THE THUNBERG FAMILY

Greta and Beata: how autism and climate activism affected the Thunberg family

When Greta Thunberg began her school strike 18 months ago, only her parents knew that the 15-year-old barely ate and had been depressed and voluntarily mute. Now a book written by her family reveals how her younger sister has also coped with an autism diagnosis. Louise Carpenter reports

Greta Thunberg, now 17, at home in Stockholm in 2018, with the family's dogs, Moses, a golden retriever, and Roxy the black labrador
PA

Louise Carpenter Friday February 28 2020, 5.00pm, The Times

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In August 20, 2018, the first day of Greta Thunberg's school strike to protest against climate change, her parents' chief concern was how much of her bean and pasta packed lunch she would be able to eat while standing alone with her "*Skolstrejk for klimatet*" sign outside the Swedish parliament.

Actually, what they predicted was that she'd be back home by lunchtime. These are poignant details in *Our House Is on Fire: Scenes of a Family and a Planet in Crisis*, the family's memoir (all proceeds to charity), which comes out in the UK next week.

Greta Thunberg with her younger sister, Beata, mother, Malena Ernman, and father, Svante Thunberg, in Stockholm in 2006

PA

For all Greta's Thunberg's influence since that first morning when she climbed on her bike and cycled off to the Swedish parliament, for her parents the campaign for global zero emissions has always been second to wanting their child to be well again.

Hospitalisation at the Sachsska Children's Hospital had been imminent in November 2014. Greta was 11. The emergency unit of the Stockholm Centre for Eating Disorders had identified that Greta was showing signs of starvation. Her blood pressure and pulse had plummeted. She was not eating, out of confusion, depression and as yet undiagnosed Asperger's syndrome. She went without food for two months before realising she would have to eat to avoid hospital admittance. As remembered by her parents, Malena Ernman and Svante Thunberg, she had "disappeared

into a darkness".

She was bullied at school. She stopped laughing and playing the piano. She cried all the time, at night when she should have been sleeping, and at school, in class and during her breaks.

As well as refusing to eat, she began to refuse to go to school. She became a selective mute, which meant that she would not use her voice anywhere outside the home, a particularly alarming side-effect of her illness given that it is this voice that has since made her the global presence that she is today.

> "BEATA: 'She couldn't tolerate noise – even the sound of breathing'

Food intake was written down. Lists were made of food to be "aspired" to – gnocchi, rice, avocados – and the number of minutes and hours it took to consume tiny amounts were counted and recorded, along with the "chews". Bullies were avoided by a teacher from the school coming to the home in secret.

> "GRETA: 'She stopped eating and talking. She cried all the time'

Amid this came Greta's growing interest in the climate. With a clarity and a single-mindedness that is associated with being on the spectrum, she could not understand why the world was not

responding to the urgent need for zero carbon emissions.

It had been a devastating time for her family – her mother, an opera singer, had suffered her own nervous collapse, falling to the floor during a performance because of stress and worry about Greta. She was on medication for depression.

Their house had, metaphorically, been on fire, but the world, as Greta was discovering, was on fire too. The lack of action to address the climate crisis seemed to give Greta a reason to get out of bed in the morning. Challenging inaction with her own research, which led to her first Friday strike in September, was to give a purpose to her life. But for her mother and father it was never the environmental campaigning that mattered most, more the way it seemed to be making her happy again – more the way it was, frankly, keeping her alive.

The sisters taking part in a 'Fridays for Future' school strike in Stockholm last March
SHUTTERSTOCK

Since those first strikes, *No One Is Too Small to Make a Difference*, a book of Greta's speeches, has since been published, its title nicely summing up a message of teenage power, and she is the most globally influential child we have seen since Malala Yousafzai. Both have appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine's Person of the Year issue.

Now aged 17, Greta has taken on Donald Trump, sailed to New York to speak at the United Nations and last month delivered a speech at the World Economic Forum in Davos.

