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# One Family Is Changing The Narrative Around Autism Spectrum Disorder And Media

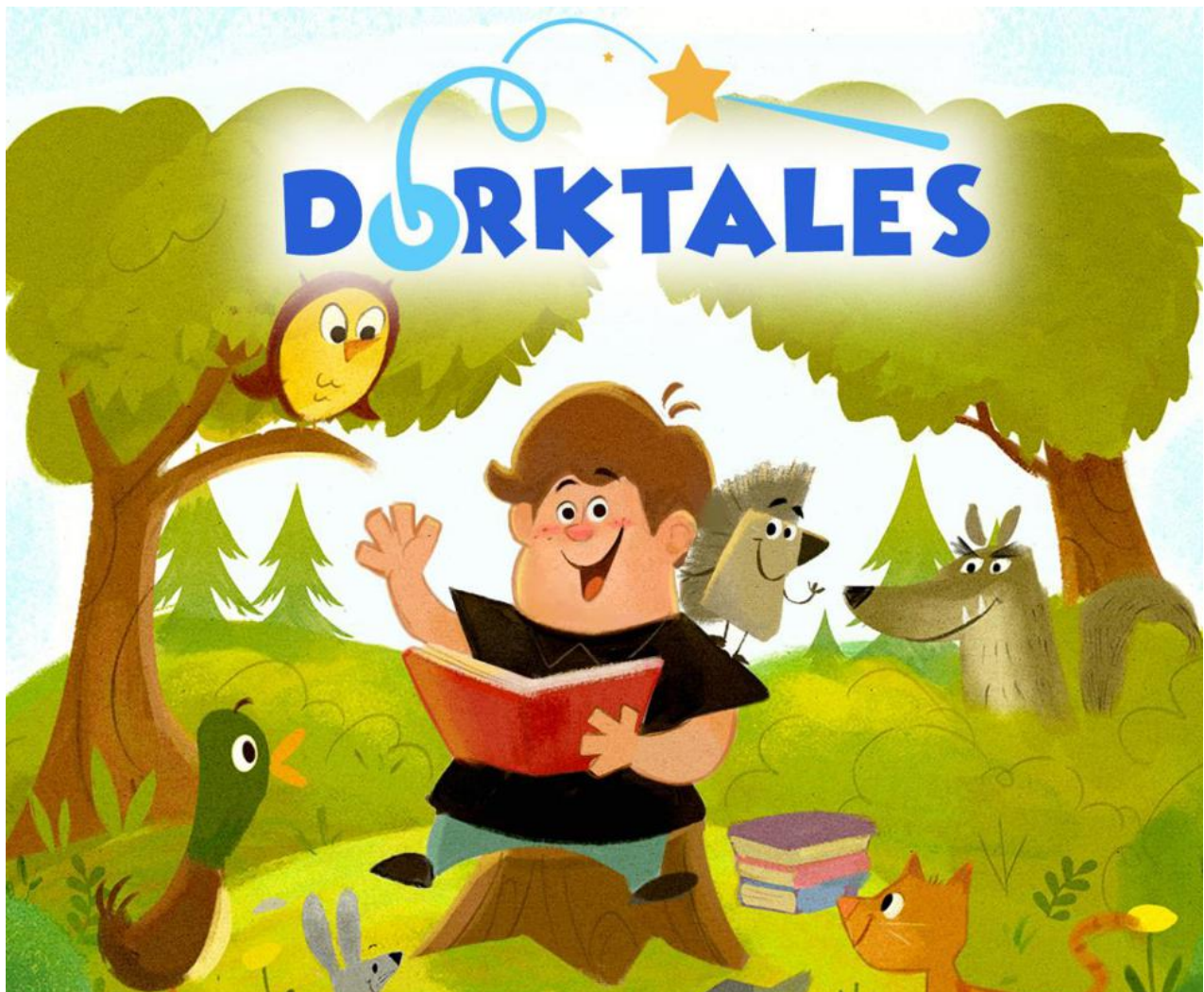
**Jennifer "Jay" Palumbo** Contributor 

*CEO of Wonder Woman Writer & Mom to two boys, one with autism.*

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Dorktales Storytime is a scripted podcast featuring two kinds of tales that feature slightly wacky ... [+] DORKTALES

Jonathan Cormur, his mom, Jodi Murphy, and his sister, Molly Murphy, are the team behind [Dorktales Storytime](#), an innovative storytelling podcast. Each episode features the retellings of classic fairy tales with important life lessons and untold stories about the hidden heroes of history.

