

Reading Group Guide

Spotlight on:

The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time

Author: Mark Haddon

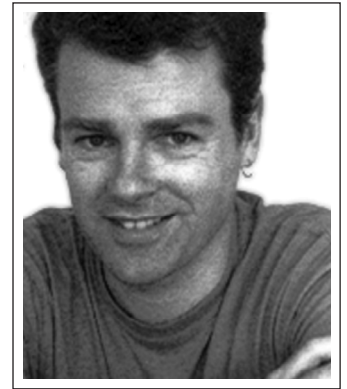
During early career, assisted patients with multiple sclerosis and autism, and worked a variety of part-time jobs, including at a theater box office and in a mail order business; worked as an illustrator and cartoonist for periodicals, including cartoon strip “Men—A User’s Guide”; creator of and writer for children’s television series *Microsoap*.

Name: Mark Haddon

Born: Born 1962, in Northampton, England

Education: Merton College, Oxford, B.A., 1981; Edinburgh University, M.A., 1984

Interests: Marathon canoeing, abstract painting



Awards:

Smarties Prize shortlist, 1994, for *The Real Porky Philips*; Book Trust Teenage Prize, Whitbread Book of the Year, Art Seidenbaum Award for First Fiction, Commonwealth Writers Prize for best first book, all 2003, and Children’s Fiction Prize from the Guardian, all for *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*; two British Academy of Film and Television Arts (BAFTA) awards and Best Children’s Drama award from the Royal Television Society, all for *Microsoap*.

Past Works:

The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time (novel), Doubleday (New York, NY), 2003.

(for Children)

Gilbert’s Gobstopper, Hamish Hamilton (London, England), 1987, Dial Books for Young Readers (New York, NY), 1988.

Toni and the Tomato Soup, Harcourt Brace (San Diego, CA), 1988.

A Narrow Escape for Princess Sharon, Hamish Hamilton (London, England), 1989.

Gridzbi Spudvetch!, Walker (New York, NY), 1993.

Titch Johnson, Almost World Champion, illustrated by Martin Brown, Walker (New York, NY), 1993.

The Real Porky Philips, A & C Black (London, England), 1994.

Baby Dinosaurs at Home, Western Publishing (New York, NY), 1994.

Baby Dinosaurs at Playgroup, Western Publishing (New York, NY), 1994.

Baby Dinosaurs in the Garden, Western Publishing (New York, NY), 1994.

Baby Dinosaurs on Vacation, Western Publishing (New York, NY), 1994.

The Sea of Tranquility, illustrated by Christian Birmingham, Harcourt Brace (San Diego, CA), 1996.

Agent Z and the Penguin from Mars, Red Fox (London, England), 1996.

Agent Z and the Masked Crusader, Red Fox (London, England), 1996.

Agent Z Goes Wild, Red Fox (London, England), 1999.

Secret Agent Handbook, illustrated by Sue Heap, Walker Books (New York, NY), 1999.

Agent Z and the Killer Bananas, Red Fox (London, England), 2001.

The Ice Bear’s Cave, illustrated by David Axtell, Picture Lions (London, England), 2002.

Ocean Star Express, illustrated by Peter Sutton, Picture Lions (London, England), 2002.



Author: Mark Haddon (2)

Past Works: (Continued)

Also author of episodes for children's television series, including *Microsoap* and *Starstreet*; contributor to screen-play adaptation of *Fungus and the Bogeyman*, by Raymond Briggs. Contributor of illustrations and cartoons to periodicals, including *New Statesman*, *Spectator*, *Guardian*, *Sunday Telegraph*, and *Private Eye*.

Works in Progress:

An adult novel, tentatively titled *Blood and Scissors*.

Media Adaptations:

The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time has been adapted as an audiobook by Recorded Books, 2003, and is also scheduled to be adapted as a film written and directed by Steve Kloves and coproduced by Brad Pitt.



Author: Mark Haddon (3)

Sidelights:

British author Mark Haddon was enjoying a successful career writing and illustrating children's books, as well as writing for popular children's television shows such as *Microsoap* and *Starstreet* before he surprised even himself with his wildly acclaimed first novel, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*. Ostensibly a quirky mystery novel about a teenager who investigates the murder of his neighbor's dog, the story gained the most attention for its narrative technique in which Haddon uses the viewpoint of an autistic boy named Christopher. Originally, as the author told Dave Weich in a Powell's interview, the idea of the story came from an image in his mind of a poodle that had been killed by a gardening implement. Haddon, who admittedly has a rather dark sense of humor at times, thought beginning a novel this way could be funny, but in order to make it work he would have to tell the incident from a unique viewpoint. "The dog came first," Haddon told Weich, "then the voice. Only after a few pages did I really start to ask, Who does the voice belong to? So Christopher came along, in fact, after the book had already got underway." It was a fortuitous decision that would lead Haddon to win a Whitbread prize, among other honors.

