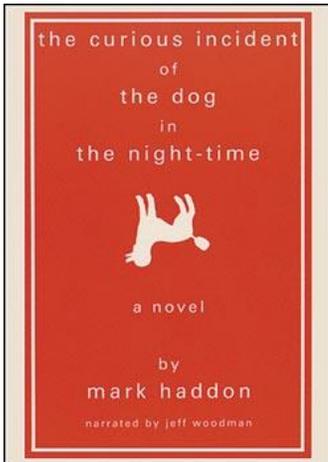


The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time

By Mark Haddon



Paperback: 226 pages

Publisher: Vintage (May 18, 2004)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1400032717

ISBN-13: 978-1400032716

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

Taken from readinggroupguides.com

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?
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?

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?

B is for bestseller

The Observer, Saturday 10 April 2004

A year after it was first published *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* is still at the top of the bestseller lists and still winning awards. Its unlikely hero, a teenage boy with Asperger's syndrome, has captured the imagination of both adults and children. Here the novel's author Mark Haddon explains how he came to write it, why Jane Austen was his inspiration... and how he got over the problem of drawing dinosaur legs

I've been writing books for children for 17 years. Over that time, I've received a steady trickle of letters. Most are from readers telling me how much they've enjoyed this or that book of mine, which always gives me a glow for the rest of the day. Others begin: 'Dear Mr Haddon, We're doing Authors with Mrs Patel and I've been told to write to you', which is flattering, but not in quite the same way.

If they ask a question it is almost invariably: 'Where do you get your ideas from?' And if they ask a second question it's usually: 'What is your favourite colour?' I'm not sure I know the answer to either.

The best question I ever received came from a boy who asked whether I did much crossing out. I explained that most of my work consisted of crossing out and that crossing out was the secret of all good writing.

Three years ago, I wrote *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, a novel set in Swindon about a teenage boy with Asperger's syndrome who discovers a murdered poodle on a neighbour's lawn. It was published in two identical editions with different covers, one for adults and one for teenagers. To my continuing amazement, it seems to have spread round the world like some particularly infectious rash.

In some ways, it has changed my life completely. In other ways, nothing has changed at all. Almost every journalist asks: 'Where did you get the idea from?' And because of my protagonist's obsession with the unpleasantness of yellow and brown, quite a few have asked: 'What's your favourite colour?', not something Monica Ali or Jonathan Franzen have to field very often.

The other question I find myself having to answer at least once a week is: 'What's the difference between writing for children and writing for adults?'

I generally take the union line. There is no real difference. Writing for children is bloody difficult; books for children are as complex as their adult counterparts and they should therefore be accorded the same respect.

Most children's writers do the same. And rightly so. Despite His Dark Materials at the National, Jacqueline Wilson being crowned Queen of Library Lending and the continuing global reach of Hogwarts, the job still sits in many people's minds somewhere between reporting for the local paper and doing watercolours of cats.

Shortly after *Curious Incident* won the Whitbread Prize, the NB column in the Times Literary Supplement cited this as one more step towards 'the Juvenilisation of Everything'.

So it's hardly surprising that children's writers want to beat certain people about the head with a leatherbound volume of *The Wind in the Willows*.

The truth, however, is more complex than the union line.

Of course, something happens as you move along the spectrum from *Where's Spot?* to *Mrs Dalloway*. And it's not just that the readers get larger and, in many cases, hairier.

Nor is it that the job gets harder. A picture book is a fiendishly difficult thing to write (let alone illustrate). It took at least 50 drafts and more than two years for me to whittle *The Sea of Tranquility* from a bloated 50,000 words to a workable 500. Which seems like a fair trade. If kids like a picture book, they're going to read it at least 50 times, and their parents are going to have to read it with them. Read anything that often and even minor imperfections start to feel like gravel in the bed.

I know some authors who have written very successful picture-book texts in an hour of white-hot inspiration but this only serves to demonstrate to the rest of us how infuriatingly elusive the secret is. Why, for example, do the *Mr Men* books work so incredibly well when they seem to have been produced at speed with a pack of elderly felt pens by a small boy with an overdue school project?

It's not a difference in subject matter, either. There are now some very good books for toddlers about sex, and plenty of thrillingly parent-frightening novels for teenagers, many of them written by Melvin Burgess.

It's not a difference between one book and another, or between one reader and another. It's a difference between ways of writing and ways of reading. For me - and perhaps this is not so odd for a writer whose next book involves skin cancer and nervous breakdown - the difference is about death.

