

BOOK CLUB TO GO!

THE CURIOUS INCIDENT OF THE DOG IN THE NIGHT-TIME

BY MARK HADDON

Introduction

Mark Haddon's bitterly funny debut novel, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, is a murder mystery of sorts--one told by an autistic version of Adrian Mole. Fifteen-year-old Christopher John Francis Boone is mathematically gifted and socially hopeless, raised in a working-class home by parents who can barely cope with their child's quirks. He takes everything that he sees (or is told) at face value, and is unable to sort out the strange behavior of his elders and peers.

Late one night, Christopher comes across his neighbor's poodle, Wellington, impaled on a garden fork. Wellington's owner finds him cradling her dead dog in his arms, and has him arrested. After spending a night in jail, Christopher resolves--against the objection of his father and neighbors--to discover just who has murdered Wellington. He is encouraged by Siobhan, a social worker at his school, to write a book about his investigations, and the result--quirkily illustrated, with each chapter given its own prime number--is *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*.

Haddon's novel is a startling performance.

Jack Illingworth, Amazon.ca

About the Author

Mark Haddon was born in Northampton in 1962. He studied for a BA in English at Merton College, Oxford, graduating in 1981.

Mark has packed a lot into his career over the years since graduating, with a spell working as a live-in volunteer for someone with MS to working a string of part-time jobs in London, from theatre box office to bicycle mail order work.

Between 1983-4 Mark returned to studying to complete an MSc in English Literature at Edinburgh University. Following this Mark held part-time positions for Mencap and several other organisations, working with children and adults with a variety of mental and physical handicaps.

At this time he was also involved in illustration work for a number of magazines and has been a cartoonist for the *New Statesman*, *Spectator*, *Private Eye*, *Sunday Telegraph* and *Guardian* for which he co-wrote a cartoon-strip, *Men - A User's Guide*.

After a year living in Boston, Massachusetts (1997-1998) with his wife they moved back to England and, dissatisfied with his illustration work because it was causing him headaches, he took up abstract painting, which he now regularly sells.

From 1996 until now, Mark has been involved with many television projects. He has won numerous awards, including two BAFTAs and The Royal Television Society Best Children's Drama for *Microsoap* for which he was the creator and writer of 12 out of 25 episodes.

He has also written 2 episodes for the children's TV series *Starstreet* and most recently, has been involved in a BBC screenplay adaptation of Raymond Briggs's, 'Fungus and the Bogeyman'.

All this still doesn't make mention of Mark's increasingly successful career as an author, with his first children's picture book, 'Gilbert's Gobstopper' published in 1987 by Hamish Hamilton.

Since then he has gone on to write and illustrate numerous children's books including the popular 'Agent Z' series for Bodley Head, of which 'Agent Z and the Penguin from Mars' was dramatised on BBC 1 in 1996. In 1994 Mark was shortlisted for the Smarties Prize for 'The Real Porky Philips' published by A & C Black.

In a publishing first, Mark's latest book and first novel for older readers, 'The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time' has been published simultaneously in two imprints. It is available for young adult readers from David Fickling Books and for adults under the Jonathan Cape imprint. It has sold co-editions in no less than fifteen other countries.

Mark now lives in Oxford with his wife, Sos Eltis, who is a fellow in English Literature at Brasenose College and their son Alfie. In his spare time, although it's amazing to think that he might have some, Mark does marathon canoeing and as he puts it, 'various other masochistic sports activities'.

An Interview with the Author

The Curiously Irresistible Literary Debut of Mark Haddon

[Dave Weich](#), [Powells.com](#)

It's not just the hook, though the hook is peculiar and oddly affecting. "When I was writing," the author allows, "I really thought to myself, *Who on Earth is going to want to read about a fifteen-year-old kid with a disability living in Swindon with his father? And I thought, I better make the plot good.*" The hook—the *plot*? is significantly better than *good*, but it's the irresistible voice of Mark Haddon's young narrator, Christopher Boone, that elevates this literary debut to fantastic heights.

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It was 7 minutes after midnight. The dog was lying on the grass in the middle of the lawn in front of Mrs. Shears' house. Its eyes were closed. It looked as if it was running on its side, the way dogs run when they think they are chasing a cat in a dream. But the dog was not running or asleep. The dog was dead. There was a garden fork sticking out of the dog.

"This is a murder mystery novel," the boy with Behavioral Problems explains a few pages further on. A fan of Sherlock Holmes stories, Christopher decides to investigate the poodle's murder and turn the story into a book of his own.