Even though the character of Christopher Boone, who suffers from a disorder known as Asperger's syndrome, is fifteen years old, Haddon originally intended the book to be for an adult audience. After having written over a dozen books for children over the years, he wanted to write about more complex themes. The resulting novel "was definitely for adults," he told Weich, "but maybe I should say more specifically: It was for myself. I've been writing for kids for a long time, and if you're writing for kids you're kind of writing for the kid you used to be at that age. . . . I felt a great sense of freedom with this book because I felt like I was writing it for me." In presenting the final manuscript to his agent, however, it was decided that it would be marketed to both an adult and a teenage audience.

The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time can be seen, in some ways, as an extension of Haddon's previous books for children, some of which contain a good dose of mystery and, often, humor. For example, his debut children's book, *Gilbert's Gobstopper*, is definitely meant to be humorous and, in its own way, have a touch of adventure. When Gilbert loses his jawbreaker, the reader is treated to a trip from the gobstopper's viewpoint as it travels through sewer pipes, enters the ocean, is found by a fisherman, and goes on ever-more surprising turns that include a trip into outer space. "This irreverent entertainment will tickle many a funnybone," asserted Carolyn Polese in a *School Library Journal* review.

Haddon also combines adventure and humor in his "Agent Z" series for children that includes *Agent Z and the Penguin from Mars*, *Agent Z and the Masked Crusader*, *Agent Z Goes Wild*, and *Agent Z and the Killer Bananas*. The Agent Z of the title actually refers to a group of three boys, including Jenks, Ben, and Barney, who assume the secret identity as part of their club. The boys get involved in one goofy adventure after another, such as the time they take advantage of Mr. Sidebottom's obsession with UFOs by concocting an alien plot using a penguin and some foil, or the time the boys make a mock movie about killer bananas. Reviewers generally had high praise for these books. *School Librarian* contributor Alicen Geddes-Ward, for one, called *Agent Z Meets the Masked Crusader* a "witty, tight and brilliantly funny book." Adrian Jackson, writing in *Books for Keeps*, similarly felt that *Agent Z and the Penguin from Mars* was "a real hoot of a story, wildly imagined."

But Haddon does not view children as mere material for humorous stories. Some of his children's books show a decidedly more sensitive side to youngsters, such as *The Real Porky Philips* and *Titch Johnson, Almost World Champion*. In a story that *Books for Keeps* critic Gill Roberts called "powerful, poignant and pertinent," *The Real Porky Philips* is about a young, sensitive, overweight boy who finds the courage to finally assert his real personality after he has to play the role of a genie in the school play. *Titch Johnson, Almost World Champion* has a similar theme about self-confidence. Here, Titch, who seems to not be good at anything except balancing forks on his nose, gains a better appreciation of himself after successfully organizing a fundraising event.



Author: Mark Haddon (4)

Sidelights: (Continued)

The rich world of dreams and imagination is explored in *The Sea of Tranquility* and *Ocean Star Express*. In the former, Haddon draws on his own childhood fascination with the achievement of mankind's first landing on the Moon in 1969. The boy in the tale has a picture of the solar system on his wall and fantasizes about what it would be like to be an astronaut. Combined with this storyline are facts about the actual landing, including interesting tidbits, for example, the footprints left there will remain for millions of years because of the lack of wind and rain on the Moon. Carolyn Boyd, writing in *School Librarian*, felt that "this book will appeal to those who remember the first moon landing and to young readers who will marvel at it." *Ocean Star Express*, by comparison, is not as grounded in reality. Here, a boy named Joe is becoming bored during his summer holiday when Mr. Robertson, the owner of the hotel where his family is staying, invites him to see his train set. No ordinary toy, apparently, the train takes Joe and the owner on a magical ride around the world in what a *Kirkus Reviews* contributor called a "sweet and simple story that young train enthusiasts will enjoy."