Not literal death, which has been dealt with even in picture books, such as John Burningham's wonderful *Granpa*, but death's smaller harbingers: illness, failure, loss, the irony that we have infinite dreams but find ourselves stuck in one body for one life.

Appalling things can happen to children. And even a happy childhood is filled with sadnesses. Is there any other period in your life when you hate your best friend on Monday and love them again on Tuesday? But at eight, 10, 12, you don't realise you're going to die. There is always the possibility of escape. There is always somewhere else and far away, a fact I had never really appreciated until I read Gitta Sereny's profoundly unsettling *Cries Unheard* about child-killer Mary Bell.

At 20, 25, 30, we begin to realise that the possibilities of escape are getting fewer. We begin to picture a time when there will no longer be somewhere else and far away. We have jobs, children, partners, debts, responsibilities. And if many of these things enrich our lives immeasurably, those shrinking limits are something we all have to come to terms with.

This, I think, is the part of us to which literary fiction speaks.

Genre fiction says: 'Forget the gas bill. Forget the office politics. Pretend you're a spy. Pretend you're a courtesan. Pretend you're the owner of a crumbling gothic mansion on this worryingly foggy promontory.' Literary fiction says: 'Bad luck. You're stuck with who you are, just as these people are stuck with who they are. But use your imagination and you'll see that even the most narrow, humdrum lives are infinite in scope if you examine them with enough care.'

Obviously, we all know men of 50 who have never paused to consider their own mortality, but I'll wager that very few of them are reading *Middlemarch*.

I don't mean that literary fiction is better than genre fiction, though I do prefer curling up with with an author such as A.M. Homes rather than Helen Fielding. Nor do I mean that the distinction is a rigid one. On the contrary, some of the best novels - *Jane Eyre*, *The Woman in White* - have a foot in both camps. I mean only that novels can perform two functions and most perform only one.

Another question I've been regularly asked over the past year is what models I had in mind when writing *Curious Incident*. Was it *To Kill a Mockingbird*? Was it *Catcher in the Rye*?

In fact, the book most often in my mind was *Pride and Prejudice*.

Jane Austen was writing about boring people with desperately limited lives. We forget this because we've seen too many of her books on screen. All we can think of is country houses, heritage frocks and Colin Firth's chest in a wet shirt. But if Austen were alive today, she'd be writing about chartered accountants in Welwyn Garden City.

Her heroines were bound by iron rules about what they could do, where they could go and what they could say. Their futures depended on the single question of who they would marry. Was it going to be the baronet? Or were they going to fall for a cad in tight red trousers and be discarded in a boarding house in Bath?

Yet Jane Austen writes about these humdrum lives with such empathy that they seem endlessly fascinating. And her first act of empathy is to write about them in the kind of book these woman would themselves read - the romantic novel.

This was what I was trying to do in *Curious Incident*. To take a life that seemed horribly constrained, to write about it in the kind of book that the hero would read - a murder mystery - and hopefully show that if you viewed this life with sufficient imagination it would seem infinite.

When I was writing for children, I was writing genre fiction. It was like making a good chair. However beautiful it looked, it needed four legs of the same length, it had to be the right height and it had to be comfortable.

With *Curious Incident*, I was trying to do something different. The first thing I was doing was writing to entertain myself rather than the person I remember being at six, or eight. Second, yes, the book has simple language, a carefully shaped plot and invites you to enter someone else's life. And these, I think, are the aspects of the book that appeal most to younger readers.

But the book, I hope, does something more than that. The legs aren't quite the same length. It isn't entirely comfortable. It's about how little separates us from those we turn away from in the street. It's about how badly we communicate with one another. It's about accepting that every life is narrow and that our only escape from this is not to run away (to another country, another relationship, a slimmer, more confident self) but to learn to love the people we are and the world in which we find ourselves.

As Christopher, my main character, says: 'People go on holidays to see new things... but I think that there are so many things just in one house that it would take years to think about all of them properly.'

And I don't believe you can fully understand this aspect of the novel (or of any novel) until you have heard at your back 'Time's wingèd chariot hurrying near'.

As a kid, I didn't read a great deal of fiction and I've forgotten most of what I did read. The Log of the Ark, Stig of the Dump, Diggy Takes His Pick; after that, my memory is very foggy indeed.