World leaders listen to her, or in the case of Trump, are forced to listen to her, irked as he is by the power of her voice on climate change. When he posted a tweet in December after she was named Person of the Year – "Greta must work on her Anger Management problem, then go to a good old fashioned movie with a friend! Chill Greta, Chill!" – her reply came minutes later, when she changed the bio of her Twitter account to, "A teenager working on her anger management problem. Currently chilling and watching a good old fashioned movie with a friend."

Here, it seems, was a teenage girl with Asperger's taking on and getting the better of the leader of the free world.

Like Malala, who aged 16 delivered her "one book, one pen" speech to the UN after surviving the Taliban's attempt to assassinate her in 2012, Greta, with the same child's purity and honesty, has created a movement worldwide of Friday school strikes that has had more impact than hundreds of climate change activists before her.

> "Our picture of autism is biased and based on a model shaped on boys

She cuts through guff and drowns out protesting voices because of her singular and uncomplicated mission. She wants carbon emissions brought down to zero. She wants investment in new fossil-free energy, not tomorrow, but now.

Malala wanted – still wants – all girls to go to school. Their teenage fights are based on a simple but profound feeling of injustice and a right to a future.

As co-author of the Yousafzai family's second book, *Let Her Fly* (the follow-up to *I Am Malala*), about the emotional impact Malala's attempted assassination had on the whole family and the way in which her mother and father parented her, I see strong parallels between the two girls. There are, of course, the obvious cultural differences, as well as the irony that Malala was fighting to go to school while Greta uses not going to school as her weapon. But they both embody an important message: teenagers have a power that, when harnessed, can be far more effective than the most established politician. Like Malala, Greta was given the freedom by her parents to use her voice. It has brought both families – one initially in Pakistan and one still in Sweden – huge criticism from trolls and naysayers, but also great pride.

I remember sitting in Malala's room at Oxford and her telling me, "My father always listened to me. This is what encouraged me to use my voice and gave me immense confidence. My father gave me a future, he gave me my voice, and he let me fly."

With her parents and, far right, her sister, Beata, last year
GRETA THUNBERG/FACEBOOK

In the lead-up to that first strike, Greta would say to her father, by way of preparing for any media interest, “Question me like you’re one of them.”

He said to her, “‘Did your parents put you up to this?’ You’re going to get that question all the time.”

‘Then I’ll tell it like it is,” was her response. “I’m the one who influenced you and not the other way round.”

Her parents knew the criticisms to come. “Whatever happens, you have to do it all on your own,” Svante Thunberg told her. “You will have to be able to answer every question. And you have to know all the arguments and answers.”

After Malala Yousafzai was shot, not so much for turning up at school, as the world quickly assumed, but more because she was achieving success in challenging the Taliban’s ideology (just as Greta takes on governments and multinationals), her father blamed himself and

many people in the world blamed him.

Greta with Malala Yousafzai in Oxford
INSTAGRAM/MALALA

By then, Malala was her own force. But still the accusations against her family came. How could they have let a child take the political limelight? The Taliban branded Malala her father's mouthpiece, but her impact in Pakistan was real. Her authenticity and its reach is why the Taliban wanted her dead. Malala's father told me, "Malala did not make an army. She did not raise a gun. She raised a voice, which is her right."

In the days after Greta Thunberg's astoundingly successful first school strike, the family received the same criticism: that Greta was a mouthpiece for "someone, a PR agency", her mother recalls. Because, by the standards of her critics, how could this awkward young teenager be acting of her own free will? How could she be so instantly successful at getting across her message armed only with a handpainted sign, an Instagram account and a picture of a polar bear?

The undertow of the criticism was clear: teenagers, by virtue of their age and inexperience, lack power and conviction. And, in Greta's case, aren't they snowflakes too?

Displaying the same tone of irony that we have since seen in her daughter dealing with the patronising words of Donald Trump, Greta's mother explains, "Greta has not sacrificed four or five hellish years to simulating various life-threatening difficulties in order to now launch the world's most cunning PR coup.

