

Epistolary Narration and the Construction of Neurodivergent Identity in *Get a Grip, Vivy Cohen!*

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Abstract

Neurodivergent individuals have historically been represented through deficit-based clinical frameworks that marginalize their voices and deny them self-determination. This paper examines the role of epistolary narration in constructing neurodivergent identity in Sarah Kapit's children's novel *Get a Grip, Vivy Cohen!* (2020). Using The Neurodiversity Paradigm as a theoretical framework, it investigates how the epistolary form enables the protagonist, an autistic girl navigating social expectations to engage in a communicative mode that suits her cognitive strengths. This explores how letter writing functions as a reflective and structured alternative to normative verbal communication, allowing the protagonist to articulate her thoughts with clarity and self-determination. It further examines how epistolary narration facilitates identity construction, enabling the protagonist to resist clinical categorization and assert an individuality grounded in her own lived experiences, interests and aspirations. The paper also demonstrates how letter writing builds meaningful social relationships that extend beyond deficit-oriented interactional norms. This study contends that the epistolary form in the novel challenges dominant assumptions about autistic communication and identity, positioning neurodivergence as a legitimate and enriching mode of human experience.

Keywords: Epistolary narration, Neurodiversity paradigm, Autism representation, Alternative communication, Children's literature.

Introduction: Neurodivergence, Literature and the Politics of Representation

Historically, neurodivergent individuals, particularly those identified as autistic, have been defined through the language of deficit, disorder and deviance. From early twentieth century psychiatry's pathologizing frameworks to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual's clinical categorizations, autism has consistently been constructed as a condition requiring correction rather than a cognitive difference deserving accommodation. Bruno Bettelheim's discredited "refrigerator mother" theory of the 1950s and 60s exemplifies how medical and popular discourse reduced autistic individuals to passive subjects of diagnosis, erasing their inner world and self-determination entirely. Even as this theory was debunked, the dominant cultural imagination continued to frame autism through what Pellicano and den Houting identify as an approach that focuses solely on the autistic person and their perceived 'deficits', leaving little room for autistic voices, perspectives or self-representation.

Children's literature has increasingly emerged as a site of contestation against these deficit-based frameworks. The growth of disability studies as an academic discipline in the 1980s and 1990s, alongside the neurodiversity movement of the late 1990s pioneered by sociologist Judy Singer, began to shift discourse from pathology toward

identity. Nick Walker's influential essay "Throw Away the Master's Tools: Liberating Ourselves from the Pathology Paradigm" names and systematizes this shift, distinguishing the 'pathology paradigm' the assumption that only one neurocognitive configuration is correct and healthy, and that divergence from it constitutes disorder from the neurodiversity paradigm, which reframes such variation as a natural and valuable form of human diversity (Walker). This vocabulary underlies the very framework this paper uses to discuss Vivy as neurodivergent rather than disordered. The pathology paradigm Walker describes is precisely what later surfaces in the novel each time a therapist or adult reads Vivy's passion for the knuckleball as a symptom to be managed rather than an interest to be respected, a dynamic this paper returns to below. Jim Sinclair's landmark 1993 essay "Don't Mourn for Us", addressed directly to the parents of autistic children, demanded that the world hear autistic voices on their own terms, a call that reverberates through contemporary literature for young readers. Scholars such as Murray (2008), Osteen (2008) and Couser (2009) have examined how literary representations of autism shape social attitudes, noting that fiction's capacity for granting readers access to the inner life of a character offers a powerful corrective to clinical depersonalization.