While Haddon received a good deal of praise for many of his children's books, including being shortlisted for the Smarties Prize for *The Real Porky Philips*, his *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* has brought him considerably more critical attention. It combines the humor, sensitivity, and adventure of his earlier books with a highly challenging narrative perspective that impressed many reviewers. The protagonist of the story, Christopher Boone, suffers from Asperger's syndrome, a type of autism that prevents him from being able to accurately perceive and interpret other people's emotions. While he possesses an extremely logical mind, he is dispassionate and unable to empathize with other people whose feelings he cannot comprehend. This makes Christopher both a very reliable narrator, because he is incapable of lying, and an unreliable one, because he cannot fully appreciate the motives behind other people's actions. Making the character even more complicated, Haddon gives Christopher other flaws, including an aversion to being touched, a hatred of the colors brown and yellow, and a sometimes uncontrollable bladder. On the other hand, Christopher is brilliant at math, loves puzzles, and has a photographic memory.

The novel is ostensibly being written by Christopher, whose school counselor has assigned him the task of writing a book as a type of therapy. Haddon becomes his character fully in the story, even numbering the chapters in prime number order rather than sequentially because of Christopher's fascination for prime numbers. The story begins when Christopher discovers the dead poodle, Wellington. A great lover of dogs, as well as a fan of the Sherlock Holmes detective stories, he decides to find out who killed Wellington and why. The chapters then alternate between narratives of Christopher's progress in the investigation and chapters that include mathematical puzzles, charts, and other calculations the fifteen-year-old uses to try to reason out the information he has gathered. But as his investigation advances, the death of the poodle proves to be a knot that, when untied, reveals much more painful truths involving something terrible that happened between Christopher's parents and their neighbors and what really happened to his supposedly "dead" mother.

Critics appreciated the use of Christopher's dispassionate voice because it forces the author to obey the old writing caveat that authors should always "show and not tell" what is happening in the story. Furthermore, what interested many reviewers is that even though Christopher has autism, Haddon in no way makes this the theme of *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*. Indeed, the word "autism" is never even used. Instead, the novel might best be viewed as an examination of "the process of writing itself," as Daniel J. Glendening put it in *America's Intelligence Wire*. The story's point of view allows considerable latitude for reader interpretation, and indeed Haddon remarked to Weich that people he has talked to have had amazingly disparate reactions to his novel. "People have said to me that it's a desperately sad book and they wept most of the way through it," the author said. "Other people say it's charming and they kept laughing all the time. People say it has a sad ending; people say it has a happy ending. Because Christopher doesn't force the reader to think one thing and another, I get many different reactions."



Author: Mark Haddon (5)

Sidelights: (Continued)

Although Haddon has had some personal experience in the past working with autistic people, he has admitted doing very little formal research when creating the character of Christopher. While many critics had no problem buying into the author's portrayal of the boy's condition, one reviewer, Nicholas Barrow of the *Spectator*, found it highly flawed. Barrow considered Haddon's descriptions to be a "total exaggeration of a fifteen-year-old boy with Asperger's," objecting to the "cliche" of an autistic boy who is a math genius, noting that Christopher is unbelievable as a teenager because he never thinks even once about sex, and finding the boy's problem with incontinence inconsistent with Asperger's patients. In the end, Barrow found the portrayal of Christopher to be "patronising, inaccurate and not entertaining," and that "some people with Asperger's would be offended by this book." However, if one considers that Haddon's motive is not to discuss the issue of mental or emotional disabilities, but rather to experiment with literary perspective and create an interesting story, then one would fall into the more predominant camp that found Haddon's narrator absorbing. As one *Publishers Weekly* critic put it, "The novel brims with touching, ironic humor. The result is an eye-opening work in a unique and compelling literary voice." "In Christopher, Haddon has tapped into a unique, yet memorable voice that lingers well after the last page," Jennifer Fish added in the *Florida Times Union*. *London Independent* reviewer Nicholas Tucker concluded, "How Haddon achieves this most delicate of balances is a tribute to his skill as a successful cartoonist as well as novelist." And Glendening called *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* "modern writing at its finest."