"I promise that any parent whose child hasn't talked to people for several years and who could only eat a few things in a few predetermined places will be extremely happy to see those complications vanish.

"I promise that, as a parent, you'd perceive that change as extremely positive. Almost like a fairytale. Like magic."

> "There doesn't seem to be any outer limit. Even if we try to hold Greta back, she just keeps going

During that first period of striking back in 2018, Greta's father saw her accept some pad Thai noodles from a supporter. She took the box, sniffed the food as always, but rather than rejecting it, she slowly forked some into her mouth. First one forkful, then the next, then the next, until the whole lot had gone. It was a miracle. Svante Thunberg was gobsmacked. It was perhaps the first clear sign that things were going to change.

As her mother explains, "There doesn't seem to be any outer limit, and even if we try to hold her back, she just keeps going."

I have heard those words before, spoken by Ziauddin and Toor Pekai Yousafzai. And their daughter went on to win a Nobel prize.

Greta Thunberg calls her Asperger's her superpower. It helps her "see" the problem clearly. It helps her crunch the numbers; boil down the science; galvanise support, appealing to children all over the world:

"When she looks out into the world, it's as if she is seeing the carbon molecules being emitted from cars and planes, the pollution from all the other sources," explains Professor Simon Baron-Cohen of the Autism Centre of Excellence in Cambridge. "She counts them in the way she used to count calories. There is no conflict of interest, no political party behind her, no stakeholder. She represents this independent voice and that is part of her strength."

Her diagnosis is to her advantage, rather than a kind of handicap (as her critics might present it). It gives her particular skills – an almost obsessive tenacity and a focus that enables her to research deeper and deeper into the climate crisis.

With her mother, Malena Ernman, in Stockholm

GETTY IMAGES

But it wasn't always that way. Before Greta Thunberg was finally diagnosed with Asperger's, she was lost. The family was lost. Their life together – as the title of the book makes clear – was metaphorically on fire.

Greta's emotional and physical problems began when she entered prepuberty, aged 11. It took a long time for the family to get a diagnosis, which is often the case for families with girls on the spectrum. If anything defines the family more than the campaign against climate change, it is that both Greta and her sister Beata, two years younger, and then latterly their mother (who reached 45 before being diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, aka ADHD), have various different diagnoses that either overlap with or are on the autism spectrum.

Greta's emotional and eating problems began at what is

considered a classic time for girls on the spectrum. The confusion they feel, which for so long they have been able to mask, reaches a head when their bodies begin to change, terrifying for a girl with autism. This is combined with the fact that "copying" behaviour in the playground – which means the way in which previously they had managed to "mask" their differences from other children – no longer works. As a consequence, their differences become obvious. In the case of Greta, unable to socialise in so-called "normal ways", she became – as happens with so many girls like her – the target of bullies.

She was openly laughed at and pushed over in the playground. Lunch breaks were spent hiding and crying in the girls' lavatory until she was forced out into the playground again by break monitors. The story is a familiar one. Greta's school said other students talked of her strange behaviour, saying that she spoke too softly and never said hello – in other words, that she asked for it. Given she spent years like this, how much must her "Fridays for Future" protest have boosted her self-esteem? Children now stand beside her in unison, either physically with her in Sweden, or virtually, via social media. The girl who once had no friends has people standing at her side all over the world.

The self-starvation followed soon after the bullying. Starving herself became a way for Greta Thunberg to attempt to control the environment around her. Malena Ernman's hunch was that Greta did not have anorexia, or at least it was masking something else.

This proved correct. But, as she points out, when your child is at risk of a life-threatening condition, pulse plummeting, you do not want to rule anything out.

"The hormonal changes are causing a change in body shape," says Baron-Cohen, "and for an autistic person

who doesn't like change, her body is changing out of control. The person is really trying to control the world, starting with food, because autistic people need a lot of control.

