A new book challenges popular thinking about autism. By Sarah Fay

There is no epidemic of autism in this country, regardless of what the media would like us to think. Though a statement like this may incite “autiebloggers” — those who believe there has been a substantial increase in autism over the past ten years — to light up the Web with diatribes, Roy Richard Grinker says the autism panic is unfounded. In his new book *Unstrange Minds*, he confidently traces how the press distorted terminology and misrepresented statistics to create a dangerous myth, and his credentials couldn’t be better. He’s a professor of anthropology, human sciences and international affairs at George Washington University — and the father of an autistic child.

In the broadest terms, autism is defined as a developmental disorder that affects the way children respond. Grinker, a native Chicagoan, says he understands why the word *epidemic* stuck. After his daughter Isabel was diagnosed in 1994, he started to see people with autism everywhere.

“At our community pool, at the grocery store, in the waiting room at the pediatrician,” he says. “And the epidemiological reports showed that autism was more common than ever. But then I started looking at the history and science of autism, and I saw something different — the high rates were a product of many different factors, all acting in concert.”

The first half of *Minds* examines these factors, including the history of the disorder, how it has been shaped by the American media, and the strong role parent-advocacy groups have played in defining it.

“Most of the voices out there are voices of panic and concern,” Grinker, 45, says. “The language used by many advocacy groups and vocal parents is indeed frightening. Autism is described as a child being ‘kidnapped,’ and the high rates are referred to as a ‘national emergency.’”

“Most of the voices out there are voices of panic and concern.”

Grinker analyzes the media’s role in molding public perception of an autism epidemic like a seasoned journalist and perspicacious scientist rolled into one. He sees the whole and its parts. He claims the press distorted “the science on autism” by reporting anecdotes, rewriting press releases and citing other journalists.

Not even a typo escapes his eye. He notes that in 1994, the DSM-IV — the manual the American Psychiatric Association uses to classify mental disorders and illnesses — printed *instead of *and, significantly broadening the criteria for diagnosing a child with autism.

It’s a lot to take on, but luckily Grinker is a skillful writer who easily transitions among the roles of historian, journalist, scientist and autobiographer. The most moving moments of *Minds* occur when he recalls his life with Isabel. As he describes watching her around her preschool, he writes like an experienced memoirist: “There are 20-foot saucer magnolias around many of the museums, lindens and holies, ginkgoes and weeping birches, whose shapes and textures made Isabel stop and stare, not so she could avoid going to school, but, it seemed to me, to fix in her mind memories of the place she now spent all her days.”

Although the second half of the book — in which Grinker attempts to examine how autism is treated in other countries — lags, *Minds* should be required reading for anyone touched by autism. It burgeons with facts about the disorder that both shock and surprise: Who knew that LSD calms autistic children (without causing them to hallucinate), or that a large number of parents in America still refuse to vaccinate their children against such illnesses as mumps and measles even though the notion that autism is caused by certain vaccines has been dispelled?

“Unstrange Minds” attempts to show that we have to look not only at the dark but at the light,” Grinker says. “I can say with confidence that it’s a better time than ever to be autistic, as odd as that may sound.”

*Unstrange Minds* (Basic Books, $29.95) is out this week.