Author: Mark Haddon (6)

Further Reading:

Periodicals:

- America's Intelligence Wire*, January 19, 2004, Daniel J. Glendening, "Author Mark Haddon Takes a Novel Approach to Autism."
- Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, June 29, 2003, John Freeman, "Whodunit Unveils Autistic Boy's Mind," p. D2; October 26, 2003, Greg Changnon, "Teen 'Rain Man' Confronts Canine and Other Mysteries," p. F3.
- Book*, January-February, 2003, Adam Langer, "The New Houdini: Mark Haddon," p. 43; July-August, 2003, Beth Kephart, "Little Sherlock," p. 76.
- Booklist*, April 1, 2003, Kristine Huntley, review of *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, p. 1376; January 1, 2004, Mary McCay, review of *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, p. 890.
- Bookseller*, January 24, 2003, "A Young Detective Obsessed by Detail," p. 29.
- Books for Keeps*, July, 1993, Adrian Jackson, review of *Gridzbi Spudvetch!*, p. 28; May, 1994, Steve Rosson, review of *The Real Porky Philips*, p. 8; July, 1995, Adrian Jackson, review of *Agent Z and the Penguin from Mars*, p. 12; September, 1995, Gill Roberts, review of *The Real Porky Philips*, p. 12.
- Books for Your Children*, summer, 1994, S. Williams, review of *The Real Porky Philips*, p. 13.
- British Book News*, March, 1988, Judith Elkin, review of *Gilbert's Gobstopper*, p. 13.
- Daily Variety*, August 2, 2002, Michael Fleming, "WB Looking 'Curious': Pitt, Grey Keen on Haddon Adventure Tale," p. 5.
- Economist*, May 24, 2003, "Great Expectations; New Fiction," p. 85.
- Entertainment Weekly*, June 20, 2003, Ken Tucker, review of *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, p. 76.
- Florida Times Union*, August 31, 2003, Jennifer Fish, "It All Adds Up to Great Debut Novel: Tale's Hero an Autistic Math Genius," p. D4.
- Growing Point*, July, 1989, review of *Toni and the Tomato Soup*, p. 5197.
- Independent* (London, England), June 6, 2003, Nicholas Tucker, "Making Sense of an Abnormal Normality: *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*," p. 15.
- Junior Bookshelf*, June, 1993, review of *Gridzbi Spudvetch!*, p. 105; August, 1993, review of *Titch Johnson, Almost World Champion*, p. 135.
- Kirkus Reviews*, January 1, 2003, review of *Ocean Star Express*, p. 60; April 15, 2003, review of *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, p. 557.
- Kliatt*, January, 2004, Jacqueline Edwards, review of *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (audio-book), p. 44.
- Knights Ridder/Tribune News Service*, June 25, 2003, Marta Salij, review of *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, p. K1715.
- Library Journal*, May 1, 2003, David Hellman, review of *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, p. 155; January, 2004, Michael Adams, review of *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, p. 184.
- M2 Best Books*, November 14, 2003, "Author Mark Haddon Set for Awards Hatrick"; January 26, 2004, "Haddon's Curious Tale Continues Its Unexpected Success"; January 28, 2004, "Haddon Claims Whitbread Book of the Year Prize."
- Magpies*, September, 1996, Margaret Philips, review of *The Sea of Tranquility*, p. 28.
- Newsweek*, September 8, 2003, David Noonan, "'Allowed to Be Odd': The Hero of a Best-selling New Novel Is a 15-Year-Old Boy with Autism—But That Label Never Appears in the Book," p. 50.
- New York Times Book Review*, June 15, 2003, Jay McInerney, "The Remains of the Dog," p. 5.
- Publishers Weekly*, May 13, 1988, Kimberly Olson Fakih and Diane Roback, review of *Gilbert's Gobstopper*, p. 273; April 25, 1994, review of *Baby Dinosaurs at Home, Baby Dinosaurs on Vacation, Baby Dinosaurs at Playgroup*, and *Baby Dinosaurs in the Garden*, p. 75; September 16, 1996, review of *The Sea of Tranquility*, p. 82; July 1, 2002, John F. Baker, "Obsessed by Sherlock Holmes," p. 14; April 7, 2003, review of *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, p. 42.



Author: Mark Haddon (7)

Further Reading: (Continued)

Periodicals:

Reading Teacher, October, 1989, review of *Gilbert's Gobstopper*, p. 56.

School Librarian, August, 1989, Joyce Banks, review of *A Narrow Escape for Princess Sharon*, p. 104; August, 1993, Julie Blaisdale, review of *Gridzbi Spudvetch!*, and Caroline Axon, review of *Titch Johnson, Almost World Champion*, p. 109; November, 1993, Alicen Geddes-Ward, review of *Agent Z Meets the Masked Crusader*, p. 155; February, 1997, Carolyn Boyd, review of *The Sea of Tranquility*, p. 19; August, 2001, review of *Agent Z and the Killer Bananas*, p. 136; summer, 2002, review of *Ocean Star Express*, pp. 74-75.