Christopher is quite good at puzzles, at math, and at remembering. He is, however, entirely incapable of delineating among the various grades of human emotion on the scale between happy and sad, which makes for a curious, if not altogether perplexing perspective. The narrator may not recognize them, but emotions lurk behind virtually every clue he uncovers. Still, his pitch never varies. Christopher never slips off course. The author's foremost accomplishment, in a book chock full of them, is to deliver a wrenching domestic fiction in such clipped, deductive prose. [The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time](#) is an emotional roller coaster. And as if that's not enough, it's often very funny, too.

"It's hilarious on one page," a member of the Powells.com customer service department commented upon returning the company copy to its shelf in the office, "then two pages later you want to cry."

Dave: Where did you find the original impulse to write this novel? I know that it wasn't a matter of you thinking you'd write a book about an autistic boy, as some might presume.

Mark Haddon: No, very deliberately not. And I think if I had done that I'd have run the risk of producing a very stolid, earnest, and over-worthy book.

It came from the image of the dead dog with the fork through it. I just wanted a good image on that first page. To me, that was gripping and vivid, and it stuck in your head. Only when I was writing it did I realize, at least to my mind, that it was also quite funny. But it was only funny if you described it in the voice that I used in the book.

So the dog came along first, 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.

Dave: Did that seem a daunting prospect at first? How long did it take to develop Christopher into the character he became?

Haddon: I think once I heard the voice I knew that Christopher would be quite easy. I started writing in that voice, and I found it so engaging myself that I knew I could write in the voice for a long time.

The more difficult thing was constructing the shape of the story. I knew there was a story; once you find a dog with a fork through it, you know there's a story there. The more difficult puzzle was this: I wanted the whole book to be in Christopher's voice, but the paradox is that if Christopher were real he would find it very hard, if not impossible, to write a book. The one thing he cannot do is put himself in someone else's shoes, and the one thing you have to do if you write a book is put yourself in someone else's shoes. The reader's shoes. You've got to entertain them, and there's no way he could have done that.

It took me a while to figure out that puzzle. The answer I came up with is having him be a fan of the [Sherlock Holmes](#) stories. That way, he doesn't have to put himself in the mind of a reader. He just has to say, *I enjoy Sherlock Holmes stories and I'll try to do something similar to that.* It was that. That was the biggest puzzle for the book. When I solved that, I began to see how I could shape the story.

Dave: The book is being marketed as both a literary novel and a story for young adults. Did you have a readership in mind as you were putting it together?

Haddon: It was definitely for adults, 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. You cast your mind back and think, *What would I have liked at age seven or five or ten?* I felt a great sense of freedom with this book because I felt like I was writing it for me.

I think all writers do that, all adult writers: be both reader and writer at the same time. Consequently, I was quite surprised when I gave it to my agent and she said, "Let's try it with both adult and children's publishers and see what happens." I was really quite surprised and, truth to tell, perhaps a bit disappointed because I'd spent a lot of effort trying to move away from writing for children. Here I thought, *Maybe I'm about to slip back inside the ghetto again.*

Dave: You still have to sit at the kids' table.

Haddon: But what happened in the U.K. was that we got a very good adult publisher and a good children's publisher that wanted to publish a parallel edition, so who can complain about that? It's the same book in a slightly different cover.

Dave: Yet what makes the book so successful is that it would seem to transcend those kind of targeted marketing efforts. Christopher, in a way, is ageless. You don't necessarily think of him as a child when you're reading because many of his faculties are advanced well beyond an adult's.

Haddon: One of the things I like about the book, if I'm allowed to say that about my own book, is something I realized quite early on: It has a very simple surface, but there are layers of irony and paradox all the way through it. Here is a fiction about a character who says he can only tell the truth, he can't tell lies but he gets everything wrong. Here

is a narrator who seems to be hugely ill-equipped for writing a book he can't understand metaphor, he can't understand other people's emotions, he misses the bigger picture and yet it makes him incredibly well suited to narrating a book. He never explains too much. He never tries to persuade the reader to feel about things this way or that way; he just kind of paints this picture and says, "Make of it what you will." Which is a kind of writing that many writers are searching for all the time.

Also and this has become something very important to me it's not just a book about disability. Obviously, on some level it is, but on another level, and this is a level that I think only perhaps adults will get, 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.

Dave: Upon finishing it, I was left wondering, *Is this book about Christopher?* To me, and I think to many adult readers, the story he tells of everyone around him resonates at least as much as his own.

Haddon: Yeah. I think that mirrors the position of a writer, of me, because I think most writers feel like they're on the outside looking in much of the time. But we all feel that sometimes. All of us feel, to a certain extent, alienated from the stuff going on around us. And all of us at some point, rather like Christopher, have chaos entering our lives. We have these limited strategies we desperately use to try to put our lives back in order. So although in some senses he's a very odd and alien character, his situation is not that far removed from situations we've all been in at one time or another.

