



'Extraordinary Attorney Woo' Excels at Representing Autism



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It's an unfortunate truth that the history of representation for the autistic community has been overwhelmingly negative. A lack of understanding of Autism Spectrum Disorder has led to plenty of autistic and autistic-coded characters painted in a negative light, whether they were meant to be that way or not.

Even as understanding of Autism Spectrum Disorder becomes more widespread and research more readily available, recent attempts at telling stories with autistic characters at the forecenter can be just as detrimental as ever (Sia's film, *Music*, comes to mind). Thankfully, there are still **good examples of representation** forming good stories, one of which is the adorable, light-hearted, and fun K-drama, *Extraordinary Attorney Woo*.

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'Extraordinary Attorney Woo's Autistic Character Is the Protagonist



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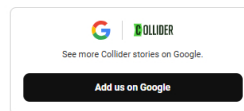
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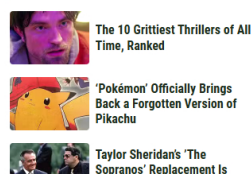
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Many stories feature their Autism Spectrum Disorder representation in the hands of side characters or characters who are even less involved with the plot. There are a few engaging films and TV shows that feature **main characters who are autistic** or autistic-coded, but few build characters quite like Woo Young-woo (Park Eun-bin).

The show begins with a flashback to Young-woo's childhood, specifically to the day when her father was told she had autism. As a single dad living day to day, he responds to the news with sadness, worried about his daughter's path in life. At this point, Woo is nonverbal, but when she becomes overstimulated by their

landlord's sudden outburst of violence toward her dad, she says her first words, memorized from her dad's law books.

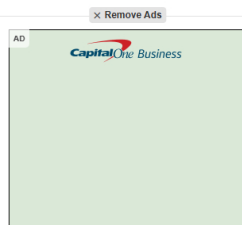
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Flash forward, and we are treated to a montage of Young-woo going about her morning as she gets ready for her first day of work at the Hanbada law firm. The episodes that follow detail her cases and her unique way of working them, by looking at the cases from a different point of view. She says it best herself in Episode 1, using her favorite hyperfixation (whales) to explain a concept to her new boss:



"If a female sperm whale that weighs 22 tons ate a giant squid that weighs 500 kilograms, then laid an egg that weighs 1.3 tons 6 hours later, how much does the sperm whale weigh?...The answer is, whales cannot lay eggs. Whales are mammals, so they give birth instead of laying eggs. If you focus only on the weight, you cannot solve the problem. You have to look at the main point."

Because Young-woo focuses on details that others would overlook, she brings a new perspective to every case. This makes her the ideal protagonist for a courtroom show, which would require its main character to both know the law inside and out, and approach the subject in a new way.



On the flip side, Young-woo also has her fair share of weaknesses. While she is a brilliant lawyer and is able to find details that others overlook, she has trouble interacting socially. While getting past her work building's revolving door is only a small obstacle, talking with clients and understanding workplace culture is an especially tough challenge for her. Protagonists need to have strengths and weaknesses in order to be engaging and to lead the story along; Young-woo has a good balance of these, making her an interesting protagonist who is easy to root for and fun to follow. She isn't the pinnacle of perfection (accidentally creating a **Mary Sue** is a common trap for stories looking to include non-offensive representation); she's a person.

'Extraordinary Attorney Woo' Emphasizes Woo's Unique Qualities



One misconception about Autism Spectrum Disorder is the "spectrum" part of it. One person's life with autism can be wildly different from any other's, a detail that Young-woo's boss, Attorney Jung (**Kang Ki-young**), overlooks when one of the firm's clients hires them to protect their autistic son. Jung brings Young-woo onto the case, even though her and the client's son, who is on the more severe part of the spectrum, are not comparable when it comes to the disorder. The clients even acknowledge that their experiences just aren't the same, expressing that, while **savants like Young-woo do exist**, they are rare.

Ad

TV shows and films often exaggerate the symptoms of disorders like Autism Spectrum Disorder, and unfortunately *Extraordinary Attorney Woo* falls victim to this. Focusing on yet another savant character gives

the impression that savants are more numerous than they are, and some of Young-woo's other characteristics are also unrealistic. Stigmas can easily arise from less than perfect portrayals of Autism Spectrum Disorder, but *Extraordinary Attorney Woo* avoids this by telling its story in an extremely positive way and by focusing on Young-woo as a unique person. The portrayal of autism in the show might not be 100% accurate, but it still works within the story.

Rather than attempt to represent the whole of the autistic experience (which would be impossible), *Extraordinary Attorney Woo* narrows the scope and focuses on Young-woo and her individual experience. While she expresses some of the more common symptoms of Autism Spectrum Disorder (like **echolalia**, hyperfixation on special interests, safety foods, and becoming overstimulated, even having a meltdown when she was young), her unique qualities set her apart not just from all the other characters, but from anyone else on the spectrum.