School Library Journal, September, 1988, Carolyn Polese, review of *Gilbert's Gobstopper*, p. 160; October, 1989, Susan H. Patron, review of *Toni and the Tomato Soup*, p. 84; September, 1994, Linda Wicher, review of *Baby Dinosaurs at Home*, *Baby Dinosaurs at Playgroup*, *Baby Dinosaurs in the Garden*, and *Baby Dinosaurs on Vacation*, p. 185; September, 1996, John Peters, review of *The Sea of Tranquility*, p. 178; October, 2003, Jackie Gropman, review of *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, p. 207.

Spectator, May 17, 2003, Nicholas Barrow, "It Ain't Necessarily So," p. 65.

Star-Ledger (Newark, NJ), July 6, 2003, Deborah Jerome-Cohen, "From the Shadows, Words," p. 4.

WWD (Women's Wear Daily), August 7, 2003, Samantha Conti, "A Dog's Tale," p. 4.

Online:

MostlyFiction, <http://www.mostlyfiction.com/> (August 3, 2003), Mary Whipple, review of *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*.

Powell's City of Books, <http://www.powells.com/> (February 10, 2004), Dave Weich, "The Curiously Irresistible Literary Debut of Mark Haddon."*

Contemporary Authors Online, Thomson Gale, 2004.



Reading Group Guide

Spotlight on: *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*

About This Book:

Christopher John Francis Boone knows all the countries of the world and their capitals and every prime number up to 7,057. He relates well to animals but has no understanding of human emotions. He cannot stand to be touched. And he detests the color yellow.

This improbable story of Christopher's quest to investigate the suspicious death of a neighborhood dog makes for one of the most captivating, unusual, and widely heralded novels in recent years.

Discussion Questions:

1. On pages 45-48, Christopher describes his "Behavioral Problems" and the effect they had on his parents and their marriage. What is the effect of the dispassionate style in which he relates this information?
2. Given Christopher's aversion to being touched, can he experience his parents' love for him, or can he only understand it as a fact, because they tell him they love him? Is there any evidence in the novel that he experiences a sense of attachment to other people?
3. One of the unusual aspects of the novel is its inclusion of many maps and diagrams. How effective are these in helping the reader see the world through Christopher's eyes?
4. What challenges does *The Curious Incident* present to the ways we usually think and talk about characters in novels? How does it force us to reexamine our normal ideas about love and desire, which are often the driving forces in fiction? Since Mark Haddon has chosen to make us see the world through Christopher's eyes, what does he help us discover about ourselves?
5. Christopher likes the idea of a world with no people in it (p. 2); he contemplates the end of the world when the universe collapses [pp. 10-11]; he dreams of being an astronaut, alone in space [pp. 50-51], and that a virus has carried off everyone and the only people left are "special people like me" [pp. 198-200]. What do these passages say about his relationship to other human beings? What is striking about the way he describes these scenarios?
6. On pages 67-69, Christopher goes into the garden and contemplates the importance of description in the book he is writing. His teacher Siobhan told him "the idea of a book was to describe things using words so that people could read them and make a picture in their own head" [p. 67]. What is the effect of reading Christopher's extended description, which begins, "I decided to do a description of the garden" and ends "Then I went inside and fed Toby"? How does this passage relate to a quote Christopher likes from *The Hound of the Baskervilles*: "The world is full of obvious things which nobody by chance ever observes" [p. 73]?
7. According to neurologist Oliver Sacks, Hans Asperger, the doctor whose name is associated with the kind of autism that Christopher seems to have, notes that some autistic people have "a sort of intelligence scarcely touched by tradition and culture—unconventional, unorthodox, strangely pure and original, akin to the intelligence of true creativity" [*An Anthropologist on Mars* by Oliver Sacks, NY: Vintage Books, 1995, pp. 252-53]. Does the novel's intensive look at Christopher's fascinating and often profound mental life suggest that in certain ways, the pity that well-meaning, "normal" people might feel for him is misdirected? Given his gifts, does his future look promising?



