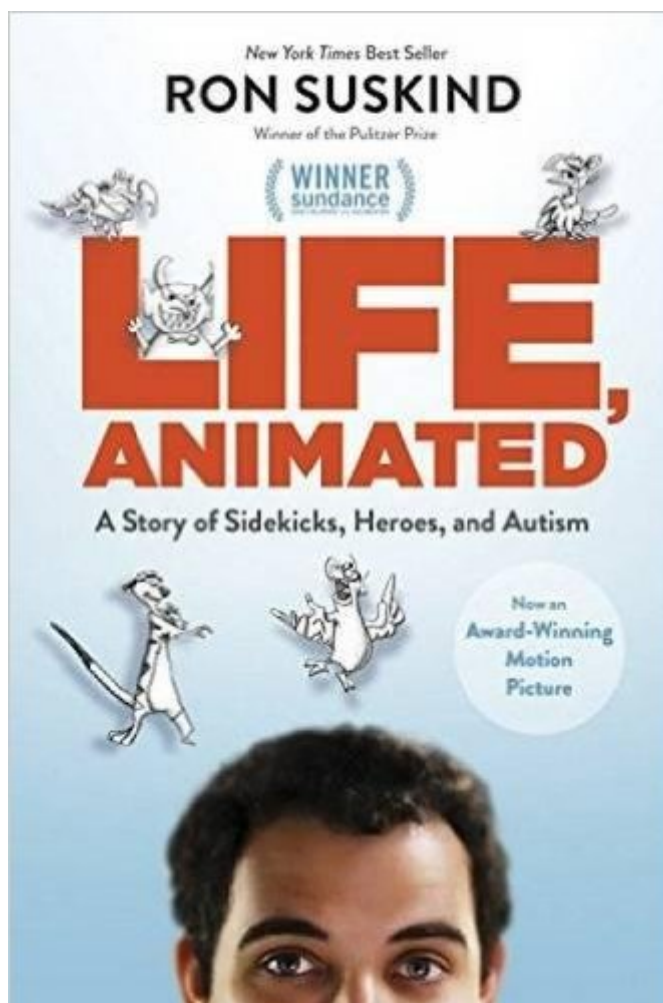


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# Life, Animated: A Story Of Sidekicks, Heroes, And Autism (ABC)



## Synopsis

Imagine being trapped inside a Disney movie and having to learn about life mostly from animated characters dancing across a screen of color. A fantasy? A nightmare? This is the real-life story of Owen Suskind, the son of the Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Ron Suskind and his wife, Cornelia. An autistic boy who couldn't speak for years, Owen memorized dozens of Disney movies, turned them into a language to express love and loss, kinship, brotherhood. The family was forced to become animated characters, communicating with him in Disney dialogue and song; until they all emerge, together, revealing how, in darkness, we all literally need stories to survive.

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## Customer Reviews

"Mr. Suskind displays virtuosity in capturing the intimate realities of life in a household dominated by autism, where the disorder shapes the life of every family member." — Judith Warner, *The New York Times*

The book by Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Ron Suskind is a fierce love story. It is also one of those fascinating medical stories that show doctors have no monopoly on knowledge. — Mark Johnson, *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*

Ron Suskind is the author of four New York Times bestsellers and the critically acclaimed, *A Hope in the Unseen: An American Odyssey from the Inner City to the Ivy League*. His other books include, *Confidence Men*, *The Way of the World*, *The One Percent Doctrine* and *The Price of Loyalty*. He

was the senior national affairs writer for The Wall Street Journal, where he won the Pulitzer Prize, and is currently the Senior Fellow at Harvard's Center for Ethics. He lives in Cambridge, Mass., with his wife, Cornelia Kennedy.