It is within this broader intellectual and cultural context that Sarah Kapit's *Get a Grip, Vivy Cohen!* (2020) commands attention. The novel presents the narrative of Vivy, an autistic girl whose thoughts, emotions and aspirations are conveyed through letters addressed to a professional baseball player. The epistolary structure is not merely a stylistic choice, it is a purposeful formal decision that foregrounds Vivy's voice, subjectivity and self-determination at every level of the text. This paper addresses a gap in existing scholarship by examining the ways in which epistolary narration, as a narrative technique, constructs neurodivergent identity in alignment with the neurodiversity paradigm. It pursues two primary objectives: to analyse epistolary narration as a communicative practice that enables personal reflection and self-representation, and to examine how it facilitates the building of meaningful social relationships outside normative interactional frameworks. Using close textual analysis informed by the Neurodiversity Paradigm and disability studies, this paper contends that the epistolary form in Kapit's novel functions not merely as a stylistic device but as a central mechanism through which neurodivergent identity is articulated, negotiated and affirmed. Having established the theoretical framework within which this paper situates Kapit's novel, attention now turns to the specific communicative pressures Vivy faces and how the neurodiversity paradigm illuminates them.

Neurodivergence, Communication Norms and the Novel:

The neurodiversity paradigm, first articulated sociologically by Judy Singer in 1998, proposes that neurological differences such as autism are natural variations in human cognition rather than pathological aberrations requiring correction. Central to this paradigm is a critique of normative communication standards, the cultural expectation of verbal fluency, rapid responsiveness and face-to-face social performance, that systematically disadvantage those whose cognitive profiles differ. As Patrick Dwyer notes, neurodiversity "can simply refer to the reality that diverse minds and brains exist" (74), a formulation that carries direct implications for how communication itself is defined and valued within social and educational contexts.

These normative pressures are precisely what Vivy encounters throughout the novel. Classroom interactions, peer conversations and family exchanges all demand a speed and spontaneity of response that her cognitive processing does not naturally accommodate. The social environment, rather than Vivy herself, becomes the source of communicative difficulty. This reframing of communicative difficulty as environmental rather than individual is theorized precisely by Damian Milton's double empathy problem, which holds that the friction between autistic and non-autistic communicators arises from "a disjuncture in reciprocity between two differently disposed social actors" (Milton 884), rather than from unilateral deficit on the autistic side. Applied to the novel, Vivy's difficulty in classroom and peer exchanges is not a failure of her communicative competence but a mutual mismatch, one that her correspondence with VJ Capello resolves precisely because both parties adapt to a shared written register. It is against this backdrop of exclusionary communication norms that the epistolary form acquires its significance in the novel: letter writing does not appear as a workaround for Vivy's limitations but as a communicative space genuinely suited to her strengths.

Beyond redefining neurological difference, the neurodiversity paradigm also carries a critical challenge to normalization-based frameworks. As Pellicano and den Houting observe, autism science has long been dominated by a ‘normal science’ orientation, in which researchers and practitioners frame their work around the goal of normalizing autistic individuals rather than understanding and accommodating their cognitive differences (381). Robert Chapman extends this critique structurally, arguing that the pressure to normalize neurodivergent people is not incidental but produced by what he terms the ‘Empire of Normality,’ an apparatus of institutional and economic practices that determines which minds are treated as acceptable (Chapman 15). Reading through Chapman’s framework, the therapists who label Vivy’s baseball a ‘fixation’ are not merely expressing individual bias but enacting a broader institutional logic that treats deviation from normative behaviour as inherently in need of correction. This paradigm, deeply embedded in educational and therapeutic institutions, shapes the social world that Vivy must navigate, informing the adults who doubt her capacity to participate in mainstream baseball and the peer interactions that demand forms of engagement she finds difficult. The novel’s formal structure, by placing the epistolary voice at its centre, constitutes an implicit critique of this normalizing orientation.

Kapit’s formal choice is not incidental. By structuring the entire novel as a series of letters, she embeds the neurodiversity paradigm at the level of narrative form itself, ensuring that the text’s very mode of expression enacts the inclusivity it advocates. In this respect, *Get a Grip, Vivy Cohen!* belongs to a broader literary tradition of neurodivergent self-narration, in which the choice of form is itself a political act, a refusal to submit neurodivergent experience to the interpretive frameworks of others. Having situated the epistolary form within the neurodiversity paradigm’s critique of normalization, the discussion now turns to how that form actually operates, moment by moment, as a communicative practice suited to Vivy’s cognition.