Book: The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time

Discussion Questions (Continued):

8. Christopher experiences the world quantitatively and logically. His teacher Mr. Jeavons tells him that he likes math because it's safe. But Christopher's explanation of the Monty Hall problem gives the reader more insight into why he likes math. Does Mr. Jeavons underestimate the complexity of Christopher's mind and his responses to intellectual stimulation? Does Siobhan understand Christopher better than Mr. Jeavons?
9. Think about what Christopher says about metaphors and lies and their relationship to novels [pp. 14-20]. Why is lying such an alien concept to him? In his antipathy to lies, Christopher decides not to write a novel, but a book in which "everything I have written . . . is true" [p. 20]. Why do "normal" human beings in the novel, like Christopher's parents, find lies so indispensable? Why is the idea of truth so central to Christopher's narration?
10. Which scenes are comical in this novel, and why are they funny? Are these same situations also sad, or exasperating?
11. Christopher's conversations with Siobhan, his teacher at school, are possibly his most meaningful communications with another person. What are these conversations like, and how do they compare with his conversations with his father and his mother?
12. One of the primary disadvantages of the autistic is that they can't project or intuit what other people might be feeling or thinking—as illustrated in the scene where Christopher has to guess what his mother might think would be in the Smarties tube [pp. 115-16]. When does this deficit become most clear in the novel? Does Christopher seem to suffer from his mental and emotional isolation, or does he seem to enjoy it?
13. Christopher's parents, with their affairs, their arguments, and their passionate rages, are clearly in the grip of emotions they themselves can't fully understand or control. How, in juxtaposition to Christopher's incomprehension of the passions that drive other people, is his family situation particularly ironic?
14. On pages 83-84, Christopher explains why he doesn't like yellow and brown, and admits that such decisions are, in part, a way to simplify the world and make choices easier. Why does he need to make the world simpler? Which aspects of life does he find unbearably complicated or stressful?
15. What is the effect of reading the letters Christopher's mother wrote to him? Was his mother justified in leaving? Does Christopher comprehend her apology and her attempt to explain herself [pp. 106-10]? Does he have strong feelings about the loss of his mother? Which of his parents is better suited to taking care of him?
16. Christopher's father confesses to killing Wellington in a moment of rage at Mrs. Shears [pp. 121-22], and swears to Christopher that he won't lie to him ever again. Christopher thinks, "I had to get out of the house. Father had murdered Wellington. That meant he could murder me, because I couldn't trust him, even though he had said 'Trust me,' because he had told a lie about a big thing" [p. 122]. Why is Christopher's world shattered by this realization? Is it likely that he will ever learn to trust his father again?
17. How much empathy does the reader come to feel for Christopher? How much understanding does he have of his own emotions? What is the effect, for instance, of the scenes in which Christopher's mother doesn't act to make sure he can take his A-levels? Do these scenes show how little his mother understands Christopher's deepest needs?



Book: *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (2)

Discussion Questions: (Continued)

18. Mark Haddon has said of *The Curious Incident*, "It's not just a book about disability. Obviously, on some level it is, but on another level . . . it's a book about books, about what you can do with words and what it means to communicate with someone in a book. Here's a character whom if you met him in real life you'd never, ever get inside his head. Yet something magical happens when you write a novel about him. You slip inside his head, and it seems like the most natural thing in the world" [<http://www.powells.com/authors/haddon.html>]. Is a large part of the achievement of this novel precisely this—that Haddon has created a door into a kind of mind his readers would not have access to in real life?

19. Christopher's journey to London underscores the difficulties he has being on his own, and the real disadvantages of his condition in terms of being in the world. What is most frightening, disturbing, or moving about this extended section of the novel [pp. 169-98]?

20. In his review of *The Curious Incident*, Jay McInerney suggests that at the novel's end "the gulf between Christopher and his parents, between Christopher and the rest of us, remains immense and mysterious. And that gulf is ultimately the source of this novel's haunting impact. Christopher Boone is an unsolved mystery" [*The New York Times Book Review*, 6/15/03, p. 5]. Is this an accurate assessment? If so, why?



Reading Group Guide

Spotlight on: *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*

Reviews:

Booklist Reviews

April 2003

The hero of Haddon's debut novel is 15-year-old Christopher Boone, an autistic math genius who has just discovered the dead body of his neighbor's poodle, Wellington. Wellington was killed with a garden fork, and Christopher decides that, like his idol Sherlock Holmes, he's going to find the killer. Wellington's owner, Mrs. Shears, refuses to speak to Christopher about the matter, and his father tells him to stop investigating. But there is another mystery involving Christopher's mother, who died two years ago. So why does Siobhan, Christopher's social worker, react with surprise when Christopher mentions her death? And why does Christopher's father hate Mrs. Shears' estranged husband? The mystery of Wellington's death begins to unveil the answers to questions in his own life, and Christopher, who is unable to grasp even the most basic emotions, struggles with the reality of a startling deception. Narrated by the unusual and endearing Christopher, who alternates between analyzing mathematical equations and astronomy and contemplating the deaths of Wellington and his mother, the novel is both fresh and inventive.