"It is a common profile I am seeing with women on the spectrum. Our picture of autism is biased and based on a model that is shaped on boys."

> "It's a whole lot harder to stay on your feet after the second blow. Now our younger daughter is in need of extra care

In 1943, a child psychiatrist in the United States, Leo Kanner, conducted a study of a small group of children with what would come to be called autism. There were only three girls but eight boys. Kanner's male "model" became the go-to study for diagnosis: poor eye contact; lack of speech; lack of interaction; no imaginative play; obsessive "boyish" interests; a fascination with puzzles; challenging, inappropriate behaviour; the need for order and structure. Only in 1981 was Asperger's syndrome recognised as a disorder in Britain.

It is still the case that, despite research, lack of funding and access to medical help means that it is much easier to get a diagnosis for a boy than for a girl. This is because of the old diagnostic model. Boys present in ways defined way back in 1943. Girls do not.

In the early years, before Greta became ill, the family travelled round Europe in a Volvo V70 crammed with

dolls, teddy bears and tricycles. Malena Ernman performed as an opera singer and Svante looked after the children. Summers were spent in Glyndebourne, Salzburg and Aix-en-Provence. The rest of the year, the little girls visited Berlin, Paris, Amsterdam, Barcelona. The family had no friends, no relatives except one grandmother. They just had each other, and that, according to Greta's mother, was enough. "Our everyday life was like no one else's," she explains. "Our everyday life was marvellous."

It ceased to be marvellous when Greta stopped eating. They pleaded with her to eat, her mother recalls. They screamed, begged, cried and offered every imaginable bribe.

Writing down each tiny amount of food taken in was the only tactic that worked. One food diary entry read, "LUNCH: 5 gnocchi. TIME: 2 hours and 10 minutes." Greta began to have panic attacks, accompanied by what Malena remembers as "an abysmal howl that lasts for 40 minutes. We haven't heard her scream since she was an infant."

Before Greta was diagnosed, her mother investigated everything: as well as anorexia, a gluten allergy, urinary tract infections and neuropsychiatric diagnoses. It was a school psychologist who first suggested "high-functioning Asperger's", but as her mother said, "Greta does not have a single characteristic trait of autism or Asperger's. Either the school psychologist is crazy or else we have a gigantic gap in public awareness."

It was, it turns out, the latter.

Just when life began to get better for the family, with a diagnosis for Greta and an eating plan that worked (Greta could still then only eat a few things, prepared in a special way), in 2016 a new crisis hit them.

Beata performing at a concert in Rattvik, central Sweden, last July, and, below, her mother representing Sweden at the 2009 Eurovision Song Contest

PA

GETTY IMAGES

Greta's sister, Beata, then aged ten, began to experience extreme emotional problems too. It was as if, her mother says, "the explosion detonated at the exact same moment".

"She falls apart, crashes," explains Malena. "She can't stand being with us any more."

On one occasion, Beata hurled DVDs from a bookshelf down the spiral staircase to the kitchen, shouting at her mother, "You bloody f***ing bitch! You only care about Greta. Never about me. You are the worst bloody mother in the world, you bloody f***ing bitch."

As Malena explains, “It’s a whole lot harder to stay on your feet after the second blow. Now our younger daughter is in need of extra care. Greta’s crash may have been more acute because she stopped eating, but this is a different kind of painful.”

The family went back to square one, just with a different child. The summer of 2016 sounds like hell: Beata could not stand the noise the family made, even their breathing. Every slightest noise caused an outburst. Any suggestion of an activity was met with, “Shut up, you f***ing idiot.” They ate their food on plastic plates in a guest room so she could not hear them. And then, in the summer, two sets of neighbours began renovations at the same time. There were fights in the family, with each of them bearing scratched faces.