The Epistolary Form as Alternative Communication:

In the novel, the epistolary form functions as a distinctive communicative framework that reflects Vivy’s particular modes of expression and cognition. Through her letters to professional baseball player VJ Capello, Vivy participates in a communicative process that enables deliberate and considered expression, freed from the pressure and uncertainty of face-to-face interaction. Writing provides her with the cognitive and temporal space necessary to structure her thoughts, refine her language and convey meaning with clarity, qualities that spontaneous verbal exchange frequently denies her. This preference for the written mode over the spoken emerges explicitly in Vivy’s own voice. In an early letter, she acknowledges her continued writing despite receiving no reply, explaining:

I guess I don't entirely know why I write you these letters, but I usually feel better once I do. So I'm going to keep writing, even if you never write me back. (38)

The act of writing is here disclosed as therapeutic and self-sustaining, a communicative practice Vivy has come to recognize as meeting a genuine need, independent of any external validation. In a different letter, she confesses with striking candour: “I can’t talk to anyone else about it right now” (11), turning to the page precisely because it offers what oral conversation cannot, unhurried space for the expression of difficult feeling.

This mode of communication aligns with broader neurodiversity research, which acknowledges and values diverse forms of communicative practice beyond conventional verbal interaction. As Pellicano and den Houting observe, neurodiversity sees autism as “one form of variation within a diversity of minds” (381), a perspective that challenges restrictive definitions of communication by affirming the validity of alternative expressive practices. Within this framework, Vivy’s preference for written communication is not interpreted as a limitation but as an effective and purposeful mode of engagement suited to her cognitive strengths. Vivy’s letters reveal the specific cognitive advantages that written communication offers her. She is able to think through her ideas before committing them to words, to revise and refine her expression, and to return to previous letters to build continuity of thought. This is evident in the meticulous way she reconstructs social encounters for VJ Capello:

I know you're probably wondering how I managed to remember everything he said so well. The answer is that I just keep thinking about what happened. What I could have done better. So I really do remember every single thing he said. (8)

This capacity for retrospective processing, replaying, analysing and narrating a difficult interaction is precisely the cognitive work that the letter facilitates and that real-time verbal exchange forecloses. The letter functions not merely as a medium but as a cognitive tool that extends Vivy's communicative capacity in ways that suit her particular mode of processing.

The epistolary form further constructs a structured communicative space that grants Vivy greater control over social interaction. By enabling her to determine the timing and manner of her responses, this mode of communication minimises the social pressure associated with real-time interaction. In this way, the novel positions letter writing as a communicative practice that supports neurodiversity-affirming perspectives, reconfiguring non-normative communication styles as a form of self-determined subjectivity rather than deficit. If the epistolary form first emerges as a communicative accommodation, its consequences extend further still, shaping not merely how Vivy communicates but who she understands herself to be.

Epistolary Narration and the Construction of Identity:

Epistolary narration plays a crucial role in the construction of identity by enabling Vivy to articulate and define herself through her own voice. Her letters function as acts of self-representation, through which she forms a clear and evolving sense of identity shaped by her experiences, interests and ways of thinking. In writing, Vivy is not the subject of someone else's narrative, not a child in need of management, not a diagnostic category, but the author of her own story.

Traditional frameworks, as Pellicano and den Houting note, often reduce autism to perceived deficits, focusing “solely on the autistic person and their perceived 'deficits'” (382). By foregrounding Vivy's narrative voice, Kapit's novel resists externally imposed interpretations and portrays identity as a self-defined and evolving construct. The epistolary form ensures that every insight the reader gains about Vivy passes through Vivy herself, placing the authority of self-description consistently in her hands.

This authority becomes most apparent in moments where Vivy pushes back against the identities others would assign her. When her mother frames her passion for the knuckleball as a clinical problem “The whole knuckleball issue seems like a fixation and the therapists are very clear on this. We shouldn't be encouraging her fixations” (23) Vivy's written response is direct and unequivocal:

No matter what she says, my knuckleball isn't some silly thing that little kids do [...] I've worked so hard on my knuckleball and a real live coach thinks I can pitch. Doesn't that mean something, anything? (23)

The letter becomes the space in which Vivy refuses the clinical framing “fixation” and replaces it with her own sustained effort, genuine skill and legitimate aspiration. Later, when her mother goes further and declares “She's disabled. She can't do this” (118), Vivy does not produce an immediate verbal rebuttal, it is through her letters to VJ that she processes the injury and asserts a counter-narrative of capability. The contrast between what Vivy cannot articulate in real-time conversation and what she is able to express through writing illuminates the epistolary mode as the space where her sense of self is most fully constructed and defended.