Jonathan is neurodivergent and on the autism spectrum. He's also a SAG-AFTRA voice artist whose characters have appeared in video games, apps, digital comics, audiobooks, industrials, and podcasts. In their 30s, he and Molly experienced feeling different and being bullied as kids. However, both were also able to make their peers' qualities often picked on into their "adult superpowers."

Dorktales Storytime includes a diverse group of podcast creators, and the show is designed to be family-friendly and spark conversation.

## How The Family Handled An Autism Diagnosis



Jonathan Cormur, his mom, Jodi Murphy, and his sister, Molly Murphy, are the team

"I was diagnosed at 13, and at the time, I was already attending a school for out-of-the-box thinkers, so my life didn't change very dramatically," said Jonathan. "However, I was fully accepted and loved at home. I had teachers who believed in and nurtured my strengths. I was also beginning to come out of my shell and engage with the world. I just felt happy to know what

behind Dorktales ... [+] MURPHY FAMILY

made me "officially" different with the diagnosis!"

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Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), refers to a broad range of conditions characterized by [social skills](#), [repetitive behaviors](#), [speech](#), and [nonverbal communication challenges](#). There are many subtypes, and each person with autism can have unique strengths and challenges.

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Jonathan's mother, Jodi, shared that she intuitively knew that her son was different. "He wasn't following the typical developmental milestones of his peers, but no medical professional or therapist ever mentioned or discussed it with us as a possible explanation. He was born in the mid-80s; autism wasn't understood as a spectrum."

Prevalence of ASD is now estimated to affect [1 in 44](#) children in the United States, and at present, the current diagnostic process can take up to [almost](#)

### three years

"When he played with cars, he turned them over, placed them up real close to his eyes, and watched the wheels spin and spin and spin," Jodi said. "He was captivated by the Tyrannosaurus Rex and collected every toy, book, and VHS on his prehistoric pal to learn and talk about it non-stop. He had a rich imagination and liked to pace around our coffee table in self-conversation and what we know today as stimming. And, on the playground, he would express his emotions by mimicking animated characters, like becoming Disney's Shere Khan from Jungle Book, to show anger. Not understanding him, the children would tease and bully him or marginalize and ignore him."

When asked how her mother explained her brother's diagnosis, Molly answered, "I don't remember her or my dad ever sitting me down and having a big conversation with me about his diagnosis. Instead, they demonstrated their love for him and celebrated all of the interests and talents that autism brought into his life."

According to a recent analysis, even [typical siblings of children with autism tend to struggle with anxiety](#), depression, and social difficulties. However, researchers found that [autistic children with typical older siblings have better social skills](#) than those without siblings. The researchers suggest that typical children may act as role models to their younger siblings with autism.

"My learning was done through that observation - it was never a case of 'let's highlight how different he is to be sure you accept and understand him,'" Molly shared. "Acceptance was inherent. I'm certain they talked me through why he changed schools and different circumstances as we encountered them. But I feel fortunate that they mostly let me learn about who he is from living life alongside him, that he got to show me instead."

## Autism And Media







LOS ANGELES, CA - FEBRUARY 08: Dancer Maddie Ziegler (L) and singer/songwriter Sia attend The 57th ... [+] GETTY IMAGES

The autism community has a long history of being excluded and ignored by Hollywood in telling and making their own stories. Most recently, Sia received tremendous pushback on her film, *Music*, where she cast her long-time collaborator, and neurotypical performer, Maddie Ziegler, in the role of an autistic individual.

