by limited, repetitive behavior (such as endlessly eating the same kind of food or watching the same TV show). While the cause is still unknown, it appears to be a genetic defect afflicting about 1 or 2 children per thousand. While most autistic children are never able to live independently as adults, some — often called “high functioning” — are.

Temple Grandin is arguably the most famous high-functioning autistic person in the world. She was born in 1947, and was diagnosed with autism when she was three. With the help of speech therapists, she was able to learn to talk, and with the help of her extremely high intelligence, she went to an elite boarding school, where a gifted teacher mentored her.

She went on to get a bachelor’s degree in psychology from Franklin Pierce College in New Hampshire, a master’s degree from Arizona State University, and a doctoral degree from the University of Illinois in the field of animal science. She is now a professor at Colorado State University.

The focus of her work has been on the means by which animals, especially cattle, perceive and communicate, through the sounds they make and the way they move. Her autism seems to give her a distinct advantage here, because (as she explains it) she thinks the way cattle do, visually and concretely rather than verbally and abstractly, like ordinary people.

Her career has focused on the design of cattle lots, storage pens, and slaughterhouses that make them far more humane than in times past. Over half the slaughterhouses in America now incorporate her designs. The movie conveys her work beautifully. In one scene, we see her figuring out what is spooking cattle, as they move through a passageway, by getting down on all fours and walking the passageway herself, trying to capture visually exactly what is frightening them.

The movie also effectively conveys her view of our obligations towards animals, one that could be summarized as “Respect what you eat!” In her words, “I think that using animals for food is an ethical thing to do, but we’ve got to do it right. We’ve got to give those animals a decent life and we’ve got to give them a painless death. We owe the animals respect!”

The movie also deftly expresses certain aspects of Grandin’s autistic personality, such as her repetitive eating habits (she loves Jell-O) and her indifference to movies about emotional relationships (such as love!). In one charming scene, she is channel surfing and happens on the famous kiss-on-the-beach scene from the movie *From Here to Eternity.*She grimaces and quickly moves on to an action flick.

*Temple Grandin*is superbly done. Mick Jackson’s direction is sure and steady. He elicits perfectly pitched performances from the actors, performances that are emotionally true without being sentimental. And despite the serious nature of the story, the film is infused with humor. Julia Ormond is marvelous as Grandin’s mother Eustacia, evincing a combination of vulnerability and resilient strength. Catherine O’Hara is solid as Grandin’s Aunt Ann, whose ranch Grandin often visited. Another fine supporting actor is David Strathairn as Professor Carlock, a key mentor to Grandin in developing her understanding of science.

Especially wonderful is Claire Danes as Grandin. She shows us in sometimes painful detail what autism entails, and the suffering it brings, but she also shows us Grandin’s unique genius. Danes apparently studied her subject intensely, and it shows in her performance. She well deserved her Emmy for Outstanding Lead Actress.

The film was a clear success with both the critics and the audience. It was nominated for 15 Emmys, winning seven; besides Danes’ award for Outstanding Lead Actress, they included an Emmy for Outstanding Made for Television Movie.

This is a treat that should not be missed.

**Editor's Note:***Review of "Temple Grandin," directed by Mick Jackson. HBO Films, 2010, 103 minutes.*

**About this Author**

Gary Jason is an academic philosopher and a senior editor of *Liberty*. His recent books, *Disturbing Thoughts: Unorthodox Writings on Timely Issues*and *Philosophic Thoughts: Essays on Logic and Philosophy*are both available through Amazon.