“Somewhere in the midst of all this we get an appointment at BUP [a child/adolescent psychiatric unit] and I collapse in the consultation room, hyperventilating,” says Malena. She was prescribed antidepressants and sedatives. It’s hard to imagine how she carried on, which, to be fair, she admits she couldn’t. Sometimes, she would lie in bed, unable to move with chronic fatigue and depression, her head full of the kinds of thoughts she knew she shouldn’t be having.

“We scream. We scratch. We pound walls. We wrestle. We cry. We endure,” she remembers. “But slowly, slowly an insight arrives, and with it, Beata’s journey begins.”

If anybody were looking for an example of the way in which society continues to be ill-equipped to deal with children – particularly girls – with these kind of diagnoses, they need look no further than the Thunbergs/Ernmans.

“I wish I could tell you that things have improved,” says Baron-Cohen. “In the workplace, there is a growing

> “Once we realised why we were feeling the way we did, we started to get better

awareness of the benefits of employing people who are neuro-diverse, but in terms of clinical services, it is still pretty dire. There is not enough money, in the education system or the NHS, and in the absence of money, we are now reaching out to philanthropy alongside the statutory provision. It’s an indicator of the fact that we aren’t improving services fast enough, either through speedy diagnosis, therapies or being able to make sure that we are not overlooking girls.”

For the first time in 15 years, in the autumn of 2016, Svante Thunberg broke down in public. It feels so sad to contemplate this when compared with the dignified, contained man who appeared on the Today programme last year, when Greta was guest-editing. But learning of their story, the question is more, how come it took so long for him to break down too? He stayed strong right the way through Greta’s crisis. Cheesy as it sounds, perhaps the sheer force of parental love and the strength of their marriage are Malena and Svante’s own superpowers.

But still, in 2016, after everything Svante had endured with Greta, when he started crying about Beata, he could not stop. Malena and Svante had just been told by a doctor that Beata might have 90 per cent ADHD, or 60 per cent autism, or 50 per cent oppositional-defiant disorder (ODD), or 70 per cent obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). “But it’s still no real diagnosis,” the doctor told them.

“You have to help her,” Svante Thunberg pleaded, sobbing. His wife recalls how he repeated that phrase over and over again – “You have to help her. You have to help her” – fearing perhaps that they were on the cusp of losing a second daughter after having just saved the first in the nick of time.

Greta’s sister was finally diagnosed with ADHD, with elements of Asperger’s, OCD and ODD, and, with medication and protocols, the family began to try to make their life work. Sometimes, they cannot all live together. “We divide up. Each of us takes a child. We live in different places. All families have a hero. Beata is ours. When Greta was feeling her worst, it was Beata who had to take a few steps backwards and manage on her own. If she hadn’t done that, nothing would have worked.”

But things have nonetheless improved so significantly for Beata, a talented singer, that she is due to star alongside her mother in a new musical about Édith Piaf in Stockholm in the autumn.

There is a section in *Our House Is on Fire* in which Malena Ernman questions the decision to write such an honest book about the family’s implosion – “burnt-out people on a burnt-out planet”. It was published in Sweden before Greta was a worldwide activist. Back then, it was Malena who was well known, as an opera singer and, in 2009, Eurovision contestant, not her daughter. “I should not have written a book about how I felt,” she says. “I should not have written a book about how my family has felt during the past few years. But I had to. Because we felt like shit. I felt like shit. Svante felt like shit. The children felt like shit. The planet felt like shit.

“And we had to write about it. Together. Because once we realised why we were feeling the way we did, we

started to get better."

Greta Thunberg did not only begin to get better because she was finally told it was OK to be who she was. She began to get better because being allowed to be who she was meant she could exercise control over her own life, and in her own way, as we have seen every day since, have her own say over the future of our planet.