Owen Suskind learned to relate to his family and eventually other people, trusting and revealing deep empathy of his own, by programming his young mind with Disney animated classics. By studying the characters' hyper-expressive faces and memorizing their tones of voice, he built a working vocabulary he could eventually extemporize with to express his own ideas. Then over the years he continued watching them, sifting every phrase, every gesture, for nuances of meaning and truth to apply to the people he knew and the situations he faced. I think Owen's story is inspiring not only because of the implications for how parents can help their autistic children (observe their passions and then let them go all out with those, and fully participate with them in those, to build on strengths for acquiring language and other life skills), but also because his methods of piecing together meaning for his life is similar to how most of us do it but just on a more deliberate, miniscule, painstaking scale. There are highlights in this book that go way beyond heartwarming or being merely instructive by example because the author Ron Suskind has shared not only the triumphs but the heartaches and anxieties that life constantly throws into the mix. It is great to see how Owen's struggles truly shaped his family into becoming better people, especially his older brother Walt, who shares one of the greatest insights in the book: that Owen was not a blessing in disguise, but a blessing in plain sight. For parents of autistic children, a book like this helps you feel not so alone in your journey, and it gives hope while also acknowledging how long and arduous the road will be.

Even though several friends sent me the link to the NYTimes article excerpt of this book, I didn't want to read another book about autism. I've read so many since my son regressed into autism 12 years ago; what more could there be to learn from yet another story? What may be "uplifting and inspiring" to some makes some of us feel even more depressed that we haven't managed that same level of success. But then I saw the author: Ron Suskind. Ron is a Pulitzer prize-winning journalist/story teller, and I love his other books. For him [a former classmate (UVA, Class of '81)], I was curious to learn about his son who disappears into autism by age three. I was interested in learning how his parents coped (&/or helped him &/or made peace with his condition). Maybe I could learn some clues to help me better parent my own son. And the NYTimes excerpt was intriguing, though I was already jealous that Owen could understand Disney plots. But it was

interesting how Ron and Cornelia figured out how to use Owen's Disney video obsession to reach him, building on Disney stories to help him express his feelings and navigate similar difficult situations in "the real world." Or, as we say in therapy-speak, help him "generalize" the Disney lessons. Personally, I'm often out of energy to do the sort of work they've done; my son has quit noticeably progressing and puberty has created a whole new set of challenges. I went back to work full-time to create a college fund for our typical daughter (We've already spent more than 5 years' of college tuition on therapies, doctors, special diet, etc. for our son; but for all our efforts, we are still unable to hold a real conversation with him--not the kind Ron can have with Owen.) But this book has inspired me to probe deeper into my son's obsessions (esp. his favorite videos) and find more paths for connecting. I know my son Luke understands so much more than he can express...and Disney could hold a key. My son's second grade teacher made a point of teaching Pinocchio in school and Luke does quotes from it often, "I AM a real boy, I am!" But I've never sat down and watched the whole video with him or tried to script the dialogue like Ron did into conversation. Thanks to his teacher, who explained its lessons in a way that he understood, it is the one Disney Full Length Motion Movie he can sit through. ("Pinocchio wants to get home to Gepetto but he got put in a cage." So is autism the cage? Can it help me explain to my son what "autism" is if I ask him?) Ron and his family decided to share their story to prompt parent/teacher thoughts like these and help other kids and families. Working with Owen's doctors and teachers they hope to create home/school curricula that uses Disney movies to reach/teach other kids like Owen. (As Malcolm Gladwell pointed out in Outliers: 10,000 hours of anything will make you a maven at it... so if we can figure out how to connect those obsessive dots to the rest of the world, maybe we'll discover some miracle breakthroughs like the Suskind family did. Back to the actual book review... Ron is the master of "creative nonfiction." In this book, like his others, he is able to weave stories that turn real people into wonderful characters who you come to love (and wish you could hang out with). Here are some of my favorite bits of wisdom/insight the book offers (some paraphrased): -On Disney movies and growth (Newsflash: Here's WHY repeated viewings are so interesting to these kids): Owen says, "The movie doesn't change. But I change. Each time it looks different to me." (So they gain comfort from the familiar, but also new insights into themselves after learning/applying the lessons.) -On why some people are mean: Owen says, "Hades is always disappointed he's not invited to any parties or celebrations." (Similarly Maleficent cursed Aurora in Sleeping Beauty after not being invited to the christening.) How kind of Owen to have compassion for the villains' feelings too. (Who says people with autism lack empathy?) -On Sidekicks: - When the hero doesn't have anything left, it's the sidekick who becomes the hero. - Let your inner voices be positive ones. In