Dave: The father and the mother: I imagine their world, and I see two people who didn't plan for this situation. They weren't prepared to take this on. Now they don't know how to cope.

Haddon: One of the strange things about his parents is that different readers feel very, very different things about them. Particularly his father. Some people say he's a good man struggling in difficult conditions; other people say, "The guy's a psychopath." And I think that's one of the functions of Christopher's voice. He paints a very sparse picture of the world around him. You only see little bits of his father and little bits of his mother. Readers bring to those characters what they want. Some people paint one picture and some people paint another.

People have said to me that it's a desperately sad book and they wept most of the way through it. 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.

Dave: I'm finding the novel much funnier as I read it a second time.

Haddon: Strangely, I did, too, as well.

Dave: I feel more grounded. The first time through I was trying just to make sense of everything. And one thing that's incredibly funny, but at the same time shocking and

sad, is how rude most strangers are to Christopher. His fear of strangers is only more and more justified as the book progresses.

The novel, modeled as a mystery, is a puzzle. Pieces fall into place as the story moves along.

Haddon: That's true. This seems strange now, but the other reason I constructed it the way I did, I really thought to myself, *Who on earth is going to want to read about a fifteen-year-old kid with a disability living in Swindon with his father?* And I thought to myself, *I better make the plot good.* I wanted to make it grip people on the first page and have a big turning point in the middle, as there is, and construct the whole thing like a bit of a roller coaster ride because readers wouldn't necessarily be interested in Christopher's world view.

Ironically, when I talk to people who like the book, they talk about Christopher's voice and his character and situation; nobody mentions the plot at all.

Dave: You worked with children with disabilities, but that's a while back in your past.

Haddon: It is. In fact, it's so far in my past it's eighteen or twenty years ago now that autism wasn't a term that was even used much at the time, and only in retrospect do I realize that some of the people I worked with had autism, although they had it much more seriously than Christopher does.

Dave: The math is also something that you bring to the book from your own background.

Haddon: I'm most like Christopher in respect of his math. Most of that came straight out of my own head. Obviously, the puzzles ultimately come from somewhere else, but most of those puzzles are things that I've enjoyed doing at one time in my life. And if you enjoy math and you write novels, it's very rare that you'll get a chance to put your math into a novel. I leapt at the chance.

Dave: And there will be a movie. Will you be involved?

Haddon: Only in a very informal way. I have met and got to know most of the main people who will be involved. As long as we're useful to each other we'll carry on talking, but I've worked in television for long enough to know that when you stop enjoying that type of thing you go home and do something else.

Dave: Has the success of the book taken you back a bit? Did you see yourself now becoming a literary author in that other section of the bookstore?

Haddon: The good thing is that's what I'd hoped and planned, that it would turn me into a literary author. That's the upside. That's an unquestionable bonus. I love that side of it. And it's given me a great deal of confidence. But what it's also done is it's really raised

the stakes. If one book's done this well, you want to write another one that does just as well. There's that horror of the second novel that doesn't match up, isn't there?

I received very good advice from various people, my publishers and agents, who said, "Get the second novel started before this one gets published because if it takes off then your head's going to spin." I'm very glad to say that I'm about ten thousand words into another novel.

Dave: Are you willing to give away anything at this point?

Haddon: I'm giving away very little, but I am telling people, for slightly odd reasons, that the working title is *Blood and Scissors*. From which you can probably gather that it's not aimed at the young adult market.

Dave: What have you been reading lately?

Haddon: I've been reading contemporary American fiction almost exclusively. I read very little British contemporary fiction. Some of it's good, but there's a kind of parochialness to a lot of contemporary British fiction. And there's something about America, something to do with the physical size of America? American writers can write about America and it can still feel like a foreign country. I think the U.K. is too small to write about from within it and still make it seem foreign and exotic and interesting. Some people do it, but it's much harder.

Dave: Anything in particular that you've enjoyed recently?

Haddon: I've been reading the latest [Nicholson Baker, *A Box of Matches*](#). And completely differently, I've been reading [A. M. Homes's](#) short stories and, indeed, [The End of Alice](#), which is about as far from Nicholson Baker as it's possible to get.

Dave: That's another book that generates very strong reactions among readers. When I spoke to her a couple years ago, she had some interesting anecdotes about people she met on her book tours.

Haddon: It probably attracts many people you wouldn't necessarily want to meet.

Dave: She spoke about having a certain ambivalence toward people who seemed to enjoy it a bit too much. She didn't know exactly what to make of them.

Haddon: Well, I have to say that soon after I discovered her writing I went online and I read a customer review that was almost unquestionably written by a pedophile who misread the book profoundly, but misread it in a way that demonstrated perfectly what she was talking about in the book about the way these people can concoct a fiction that deceives everyone else, and deceives themselves as well.