Jonathan is undeterred by these limitations and hopes to change the narrative. He has always enjoyed the arts and feels they helped him learn about human connection, emotions, humor,

and even social etiquette.

His mom leveraged this interest and found opportunities for him to audition and get cast in community theater productions. After one of his first roles, he remembers glancing out into the audience and seeing some of his elementary school bullies giving him a standing ovation along with the rest of the audience. It was then that he knew this was a pathway to his college studies and a career.

"Diversity and inclusion initiatives need to include neurodiversity," he said.

"For people to understand the full spectrum of the autistic experience, it has to come directly from our community's many amazing artists and storytellers.

Learning about and embracing different ways of engaging with the world is incredibly powerful. When we speak about our own experiences, we are creating opportunities for the autistic community to find more accessibility and understanding in classrooms, at jobs, with family, and in other walks of life."

[According to one study](#), "media representations of talent and special abilities can be said to have contributed to a harmful divergence between the general image of autism and the clinical reality of the autistic condition."

"As for stigmas around hiring autistic actors, most of my work is voice-over, so getting employed is based on whether or not I am the right 'voice' for the part," Jonathan said. "When JE Talent Agency picked me up, my agent, who managed the voice talent, said to me, 'Your autism is an asset.' He meant that I am responsible, reliable, and have the know-how to deliver for directors and clients. I can easily memorize my scripts, perform them with authenticity and nuance, and I can improvise dialog when necessary. I can do this because I am completely immersed in the work—this is a space I understand where I don't always understand how to be in real-life situations."

## The Dorktales Storytime Podcast

Dorktales Storytime is a scripted podcast featuring two kinds of tales that feature slightly wacky retellings of classic fairy tales with important life lessons and untold stories about the hidden heroes of history. As Jodi puts it, "Yesterday's geeks, nerds, and dorks who are today's must-know visionaries, great minds, dream makers, achievers, and inventors we never learned about in school."



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Karen Simpson Gardiner from Peninsula Youth Theatre helped create four original "Dorktales" with the Murphy family in 2013, which Jonathan performed at local theaters and libraries before the pandemic.

His skills as a character actor came together when telling these stories, so they decided to turn the project into a podcast. First, we made a new logo and commissioned illustrations; Molly and Amy Thompson—a friend from their youth theater days—wrote up a batch of new stories. Then, their audio producer, Jermaine Hamilton, and Jonathan started recording.

The podcast launched during the pandemic in August 2020 and has grown consistently over the past year and a half. Currently, we're in the top 3% of all podcasts (according to Listen Notes), and we've been featured in Common Sense Media's Picks for Apple Podcasts, on ABC7 Bay Area News, and in Podcast Magazine.

"I encountered a truly unfortunate amount of bullying growing up," said Molly. "From our perspective as grown-ups, we accidentally write off these feelings because we've made it through, telling kids that it's not such a big deal - you're young, and it will pass. I think that's the wrong approach. I love making this podcast because we can tell all kids that everything they're feeling is valid. We can give young people tools for navigating the world and stories to turn to where they can hear that they matter and they're enough. I want to be that community for young people. I want Dorktales to be where kids can celebrate who they are without fear."

They have released almost 50 episodes, and Jonathan has voiced 120 different characters—from kings, queens, princes, and princesses to witches, ogres, trolls, a crypt-keeper, and a menagerie of sentient animals.

Their overall mission is self and peer acceptance. They want children, especially those neurodivergent, to know that they are inherently remarkable.

"I couldn't do what I do without a support system," Jonathan states. "My family believed in me when I didn't believe in myself, and their encouragement made it possible for me to pursue my interests and turn them into a career."

As for Jonathan's advice for other autistic individuals looking to pursue a creative career, he recommends building your support system. "Family members, mentors, teachers, siblings—people who believe in you and can trust to guide you on your creative journey.

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**Jennifer "Jay" Palumbo**

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I am the Founder and CEO of Wonder Woman Writer, LLC, a freelance writer, stand-up comic, and proud mompreneur to two boys, one with special needs. I have written pieces for Time,... **Read More**

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