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She has special interests, but her focus is specifically on law and whales. The visualizations of her thought process (pictures and text appearing behind her on the screen as quick and easy ways to signal that Young-woo is accessing information from her memory), a technique that has become tiresome on TV shows that portray characters with autism or who are autistic-coded, are fresh in this instance because they mostly focus on whales specifically. Young-woo makes a lot of her points at work by explaining how she sees the case through anecdotes about whales. This helps her to connect better with the people around her, and she's able to communicate what she means in a way that excites her.

Even though "whale talk" can become a little too much for those around her, Young-woo does have friends she can talk to about her interests, including Jun-ho (**Kang Tae-oh**), who finds her excitement charming. This is a very important addition to the story, as it introduces not just a love interest, but also shows that having interests that you want to talk about all the time can be a good thing.

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Young-woo's support system is shown to be a strong one, representing not just her specific place on the spectrum but also how symptoms like hyperfixations don't have to be shown as annoying, as they are in so many other films and TV series. *Extraordinary Attorney Woo*'s light-hearted and charming tone encapsulates Young-woo as a character, a smart and resourceful attorney who always gives it her all, and that sort of positive representation speaks volumes.

'Extraordinary Attorney Woo' Addresses Multiple Types of Discrimination



One of the more prevalent ways that autism has been represented in media is a tendency to focus on sad and demoralizing discrimination that people on the spectrum face every day. Because Young-woo's autism is visible in the way that she walks, talks, and moves her eyes, she is susceptible to discrimination based solely on other people's assumptions (which are often misinformed).

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When Young-woo was little, she was bullied in every school she attended, only finding one friend throughout childhood. This mean-spirited response to Young-woo's existence as a person with autism is something every rational, normal person can agree is wrong. For some forms of representation, that's where the showcase of discrimination stops. But *Extraordinary Attorney Woo* takes it even farther by not being afraid to have some of its main characters fall into unknowing discrimination.

Though Young-woo's boss, Attorney Jung, becomes a strong mentor and supportive employer, he doesn't start off that way. The second page of Young-woo's resume was lost, so he wasn't aware at the start that she is on the spectrum. When she shows up for her first day and Jung is made aware of her disability, he immediately goes to his superior asking for permission to let her go. This decision, while obviously unfair considering the other impressive aspects of Young-woo's resume, was not made with any ill will, but rather out of concern for the firm's clients.

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Jung may not have been willing to give Young-woo a fighting chance in the beginning, but that was because he identified very quickly a challenge that Young-woo would have to face: being a good talker, in front of clients and in the courtroom. This is an area where Young-woo admittedly does need practice, but without his boss forcing him to give her a chance, she could never have proven herself able to adapt.

Despite his misunderstanding of Young-woo's disability, Jung is also able to adapt, and he learns very quickly that she is a talented lawyer. He corrects himself whenever he realizes that he has made a wrong judgment call, meaning that even the supporting characters of the story are able to learn, grow, and become very likable.

This means that *Extraordinary Attorney Woo* shows not just the most basic and mean-spirited form of playground discrimination more akin to bullying, but also the more subtle forms of discrimination that stem from over-concern and a lack of understanding of the disability. This latter form is far more prevalent; no one purposefully bullies someone else and expects to be known as a good person, but a condescending attitude toward a person on the spectrum can be just as damaging.

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'Extraordinary Attorney Woo' Introduces Woo as a Character First



It can safely be said that *Extraordinary Attorney Woo* is a story that focuses on characters and plot far more than simply finding a good way to include representation. The representation itself is just a part of the protagonist's life; it isn't tacked on, because Young-woo's characterization necessitates its existence.

This means that the series doesn't include Autism Spectrum Disorder just to make comments on it or to tell preachy messages; rather, the series tells a very specific story about a very specific person and values the character above the disability. So often, several types of representation (whether it's disability, LGBTQ, etc.) can be used as a crutch or an excuse to tell a lackluster story with barely-noticeable characterization. *Extraordinary Attorney Woo* is brimming with passion for the story, the characters, and the character relationships.

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In short, the show presents Young-woo as a character (a person) first, and a character with autism second. Though being autistic is a large part of Young-woo's story, it isn't the only part or even the main part. The best representation comes when the representation itself is just one portion of the character — not something to gawk at, but something to be accepted.

Woo Young-woo stands out as an interesting protagonist and a passionate character, and the way she interacts positively with the world and people around her reinforces that. As a person, Young-woo is gifted, flawed, adaptable, and positive, making her an effective example of good representation.

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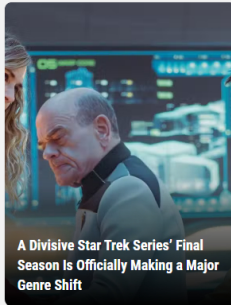
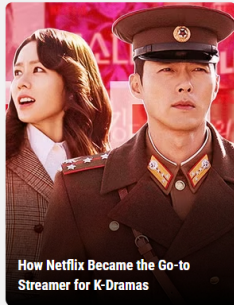
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