Our House Is on Fire: Scenes of a Family and a Planet in Crisis*, by Malena and Beata Ernman and Svante and Greta Thunberg, is published by Allen Lane on March 5 (£16.99)*

FOUR VOICES ON GRETA, AUTISM AND OUR HOUSE IS ON FIRE

'There's no grey in my world. It's black or white. Greta's the same'

Chris Packham
BBC

Chris Packham *The wildlife presenter was diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome at the age of 44*

In some ways I had it easier than Greta. It struck me early on in the book how much her family moved around when she and her sister were really young, because their

mother was an opera singer, always on tour. I'd have hated that and I suspect she did too. When I was a child, my bedroom was my security and my sanctuary, where everything was arranged just so.

My diagnosis – Asperger's, high-functioning autism and OCD – was similar to hers but it came much later in my life because there was less awareness of these things in the Seventies when I was growing up. I didn't have the eating disorder to the same extent that she did, but I did try to control my food intake as part of my OCD. I still do. Even now, if Charlotte [his partner] and Megan [his stepdaughter from a previous relationship] are away, I'll buy six of the same meals and just eat those.

It's not a major thing now as an adult, but I do use regularity and regulation as a means of controlling stress. Like I always put on the same top and trousers to relax in the house in the evening. I think Greta was under enormous stress from bullying and trying to figure out who she was and what was different about her, and she used food as a means of control. It's the last bastion: no one can decide what I put in my mouth. You control what you can control or you think everything will go to ratshit.

The bullying thing is what really chimed with me, and in that regard I probably had it worse because of the era I grew up in. Bullying – from teachers and pupils – was part and parcel of life then, especially in a comprehensive school like mine. You got no sympathy. Greta hid the bullying, but when it came out, she got sympathy. My parents had no comprehension, but her parents tried to get help. It is depressing that in Sweden in the 21st century the system turned out to be such a shambles, but given her parents' dedication to tutoring themselves and sorting it out, she eventually got a diagnosis and some help. I didn't, because nobody had any conception of what was going on.

I totally get her obsession with facts and lists and memorising information. I had obsessional interests from a very young age. They changed all the time. I'd go to bed thinking about the battle of Agincourt and wake up fixated on frogs. One big difference between us was that Greta's sister also had behavioural and social difficulties, whereas my sister did not. Instead, she became, along with my parents, an observer of "the Chris Show".

Like Greta, I also had selective mutism. I stopped speaking for periods of time, again as a direct reaction to stress. When my kestrel died, I couldn't speak the next day. I was thinking stuff but no words came out of my mouth. I was frightened. It was completely alien to my parents and they didn't know what to do, so they sent me to school as normal where, of course, I got ripped to shit. It was a bear pit. It's the reaction of your peers that separates you and drives these traits out into the open.

The thing I identify with most about Greta is her aggravated sense of injustice. I'd get disproportionately, ferociously upset about even trivial injustices, like if someone had marked my score incorrectly in an exam. I had no tolerance of injustice and I still haven't. There is no grey in my world. It's black or white. She's the same. I've never met her, never corresponded with her, but I feel a tremendous neurological kinship with her and a commonality of purpose.

The fact that she is Asperger's is empowering to me. I get an enormous amount of hate and so does she. I feel a little less lonely because she's out there, wearing the hate as a badge of honour. I didn't have that at her age. I'm not saying she won't hurt. We all hurt. But she's managing it well and her parents are supportive. I didn't have that resilience until later on. I'm 59 now and I've never been silenced and neither will she be. She won't stop. Long may she continue.

Why I didn't get Greta (or even recognise her) – but do now

Lucy Siegle
MARK HARRISON

Lucy Siegle *Environmentalist and TV presenter*

I recently passed the first anniversary of my meeting Greta Thunberg up a mountain at Davos. I marked the occasion privately, turning a bit red as I remembered my failure to recognise that the figurehead of an unstoppable movement was in front of me. Instead of offering up my card with a profound, "I am here to help you wake up the world to the climate crisis, Greta," I offered a breezy "Hi" and wondered when Bono was arriving.