scary situations, Owen carries thoughts about what a hero's sidekick would advise him to do. (Jiminy Cricket is not just his conscience, but a friendly, positive, encouraging voice to bring along.)- If you have no voice/words, recall Sebastian's advice to Ariel: "A smile can go a long way when you got nothing to say."- Insight on death/"immortality"/legacy: Owen was fascinated that a voice-over actress died, mid movie. So two actresses then shared credits for a single character. Owen became obsessed with who did which line...(not exactly interesting small talk for the rest of us, as Ron points out). But Owen finally "get its" and tells Ron about his epiphany: "It's not about the voice actors... it's about getting the voice \_right\_ so you don't even notice--then the characters can live forever!"-Lessons from Merlin/King Arthur and a Monty Python skit: The final castle that stands (and is to be left to Arthur) is built on the foundation of the previous (3) castles that fell.Touchingly, Owen explains that his 3 "fallen castles" in his own life are so different from those his parents imagined (That is, IF they'd even tried to take that metaphoric leap.) ... For example, while the parents looked at a year of homeschooling as a sacrifice, but a great triumph, led by mom Cornelia (i.e., a "castle" that got him into a better h.s.), Owen looked at that year as a "fallen" castle (failure/punishment) because he wasn't able to be in real school with other kids.-On Siblings of kids with sp needs:Big brother Walter is Owen's hero and the reader's too. The book includes his voice/perspectives (a under-reported story by the media). Speaking (I think) for many sibs, Walt has the attitude that, yes, it sucks (your brother's autism) and it makes your family's life difficult/strange in so many ways, but dealing with his brother's challenges has taught him so many lessons. (p. 231 essay by Walter)"The joy my brother finds in things that most people would roll their eyes at has helped to let my family realize what is important to us. And that makes every up and down along the way not a blessing in disguise... Just a blessing. When I wonder if life would have been easier if Owen was a `normal' kid, I always remember it is because of him that I am the person I am. The hard work Owen puts in day after day--and because I know he works harder in a single day than I could even imagine possible--helps me to realize that, as tough as things may appear at times, it is in the face of the seemingly insurmountable challenges that you have your greatest victories and learn things about yourself you'd never thought possible."And I laughed at Walt trying to enlist his brother's aid in keeping a secret from their parents (Owen is like my own son, just like Jim Carry in Liar, Liar, he is unable to tell a lie.) I also was touched and laughed at Walt's brotherly advice on dating: "You should ask that girl in your art class for a ride after class, even if you don't need it... Who knows where it might lead?" (Owen knows that answer: "HOME!" :)Other lessons from the Suskinds:-Absence of cynicism is not a bad thing.-Transitions are tough; we don't WANT to imagine our kids at 50, but you do need a plan (Cornelia: "We love him, he's always welcome, but moving

back home is not good for them or us.")-Denial is OK sometimes, especially in the beginning, if it enables us to keep standing.-On doing all you can for this person who needs you so much: Even if you risk being in bad form (or a little obnoxious as Cornelia warns) to mention the Pulitzer (or whatever your own trump card is) to help open a door for your kid.. Go ahead and play it if it might open a (backstage) door that was slammed shut. And, Hey, Owen, you gotta TELL people your dreams, that way maybe they can help you make them come true...or maybe they know someone who can. No hero succeeds alone in the Disney movies or in life. One last example of Ron's way with words to evoke universal emotions in the stories he relays: Brother Walt, about to enter the workforce after college, on a whim decides to jump in the car and go visit Owen at his residential school...He is greeted like a hero not just by Owen but by his classmates. (As Ron observes: In the special needs community "a visiting sibling is a friendly representative of the wider world, someone who gets them.") I liked his description of Walt's freedom for an impromptu road trip to visit Owen (this line captures how most working adults/parents feel): "Just doing whatever you want, whenever you want--when your time is mostly your own--is what people look back on fondly, wistfully, when they think of youth; something the youth don't notice much until it's gone. Or is about to be." For those of us who will never be empty nesters or "retired" from the journey autism has put us on, this book does remind us that we're not alone. And many stories within the journey do have "happy endings" --a birthday party that went well, a playdate that succeeds (and "endings" are also new beginnings of breakthroughs, progress, friendships). I'm glad I read this book and got to know its heroes and sidekicks and misunderstood villains. It is an engrossing love story with heartbreak and suspense but also valuable lessons, humor and great insights. In a noisy world full of advice on how to understand, treat, and cope with autism it is a generous gift that the Suskinds took time to share.