Within the narrative, identity is depicted as something that keeps changing and growing through reflection. Each letter contributes additional layers of depth and complexity to Vivy's characterization, illustrating the dynamic and evolving nature of selfhood. As Patrick Dwyer argues, disability “might be more simply and parsimoniously conceptualized as the product of an interaction between an individual's own characteristics and their environment” (76), reinforcing the idea that neurodivergent identity is not fixed but shaped through ongoing interactions and lived experiences. Vivy's identity, formed letter by letter, embodies precisely this processual understanding.

Significantly, the novel shifts attention away from medical labels and towards Vivy's passionate engagement with baseball and her determination to pursue it. Her identity is not constituted by her diagnosis but by her loves, her goals and her relationships. This emphasis on interest and agency positions neurodivergence as something grounded in individuality and strengths rather than limitations, a decisive departure from the clinical frameworks that have historically defined autism purely in terms of what autistic individuals cannot do. From her very first

letter, Vivy presents herself not as an autistic girl who cannot throw, but as a pitcher learning “the pitch that defies the laws of physics” (3), foregrounding capability and aspiration rather than limitation.

The act of writing further enables Vivy to articulate her intentions, assert her preferences and actively shape the trajectory of her own story, positioning herself as an active rather than passive participant in the narrative of her own life. This perspective resonates with the foundational disability studies principle captured in the slogan *Nothing About Us Without Us*, which demands the inclusion of disabled and neurodivergent individuals in all decisions that affect them. As Robert Chapman’s critique of the Empire of Normality suggests, the authority to define what counts as normal, acceptable or legitimate is itself a form of institutional power (15), and it is precisely this power, the power to narrate, to define, to resist marginalization that the epistolary form places in Vivy’s hands. The self that Vivy constructs through her letters does not remain privately held, it is, from the outset, oriented toward connection with others.

Relationship-Building and Social Inclusion Through Letters:

Beyond functioning as a mode of personal expression, epistolary communication in the novel facilitates the development of meaningful social relationships. Through her correspondence with VJ Capello, Vivy engages in a dialogic exchange that bridges her internal experiences with the external social world, demonstrating that connection and belonging are achievable outside the constraints of normative face-to-face interaction.

The practice of letter writing enables communication to unfold at a pace that is comfortable for Vivy, thereby reducing the pressures associated with conventional modes of interaction and allowing for more thoughtful and reflective engagement. This temporal flexibility is not a concession to limitation but a redesign of the communicative encounter, an accommodation in the truest sense, that makes authentic connection possible. In this way, epistolary exchange cultivates a communicative environment that is both flexible and inclusive, modelling for readers what genuinely accessible social interaction might look like.

The dominant discourse, as Pellicano and den Houting observe, continues to frame autism through limitation, noting that “the language of deficits dominates discussion of autism both in scientific writings and in the popular press” (383). This deficit-oriented framing constrains the understanding of autism by focusing on what is absent rather than what is present, the complexity, the individuality, the genuine communicative desire of autistic people. Within such narratives, alternative modes of interaction are frequently overlooked or pathologized. In contrast, Vivy’s letters demonstrate that meaningful connections can flourish through expressive practices that extend beyond deficit-based frameworks. The correspondence between Vivy and VJ Capello provides a source of encouragement, validation, and emotional support, strengthening her sense of belonging and social connectedness in ways that conventional interaction had failed to provide.