Instagram confirms it happened. There we are at the 2019 Davos Arctic basecamp, Greta on the stage in a plum-coloured quilted jacket with her trademark plaits poking out from underneath a woolly hat, outlining the climate crisis to a circle of people that included scientists, A-listers and high-level diplomats. I had ridden up the mountain on the funicular railway to meet the climate scientists led by Lancaster University's Dr Gail Whiteman. They bravely camp out during Davos in minus 10C or worse in order to avoid the hotel charges, but mainly to collar any world leaders who wander up and give them a climate primer that they won't forget. Greta had camped out on the mountain too. "What was it like to sleep out here last night?" Whiteman asked her. "It was cold," said Greta.

She spoke without nerves and there was something

undeniably interesting about being told to get it together by a 16-year-old (as she was then). But I didn't get it. Afterwards, I told a friend I didn't think a 16-year-old girl would be the one to change things. "Hmmm," said my friend for a long time. Then, "No, I think she will do it."

Looking back, like many older climate and environmental commentators who'd been plugging away for 15 years, I felt rather threatened. This was our territory and even though we weren't making much progress, we were doing our best, weren't we? It was pretty clear that Greta wasn't impressed.

In my defence, I didn't know much about Greta at that point. I had no context. I could have done with this book. *Our House Is on Fire: Scenes of a Family and a Planet in Crisis* gives that context. There are two truths contained in this book: that we live in an era of a mental health crisis among young women and the era of climate crisis. Greta and her family have challenged the acceptance and denial of both these truths in a way that should liberate us all. I'm glad I got there in the end.

'I found the book difficult to read and more difficult to love'

Henry Normal
TOM JACKSON

Henry Normal *The writer and TV producer is the co-author, with wife Angela Pell, of* A Normal Family: Everyday Adventures with Our Autistic Son

This isn't a book about autism; it's a book about climate change. I state this bluntly in the no-nonsense style of the book itself.

It bears all the family's names on its cover but is essentially written from Mum's point of view.

Malena isn't a "glass half full" type or even a "glass half empty" type; she's a "there's something fundamentally wrong with the glass" type.

Don't be fooled by Greta's name being given prominence in the blurb and the description in the intro as "the road to Greta's school strike". This is essentially a set of arguments and a call to arms for action to combat CO2 emissions.

"Time's too short," the book emphatically states. It seems odd then that the first few "scenes", as the chapters are called, concentrate on affirming Malena's credentials in opera and singing.

It's page 16, scene 6, before we get to Greta and we are straight in with eating disorders at the age of 11. As a parent with an autistic child myself, this for me is the most interesting section. There's a saying among parents of special needs kids: "If you've seen one autistic person, then you've seen one autistic person." So I was keen to know how Greta's condition had developed and how the family had coped. I was curious in what ways Greta's Asperger's first manifested itself and how the family helped with her challenges.

Unfortunately, both Greta's and her sister Beata's stories seem to be dealt with incredibly swiftly, so as to get on to

the main business of saving humanity. I can't help sensing irony here.

The two daughters and their journeys are given the occasional lip service throughout the book but almost as light relief from our impending global doom.

"Burnt-out people on a burnt-out planet" is the bleak catchprase of the book. Difficulties and tales of the fatigue encountered overwhelm the reader throughout. In fact it's hard to truly identify any moment in any chapter approaching the outer suburbs of Joy.

I suspect most people likely to read this book do so drawn by the name Greta Thunberg. However, I'm left in some doubt as to how much of her is really in this book. I confess I'm particularly intrigued by Greta as a person and as an objective observer of world events I'm open to her cause. As sympathetic as I am, though, on reaching the 100-page mark, I did begin to feel like I was two hours into a seven-hour flight and wishing I hadn't struck up a conversation with the person in the next seat.

Greta own words are quoted, explaining at one point "this is a book about climate change and it should be boring".

I can't help feeling this work will, by its nature, be preaching to the converted, in which case I hope it serves to rally the troops. Of course, the irony of bemoaning the cutting down of trees in a paperback doesn't escape me.