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Library Journal Review

May 2003

Sometimes profound characters come in unassuming packages. In this instance, it is Christopher Boone, a 15-year-old autistic savant with a passion for primary numbers and a paralyzing fear of anything that happens outside of his daily routine. When a neighbor's dog is mysteriously killed, Christopher decides to solve the crime in the calculating spirit of his hero, Sherlock Holmes. Little does he know the real mysteries he is about to uncover. The author does a revelatory job of infusing Christopher with a legitimate and singularly human voice. Christopher lives in a world that is devoid of the emotional responses most of us expect, but that does not mean he lacks feelings or insights. Rather than being just a victim, he is allowed to become a complex character who is not always likable and sometimes demonstrates menacing qualities that give this well-trod narrative path much-needed freshness. The novel is being marketed to a YA audience, but strong language and adult situations make this a good title for sophisticated readers of all ages. Highly recommended for all fiction collections.

Previewed in Prepub Alert, LJ 2/1/03. David Hellman, San Francisco State Univ. Lib. Copyright 2003 Reed Business Information. <http://www.cahners.com>



Book: The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time

Reviews: (Continued):

School Library Journal Review

October 2003

When a teen discovers his neighbor's dog savagely stabbed to death, he decides to use the deductive reasoning of his favorite detective to solve the crime. Employing Holmesian logic is not an easy task for even the cleverest amateur sleuth and, in Christopher's case, it is particularly daunting. He suffers from a disability that causes, among other things, compulsive behavior; the inability to read others' emotions; and intolerance for noise, human touch, and unexpected events. He has learned to cope amazingly well with the help of a brilliant teacher who encourages him to write a book. This is his book—a murder mystery that is so much more. Christopher's voice is clear and logical, his descriptions spare and to the point. Not a word is wasted by this young sleuth who considers metaphors to be lies and does math problems for relaxation. What emerges is not only the solution to the mystery, but also insight into his world. Unable to feel emotions himself, his story evokes emotions in readers—heartache and frustration for his well-meaning but clueless parents and deep empathy for the wonderfully honest, funny, and lovable protagonist. Readers will never view the behavior of an autistic person again without more compassion and understanding. The appendix of math problems will intrigue math lovers, and even those who don't like the subject will be infected by Christopher's enthusiasm for prime numbers and his logical, mathematical method of decision making.

Jackie Gropman, Chantilly Regional Library, VA Copyright 2003 Reed Business Information. <http://www.cahners.com>

BookPage Review

June 2003

Holmes is where the heart is.

Imagine having the capacity to calculate every prime number up to 7,057, but an utter inability to express anger, love or fear. That's the brilliant, bewildering reality for Christopher John Francis Boone, the 15-year-old narrator of Mark Haddon's whimsical first novel, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*.

An autistic savant who finds comfort in contemplating the solar system and doing "maths," Christopher Boone lives with his father, a good-natured handyman, in London. (Though his parents are estranged, his father tells Christopher his mother died of a heart attack a few years before.)

In some ways, the young boy's life is that of a typical teen. He enjoys caring for his pet rat, Toby, and dreams of being an astronaut and in others, it is rigid and ritualistic. He refuses to eat yellow or brown foods, or foods that have touched each other on his plate.

When Christopher discovers his neighbor's dog Wellington impaled on a garden fork, any semblance of normalcy in the child's existence comes to a screeching halt. Inspired by his hero, whodunit doyen Sherlock Holmes, Boone sets out in search of clues to the canine conundrum. What begins as a quirky mystery quickly transforms into a moving coming-of-age tale in which a child comes to terms with his parents' troubled marriage.



Book: The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time

Reviews (Continued):

A creative writing professor at Oxford University, London-born Haddon worked with autistic savants as a young man. Add to that his vast experience as a writer and illustrator of award-winning children's books—his drawings, from constellations to a depiction of the time-space continuum, are sprinkled throughout the text—and you have all the makings of a crackling cinematic success. It's little wonder that Harry Potter producers, Heyday Films, in conjunction with showbiz veterans Brad Grey and Brad Pitt, snapped up the film rights faster than you can say "Elementary, Watson."