I was born too late for steam trains and a lazy eye meant I'd never be an astronaut. I wanted to be a palaeoanthropologist, excavating Australopithecus bones in northern Kenya. So I read books about chemistry and how cars worked and life on the ocean floor. I still have my favourite childhood book sitting near my desk, partly so I'm ready to answer the question: 'What was your favourite book as a child?' It's Origins of the Universe by Albert Hinkelbein ('On Mars, there may be vegetation consisting of mosses and lichens').

I don't remember deciding to become a writer. You decide to become a dentist or a postman. For me, writing is like being gay. You finally admit that this is who you are, you come out and hope that no one runs away.

But I do remember reading R.S. Thomas at 14 - 'Iago Prytherch his name, though, be it allowed,/ Just an ordinary man of the bald Welsh hills,/ Who pens a few sheep in a gap of cloud' - and being astonished that someone could arrange these perfectly ordinary words in a way that did amazing things to the inside of my head.

I've spent most of my life trying to understand that mystery, and trying to give other people the experience I had.

I started writing books for children because I could illustrate them myself and because, in my innocence, I thought they'd be easier.

I was wrong, of course. The four Baby Dinosaurs boardbooks had 12 words each. If Dickens had spent the same time on each word, he'd still be working on the first chapter of Pickwick Papers. How do you order 12 objects - Juice, Telephone, Sandwich, Alarm Clock - to create some kind of narrative? Why do dinosaurs have such large and worryingly sensual thighs when you draw them without wrinkles? How do you make a cartoon stegosaurus look five years old rather than 35? Do we have to remove all purple dinosaurs to prevent litigation from the lawyers representing Barney the Purple Dinosaur?

But if I was wrong, at least I had a stern apprenticeship.

Young readers have to be entertained. No child reads fiction because they think it's going to make them a better person. If they want edification, they read Albert Hinkelbein. Bore children and they stop reading. There's no room for self-indulgence or showing off or setting the scene over the first 30 pages.

Since that time, I've written 16 children's books and five unpublished novels. Some of the latter were breathtakingly bad. The Blue Guitar Murders involved a singing policeman, an escaped leopard and the theology of Thomas Aquinas. If I weren't so ashamed of it I'd suggest someone publish it as a dreadful warning to young writers who want to be the next James Joyce.

My problem was that I hadn't realised the importance of what I'd learnt writing for children.

It's not about you. No one wants to know how clever you are. Like children, adults need to be entertained. Even those reading to make themselves better people would prefer to enjoy the process. They don't want an insight into your mind, thrilling as it might be. They want an insight into their own.

Reading is a conversation. All books talk. But a good book listens as well.

Most adults, unlike most children, understand the difference between a book that will hold them spellbound for a rainy Sunday afternoon and a book that will put them in touch with a part of themselves they didn't even know existed.

And perhaps this is why so many children's writers don't have children of their own. As every long-suffering parent knows, most children simply don't make the distinction. A book is either good or bad. And some of the books they think are good are very, very bad indeed. Our own son, Alfie, is only three, but when we suggest reading Shirley Hughes or Maurice Sendak he'll drag some dogeared thing off the shelf and say: 'No, I want to read the boring book.'

I remember a picture from an encyclopedia in my junior science library. It was a medieval woodcut of a man who had climbed a long ladder and found himself touching the sphere on which the stars revolved. He'd removed a panel from the sphere and was staring through the hole into the outer darkness.

This is what I now want from a good book. I want to be taken to the very edge. I want a glimpse into that outer darkness.

I've recently returned from a publicity tour of Italy. You get asked different questions in Italy. One which cropped up several times was: 'Christopher is an atheist. Are you?'

I am. But I am atheist in a very religious mould. I'm always asking myself the big questions. Where did we come from? Is there a meaning to all of this? I read the King James Bible, as all English writers should. And when I find myself in church, I edit the hymns as I sing them, like President Clinton giving evidence to Kenneth Starr about his relationship with Monica Lewinsky, just to make sure I'm not technically lying - 'All things bright and beautiful, the hmmm hmmm made them all.'

Religion provides believers with two contradictory things. It gives them answers. And it celebrates mystery. It reminds them that they are a vanishingly small part of a vast cosmos. And it shows them how they are intimately connected to every part of it.

Science and literature do this for me. They give me answers. And they ask me questions I will never be able to answer.

This is the nearest I come to what other people might call a religious experience.

First, when I'm trying to get my head round string theory or the evolution of the human eye. Second, when I open a book and find myself sliding effortlessly into the mind of someone who lived on the far side of the world and died long before I was born.

© Mark Haddon.