Because Ron Suskind and his family have opened up their lives to scrutiny and done unbelievable work reconstructing Owen's life course with impeccable detail, I hesitate to even write a review. How can one review a family's struggle with heartache and the direction they take to help their child succeed? If I could give the book 4.5 stars, I would. 5 for the story and, unfortunately, 4 for the writing. Ron Suskind is perhaps my favorite writer. And, I had the wonderful opportunity to see him speak. It was something I will always remember. I downloaded the Kindle edition in the middle of the night when I saw that he had written a book on a topic that has dominated my life for at least the last 30 years. Unfortunately, the writing is repetitive and overly detailed in Disney phenomena and quotes, It also has way too much philosophizing and overly bold assertions about stages of

childhood development. It could be cut by a third and be a more captivating and powerful book. I felt that perhaps the author was so personally invested in the story that he got lost in the weeds. I was also wondering what happened to all the editors who had a hand in the book. Despite my hesitation, I would still like to address the content. I have raised 2 high functioning autistic sons. I also discovered in my 50s that I, too, had some form of autism from birth. There is so much written about the manifestations of autism. Some of it is so inconsistent that it is often difficult to see how it holds together as a single phenomenon. I am impressed that Mr. Suskind clearly captured the quintessential agony of autism, loneliness and yearning for friends. I have never seen this sadness expressed clearly in the vast literature I have embraced over the years. It is like finding a friend who gets it. Again, it is unfair to criticize a family's intellectual constructs when they are faced with raising an autistic child. My two, while both clearly on the spectrum, are totally different; sometimes deliberately differentiating themselves in brotherly animosity. Each required tailor-made, dynamic help to see them to adulthoods in society. My main beef with Suskind, then, is his assumption that all autistic children will, like his son, have a single life-long, abiding interest in fiction, movies, tv, books, with anthropomorphic characters. In the case of his son, Owen, it was Disney movies. Mr. Suskind then asserts that this interest can be universally leveraged by families and helper people to enhance the child's social, emotional and academic progress. He prescribes "affinity therapy" for all autistic children based on the success his family had in using this technique. He even suggests that this form of therapy would result in enormous financial savings for treatment of autism. While it is possible that many autistic children have such interests, it has not been my experience that most do. For example, one of my sons had an obsession with professional sports uniforms and the other with car makes and models. Neither interest would be amenable to "affinity therapy." There is also a subtext of unlimited funds and access to a wide range of resources that were made possible by Suskind's financial success, fame, magnetic personality and access to powerful people. Owen received all kinds of individualized, intensive treatment and experiences that are out of range of even upper middle class families with autistic children. He received care readily from any professional the family deemed to have expertise. Many of us struggle for access to such people, languish on waiting lists and are barely able to afford the care when available. I find it ironic that Mr. Suskind would openly detail his use of money and ties to obtain favor when his books disparage this type of behavior. I know that one will do whatever it takes when faced with devastation of a loved one. Mr. Suskind might say that it is a "good enough reason." I do, however, want to thank the Suskind family for the candor, emotionally wrenching reliving and painstaking work they put into this book. I read it eagerly and fast. It gave me a great deal of food for thought. Most importantly, it

inspired me to help my son understand the enormity of his success in being able to go away to college in the face of a childhood marked by substantial autism. I asked him to recognize and applaud his achievement when he is often feeling badly about himself.

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