Allison Block is a writer and editor in La Jolla, California. Copyright 2003 *BookPage* Reviews
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Kirkus Review

April 2003

Britisher Haddon debuts in the adult novel with the bittersweet tale of a 15-year-old autistic who's also a math genius. Christopher Boone has had some bad knocks: his mother has died (well, she went to the hospital and never came back), and soon after he found a neighbor's dog on the front lawn, slain by a garden fork stuck through it. A teacher said that he should write something that he "would like to read himself"—and so he embarks on this book, a murder mystery that will reveal who killed Mrs. Shears's dog. First off, though, is a night in jail for hitting the policeman who questions him about the dog (the cop made the mistake of grabbing the boy by the arm when he can't stand to be touched—any more than he can stand the colors yellow or brown, or not knowing what's going to happen next). Christopher's father bails him out but forbids his doing any more "detecting" about the dog-murder. When Christopher disobeys (and writes about it in his book), a fight ensues and his father confiscates the book. In time, detective-Christopher finds it, along with certain other clues that reveal a very great deal indeed about his mother's "death," his father's own part in it—and the murder of the dog. Calming himself by doing roots, cubes, prime numbers, and math problems in his head, Christopher runs away, braves a train-ride to London, and finds his mother. How can this be? Read and see. Neither parent, if truth be told, is the least bit prepossessing or more than a cutout. Christopher, though, with pet rat Toby in his pocket and advanced "maths" in his head, is another matter indeed, and readers will cheer when, way precociously, he takes his A-level maths and does brilliantly. A kind of Holden Caulfield who speaks bravely and winningly from inside the sorrows of autism: wonderful, simple, easy, moving, and likely to be a smash.

Film rights to *Hey Day*, with Brad Grey & Brad Pitt for Warner Bros. Agent: Clare Alexander/Gillon Aitken

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Publishers Weekly Review

April 2003

Christopher Boone, the autistic 15-year-old narrator of this revelatory novel, relaxes by groaning and doing math problems in his head, eats red—but not yellow or brown—foods and screams when he is touched. Strange as he may seem, other people are far more of a conundrum to him, for he lacks the intuitive "theory of mind" by which most of us sense what's going on in other people's heads. When his neighbor's poodle is killed and Christopher is falsely accused of the crime, he decides that he will take a page from Sherlock Holmes (one of his favorite characters) and track down the killer. As the mystery leads him to the secrets of his parents' broken marriage and then into an odyssey to find his place in the world, he must fall back on deductive logic to navigate the emotional



Book: *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*

Reviews (Continued):

complexities of a social world that remains a closed book to him. In the hands of first-time novelist Haddon, Christopher is a fascinating case study and, above all, a sympathetic boy: not closed off, as the stereotype would have it, but too open-overwhelmed by sensations, bereft of the filters through which normal people screen their surroundings. Christopher can only make sense of the chaos of stimuli by imposing arbitrary patterns (“4 yellow cars in a row made it a Black Day, which is a day when I don’t speak to anyone and sit on my own reading books and don’t eat my lunch and Take No Risks”). His literal-minded observations make for a kind of poetic sensibility and a poignant evocation of character. Though Christopher insists, “This will not be a funny book. I cannot tell jokes because I do not understand them,” the novel brims with touching, ironic humor. The result is an eye-opening work in a unique and compelling literary voice. (June 17)

Forecast: Considerable buzz abroad—rights sold in Brazil, Denmark, Finland, France, Greece, Holland, Italy, Japan, Norway, Spain, Sweden and the U.K.—and a film deal (rights bought by Hey Day, the makers of Harry Potter) augur well for this engaging debut.

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Voice Of Youth Advocates Review

December 2003

Christopher Boone is taking his A-level mathematics exams, does not tell jokes, will not eat any food that is yellow or black, and creates flow charts to make decisions. He is a typical fifteen-year-old, but one diagnosed with autism. Finding murdered dog in his neighbor’s front yard prompts him to begin investigating and writing a book as if he was Sherlock Holmes. This book leads Christopher to some disturbing revelations about the death of his mother and sends him on a very frightening and over-stimulating journey to London to solve the mystery. First-time novelist Haddon captures the confusing, analytical, unemotional world of autism in her endearing narrator. Christopher relates events as a newspaper reporter, but readers will applaud his tenacity and empathize with his family issues when he says, “I was brave and I wrote a book and that means I can do anything,” he leaves the reader convinced that he can and will. Students interested in math and physics will appreciate Christopher’s chapters solving math problems and looking at hypothetical graphs about frogs in a pond, and everyone will cheer for Christopher as he emulates his hero, Sherlock.

Lynn Evarts 5Q 3P S A/YA Copyright 2004 VOYA Reviews.