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Tantalized by the Hint of a Cure for Autism

By ABIGAIL ZUGER, M.D.
Published: February 27, 2007

If lightning strikes once, then why not again? This irrational logic will tempt the victims of any senseless tragedy to believe in miracles, or so Portia Iversen assures us by way of explaining her long, determined slog toward a miracle of her own. Whether she actually found one or not, readers will have to decide for themselves.

Ms. Iversen's second son, Dov, was born in 1992, a normal baby who suddenly was not normal

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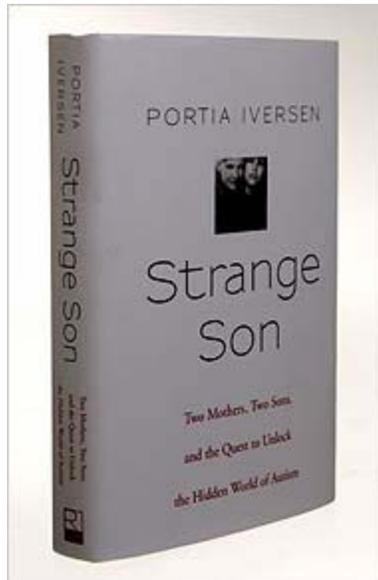
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Strange Son
Two Mothers, Two Sons
and the Quest to Unlock
the Hidden World of
Autism.
 By Portia Iversen. 397
 pages. Riverhead, \$24.95.

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at all. Before he was a year old he was reacting strangely to noises and making strange noises of his own. At 3, nonverbal and mesmerized by objects, he was given a diagnosis of [autism](#). By the time he was 8, Dov still could not talk and was virtually impossible to communicate with. The family home was jammed with his toys, therapists and aides, and Ms. Iversen and her husband had established a foundation to speed autism research.

Then Ms. Iversen heard intriguing news about another autistic boy. In Bangalore, India, Soma

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Mukhopadhyay had single-handedly managed to teach her severely autistic son, Tito, to communicate with such sophistication that he was writing poetry on a laptop computer, and could articulate how it felt to be him.

“Men and women are puzzled by everything I do,” Tito wrote. “My parents and those who love me are embarrassed and worried. Doctors use different terminologies to describe me. I just wonder.”

And this from a boy who could barely speak, and whose hand-flapping, body-rocking, utterly asocial persona reminded Ms. Iversen of her own son. Surely if one boy could break through the wall around him, other boys could too. Ms. Iversen saw her miracle glimmering in the distance and was galvanized into action.

She persuaded her foundation to bring

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Soma and 14-year-old Tito to Southern California for what proved to be an exhausting and exhaustive monthslong effort by a network of neuroscientists and well-wishers to anatomize the miracle that was Tito. But few miracles withstand minute dissection, and this one was no exception.

For one thing, the young poet was still an immensely dysfunctional adolescent who could not remain still for most neurological testing, who was besieged by erratic impulses (like trying to jump out of a minivan speeding down a California freeway) and who became unhinged whenever he was separated from his mother.

His mother was a loner and a bit of an oddball, whose method of cajoling intelligent communication from Tito depended on an alphabet board and a frenetic combination of shouts, gestures

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and taps on the knee.

Some of the experts who observed Soma and Tito in action wondered if the whole performance was not an illusion, with the disturbed boy serving as a ventriloquist's dummy for his mother. Others were intrigued by persuasive evidence that a chaotic dissociation of sensory inputs seemed to contribute to Tito's disabilities, and tried to experiment with various ways to ameliorate them. None of these attempts were very successful, and ultimately no one could separate Tito's abilities from Soma's presence, or figure out how she alone could break through the sensory dissonance to give Tito his own voice.

Ms. Iversen is the first to acknowledge that she is no neuroscientist, and the observations and theories Tito's case elicited from the experts never quite coalesce into a whole for the reader. She tells her own story with considerably more

success.

For when Soma finally sits down with Ms. Iversen's Dov and begins to prod and cajole him just as she does Tito, the miracle that Dov's parents have been waiting for appears to unfold. Within weeks, their frighteningly inaccessible and uncontrollable child begins to use an alphabet board to tap out logical human thoughts. He wants a Barbie doll and a blue blazer. He remembers Hebrew letters and words from a preschool he attended years before, and he has known how to read English for three years. His favorite color is red. He thinks his little brother is spoiled rotten. After a few weeks he drops Barbie like a shot when he learns that dolls are for girls.

Ms. Iversen and her husband suddenly have a different boy in their lives.

Were Ms. Iversen a more expert writer, she

might have been tempted to end the story there, as, surely, any made-for-TV movie would have done. But she is a diarist who chronicles events, without much literary style, but with the plodding honesty and diligence of a court reporter.

And so we learn that Soma's method works better for some autistic children than others, and is nowhere near being a panacea. That a committed psychologist who tried to induce Tito to communicate without his mother in the room finally gave up after two years of weekly sessions: "I thought eventually we'd be able to connect. But we never really could." And that although teenage Dov can now communicate effectively and learn at his grade level, he remains saddled with profound emotional, neurological and behavioral abnormalities, and "needs help with almost everything."

As miracles go, this one comes with a long

list of caveats. But at least this book, unlike so many of the happy-making medical stories the media hone for us, has the courage not to gloss over any of them.

Abigail Zuger, a regular contributor, is a physician in Manhattan.

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