Dave: In another interview, you mentioned the idea that it's not so much the idea of writing about a disability as much as the different worldview a disability might impose on the narrator, some unconventional perspective, that's of interest to you in creating characters.

Haddon: Disability crops up here and there in my work. Since I finished the novel, one of the things I've done was I wrote a radio play for BBC Radio 4 in the U.K. about two brothers, one of whom has Down's Syndrome.

For me, disability is a way of getting some extremity, some kind of very difficult situation, that throws an interesting light on people. But it's also something that's terribly, terribly ordinary. There are these extreme situations, but they're happening somewhere in your street at this very moment. And that's important to me, to find the extraordinary inside the ordinary.

Dave: The word *autism* appears several times on the book jacket of [The Curious Incident](#). It wasn't until after I'd finished reading and I'd stumbled upon an article about you that I realized you never actually use the word in the novel. You never cite a specific disability or diagnosis to describe Christopher's condition. It's interesting what the marketing of a book can do to a reader's perception.

Haddon: And I must admit, recently I've been thinking that when the paperback comes out it would be kind of nice to lose all that from the cover. As several people have said in reviews, Christopher tells you all you need to know.

I understand why, when people are marketing a book, they want to give it a hook, why they want to explain things on the cover. But I like the idea of another version coming out with no labels on it whatsoever. One of the nicest reactions I've had to the book, although it was slightly eccentric, was from someone at a publisher that didn't eventually publish it. We were sitting around in their offices talking, and someone mentioned autism and Asperger's, and this woman said, "Oh, I didn't realize there was actually anything wrong with Christopher." I've always treasured that reaction.

It's kind of naïve but perfect. There is a very true sense in which there is something more wrong with the people around Christopher than with him. By the end of the book, although he hasn't profoundly changed in a way, he hasn't changed at all he has managed to restore order to his life. From his perspective, that's been a victory. But if you look at the people around him, they're still struggling with these huge problems. Their story is going to go on. They're the people who in some sense have something wrong with them.

Dave: A couple people here in the office have mentioned that for a couple days after finishing, they found themselves walking around thinking like Christopher.

Haddon: My father said to me that, having read the book, he had to take a different route on his evening walk because he discovered that three yellow cars were habitually parked up the street in a row. So he had to go round the block.

Dave: There you go. *—Powells.com*

Mark Haddon spoke via telephone from New York City on June 24, 2003.

Reviews

The fifteen-year-old narrator of this ostensible murder mystery is even more emotionally remote than the typical crime-fiction shamus: he is autistic, prone to fall silent for weeks at a time and unable to imagine the interior lives of others. This might seem a serious handicap for a detective, but when Christopher stumbles on the dead body of his neighbor's poodle, impaled by a pitchfork, he decides to investigate. Christopher understands dogs, whose moods are as circumscribed as his own ("happy, sad, cross and concentrating"), but he's deaf to the nuances of people, and doesn't realize until too late that the clues point toward his own house and a more devastating mystery. This original and affecting novel is a triumph of empathy; whether describing Christopher's favorite dream (of a virus depopulating the planet) or his vision of the universe collapsing in a thunder of stars, the author makes his hero's severely limited world a thrilling place to be.

– *The New Yorker*

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. . . . 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.

--Kristine Huntley, *Booklist*

"Moving. . . . Think of **The Sound and the Fury** crossed with **The Catcher in the Rye** and one of Oliver Sacks's real-life stories." —Michiko Kakutani, *The New York Times*

Mark Haddon's portrayal of an emotionally dissociated mind is a superb achievement. He is a wise and bleakly funny writer with rare gifts of empathy.?

- Ian McEwan, author of *ATONEMENT* and *AMSTERDAM*

Further Reading

Flowers for Algernon by Daniel Keyes

Mango Shaped Space by Wendy Mass

My Sister's Keeper by Jodi Picoult.

The Speed of Dark by Elizabeth Moon

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By Mark Haddon

Possible Discussion Questions

1. What is the effect of the dispassionate style in which 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, what, if any, evidence is there 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 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?

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. How well do Siobhan and Mr. Jeavons understand Christopher?

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 is the idea of truth so central to Christopher's narration?

10. Which scenes are comical in this novel, and why are they funny? How and why 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. 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?

13. What is the effect of reading the letters Christopher's mother wrote to him? What does Christopher seem to understand from what his mother wrote?

14. When Christopher's father confesses to killing Wellington in a moment of rage at Mrs. Shears 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?

15. 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]?

16. 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]. What do you have to say of this assessment? - *Reading Group Guides*

