

# **The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time**

by **Mark Haddon**

## About the 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.

## Praise for the Book

"Gloriously eccentric and wonderfully intelligent."

— *The Boston Globe*

"Moving. . . . Think of *The Sound and the Fury* crossed with *The Catcher in the Rye* and one of Oliver Sacks's real-life stories."

— *The New York Times*

"This is an amazing novel. An amazing book."

— *The Dallas Morning News*

"A superb achievement. He is a wise and bleakly funny writer with rare gifts of empathy."

— **Ian McEwan**  
author of *Atonement*

*Courtesy of Vintage*

## About the Author

### Biography Resource Center

#### Mark Haddon

1962-

**Birth:** 1962 in Northampton, England

**Source:** *Contemporary Authors Online*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

#### "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.

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."

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 "cliché" 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."

## PERSONAL INFORMATION

Born 1962, in Northampton, England; married Sos Eltis (an educator); children: Alfie. **Education:** Merton College, Oxford, B.A., 1981; Edinburgh University, M.A., 1984. **Avocational Interests:** Marathon canoeing, abstract painting. **Addresses:** Home: Oxford, England. Agent: c/o Author Mail, Doubleday, 1745 Broadway, New York, NY 10019.

## 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*.

## CAREER

Author. 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*.

## WRITINGS

*The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (novel), Doubleday (New York, NY), 2003.  
*A Spot of Bother* (novel), Doubleday (New York, NY), 2006.

## FOR CHILDREN

- (And illustrator) *Gilbert's Gobstopper*, Hamish Hamilton (London, England), 1987, Dial Books for Young Readers (New York, NY), 1988.
- (And illustrator) *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.
- (And illustrator) *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.
- (And illustrator) *Agent Z and the Penguin from Mars*, Red Fox (London, England), 1996.
- (And illustrator) *Agent Z and the Masked Crusader*, Red Fox (London, England), 1996.
- (And illustrator) *Agent Z Goes Wild*, Red Fox (London, England), 1999.
- Secret Agent Handbook*, illustrated by Sue Heap, Walker Books (New York, NY), 1999.
- (And illustrator) *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.

Also author of episodes for children's television series, including *Microsoap* and *Starstreet*; contributor to screenplay 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*.

## 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.

## WORKS IN PROGRESS

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

## FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR

### 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.

## 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?

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?