This could well be an important book, but I found it difficult one to read and a more difficult one to love.

'Without such families speaking out, their crises remain hidden'

Simon Baron-Cohen

Professor Simon Baron-Cohen *Director of the Autism Research Centre, Cambridge University*

This book is remarkable for its honesty and courage. Written by Greta Thunburg's mother Malena, and co-authored with her husband and two daughters, she invites us into her home to reveal not only how Greta became passionate about the massive climate crisis, but how her own small family was struggling to survive the impact of dealing with two children with neurodevelopmental disabilities – autism and/or ADHD – without support.

Malena and her family have done us a huge service in disclosing how hard their lives were, behind closed doors. Without such families speaking out, their crises remain hidden within the domestic space. Malena highlights how society has a responsibility to not just save the planet from global warming but to save families like hers from a life of pain and breakdown.

Greta's drive to focus world attention to the climate crisis, and that she is autistic, are likely not a coincidence. Indeed, there are several reasons why one can assume that her autism was and remains the driver of her remarkable talents.

First, like some autistic people, she can take in a huge amount of scientific information, can fact-check at speed, can see scientific patterns rapidly, and she goes deeply into a topic with a laser-focus, unswervingly and persistently. Autistic obsessions can be hugely positive.

Second, like most autistic people, she is hypermoral, a whistleblower, feeling deep distress at the idea of suffering, whether for us as a species, or the hundreds of species that will be wiped out by the climate crisis.

Third, most autistic people don't tolerate waffle, excuses, or lies. Greta is the child who tells the adults who run the world to go back and do their homework and take responsibility for the mess they have created. She has a knack of cutting straight to the chase: why should children go to school if there is no future?

But Greta's autism came at a price: an eating disorder in her early teens, a mind so crowded with information that it is at times overwhelming, heightened anxiety, so much that she developed selective mutism, being unable to stay in mainstream school, being bullied and stigmatised. The result was teenage depression, a mental health condition that could have been avoided with the right support.

Autism runs in families so it comes as no surprise, as her mother reveals, that Greta's younger sister Beata also required a complex set of diagnoses. This included autism, giving her too some "superpowers" (like her mother she is a fantastic singer), but also leaving her overwhelmed. The genes for autism often co-occur with a predisposition to develop other neurodevelopmental disabilities, including ADHD (which Beata and her mother also have), and OCD. With no support, Greta, Beata and their parents were left to flounder and keep their lives afloat when family life could have been so much easier.

When a couple of years ago I was invited to address the UN in New York on Autism Awareness Day, I decided to not pretend things were all fine for autistic people. I hear from families like Greta's every day about how bad things are: long waiting lists to get a diagnosis, minimal

or no support after the diagnosis, autistic teenagers dropping out of school having been bullied, developing poor mental health, including suicidal tendencies and high levels of unemployment for autistic adults. I decided to title my speech *Autism and Human Rights*, to draw attention to how autistic people were being deprived of many basic human rights.

”Reasonable adjustment” for a person’s disability is one way in which schools, colleges and the workplace can become autism-friendly. But basic clinical services also need significant new funding, to show how a compassionate society supports people with disabilities, including “invisible” disabilities like autism.

That Greta has achieved so much good for humanity, despite a lack of support, speaks volumes about her own resilience and drive. But her family’s wake-up call, “Our house is on fire”, will hopefully result not just in bringing down carbon emissions to safe levels – please cut down your flying, driving, consumption of red meat, and switch your energy provider to a green one. Hopefully it will also result in raising awareness for the need for essential support for the millions of families of autistic individuals, and those with other forms of neurodiversity – please give them the respect and dignity every person deserves.

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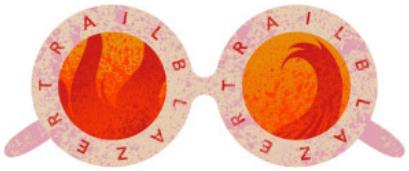

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