This redesign of the communicative encounter is consistent with Milton’s broader account of social reality as something that is not owned by one party alone but produced through the agency of its ‘actors’ a mutuality that the Vivy–VJ correspondence enacts rather than merely describes. The stakes of this mutual recognition are heightened when read alongside Chapman’s account of how neurodivergent life is “structured by neurodivergence and economic hardship” (Chapman 1) for a working-class autistic girl like Vivy, whose family cannot easily access private coaching or therapeutic advocacy, VJ’s letters are not simply emotionally validating but represent one of few channels of recognition unmediated by institutional gatekeeping. The dialogic dimension of the exchange is significant, Vivy is not merely writing into a void but participating in a mutual communicative relationship. The transformative power of VJ’s eventual response is evident in what his words contain:

It is my professional opinion that a woman who throws a great knuckleball can compete in professional baseball [...] There’s nothing quite like your first baseball season, and I do hope you enjoy it regardless of your final win-loss record. (48)

That a celebrated professional pitcher would respond to her on her own terms, taking her baseball seriously, addressing her as an aspiring player rather than a disabled child, constitutes precisely the form of recognition that

Vivy has sought. VJ's responses, received and processed on Vivy's terms, affirm her as a person worthy of being heard and responded to, a form of recognition that carries profound developmental and psychological weight. As Patrick Dwyer highlights, "the call to listen to and learn from neurodivergent people" (73) underscores the significance of communicative practices that foreground lived experience and mutual understanding. The epistolary relationship in the novel enacts precisely this call, modelling a form of cross-neurological connection built on attentiveness rather than correction.

This relational growth extends beyond the Vivy-VJ correspondence to shape Vivy's place in the social world more broadly. By the novel's midpoint, Vivy can report to VJ: "Now I'm just part of the team, like Henry, the other catcher, who always chews gum really loudly. Or Neal, the third baseman, who loves to make fart jokes" (218). What is notable here is the ordinariness of the phrasing, Vivy locates herself within the team not as a special case requiring accommodation but as one player among others, each with their own idiosyncrasies. That this integration has been built and narrated through letters, each one processing a social encounter, working through confusion or rehearsing an emotional response, suggests the extent to which epistolary communication has functioned as the scaffolding for her social belonging. Having traced how the epistolary form shapes communication, identity and relationship within the novel itself, it is worth stepping back to ask how Kapit's formal choices compare with those of other children's authors working in similar territory.

Situating *Get a Grip, Vivy Cohen!* within Children's Literature:

Kapit's use of epistolary form does not emerge in a vacuum, the form has a long history in children's literature independent of neurodivergent representation and comparison sharpens what is distinctive about her deployment of it. Beverly Cleary's Newbery Medal-winning *Dear Mr. Henshaw* (1983) is the genre's best-known precedent, a boy named Leigh Botts writes to his favourite author to process his parent's divorce and midway through the novel his letters quietly become diary entries addressed to an imagined, 'pretend' Henshaw rather than real correspondence. This shift is telling by contrast. Leigh's epistolary practice moves inward, from dialogue toward soliloquy, as the letters gradually stop requiring a reader at all. Vivy's letters by contrast, remain resolutely dialogic across the entire novel, VJ Capello continues writing back, and the relationship's reciprocity is never abandoned for private reflection alone. Read against Milton's double empathy problem, this distinction matters: where Cleary's novel uses the epistolary form primarily as a vehicle for a child's private emotional processing, Kapit's novel insists on sustained, mutual address as the very thing that makes Vivy's communicative mode legitimate rather than compensatory.

A different point of comparison emerges from *A Kind of Spark* by Elle McNicoll, an own-voices novel narrated in the first person by Addie, an autistic eleven-year-old in Scotland. Like Kapit, McNicoll is herself autistic, and both novels resist externally imposed interpretation by placing narrative authority entirely with the autistic protagonist. The formal strategies diverge, McNicoll's continuous first-person narration captures autistic experience as it unfolds moment-to-moment, immersing the reader in real-time sensory and emotional processing, whereas Kapit's epistolary form foregrounds retrospection, the very quality Vivy identifies as central to how she communicates most effectively "I just keep thinking about what happened. What I could have done better," (8). The comparison suggests that own-voices authenticity in neurodivergent children's fiction need not rely on a single formal template, Kapit's specific contribution is a form whose structure, the deliberate, revisable, temporally flexible letter, mirrors the cognitive practice it represents.

A third comparison clarifies the stakes of authorial and narratorial position more directly. Cynthia Lord's *Rules*, a widely read entry in the same broader genre of autism-themed children's fiction, is narrated not by David, the autistic character, but by his neurotypical older sister Catherine. Lord, who has an autistic son but does not identify as autistic herself, locates the reader's access to autism at one remove, mediated through a sibling's exasperation and eventual acceptance. This is a structurally opposite choice to Kapit's: it keeps autism as the novel's central concern while withholding narrative authority from the autistic character himself, an arrangement the neurodiversity paradigm would recognize as a residual form of speaking for rather than listening to. Positioned against *Rules*, Kapit's decision to make Vivy both protagonist and sole narrating consciousness, reinforced by

Kapit's own standing as an autistic author, becomes legible as a more complete formal enactment of *Nothing About Us Without Us* than the sibling-narrated model allows.

These comparisons indicate that *Get a Grip, Vivy Cohen!* draws on an established children's literature tradition of epistolary narration and autism-themed fiction while departing from both in a specific way, it fuses the dialogic, reciprocal structure largely absent from *Dear Mr. Henshaw*, the own-voices authenticity shared with *A Kind of Spark*, and a formal commitment to autistic narrative authority that *Rules* withholds. It is this convergence, rather than any single feature in isolation, that accounts for the novel's distinctive contribution to neurodivergent representation in children's literature. Bringing these theoretical, textual and comparative threads together, the following conclusion returns to the paper's central claim.

Conclusion: The Letter as a Site of Transformation

The novel *Get a Grip, Vivy Cohen!* demonstrates how narrative form can reshape the representation of neurodivergent experiences within children's literature. It's sustained use of epistolary narration introduces a communicative mode that prioritizes reflection, self-expression and relationship-building, challenging cultural assumptions that privilege rapid verbal responsiveness and normative social performance. Rather than treating communication as a fixed standard to which neurodivergent individuals must conform, the text reconceptualizes it as flexible, individualized and responsive to cognitive diversity.

This paper has contended that letter writing in the novel functions not merely as a stylistic device but as a central mechanism through which neurodivergent identity is articulated, negotiated and affirmed. Vivy's letters are simultaneously acts of self-construction, communicative practice and social resistance, each epistolary exchange constituting a challenge to the deficit narratives that have historically marginalized autistic voices. As the conventional medical model continues to conceptualise autism in terms of biologically derived functional deficits (Pellicano and den Houting, 382), novels like Kapit's serve as vital counter-narratives, insisting on the complexity, capability and voice of neurodivergent subjects. Read alongside Walker's pathology paradigm and Milton's double empathy problem, Vivy's letters do not merely resist deficit labelling in isolated moments but sustain, across the length of the novel, an alternative account of communication as mutual rather than one-sided and of divergence as difference rather than defect.

The study demonstrates that narrative voice plays a crucial role in the expression of self-determination. By telling her own story through the letters she writes, Vivy is able to declare what she loves, share her goals and push back against limiting expectations. This shift from passive object to active subject is nowhere more apparent than in the novel's closing movement, where Vivy steps onto the mound for the final game and reflects: "Even with all the scariness, this was still exactly the place I wanted to be" (318). That this moment of arrival, physical, psychological and social has been prepared for through months of letters underscores the extent to which epistolary communication has shaped Vivy's capacity to inhabit her own life.

This shift reflects wider transformations in disability and neurodiversity studies and crucially demonstrates the power of literary form to carry those transformations into the imagination of young readers. Read through Walker's distinction between the pathology paradigm and the neurodiversity paradigm, this formal achievement carries a double significance, *Get a Grip, Vivy Cohen!* is both a politically meaningful intervention in the representation of neurodivergence and an aesthetically innovative work of children's fiction. In this way, the epistolary form functions as more than a narrative device, it becomes a mechanism through which Vivy asserts autonomy and constructs a self-determined identity, one letter at a time.

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