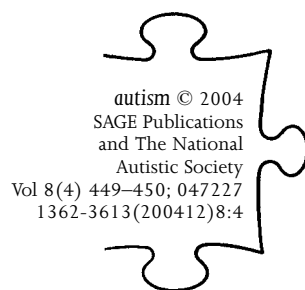


# Book review



**The Curious Incident of the Dog In the Night Time** by Mark Haddon.  
Jonathan Cape/Random House. ISBN 0 224 06378 2. £10.99, 272 pp.

This is the first novel I have read in which the central character is a person with Asperger syndrome, and I couldn't put the book down. This book could do for Asperger syndrome what *Rain Man* did for autism: convincingly portray a person with this disability, and raise popular awareness of this relatively poorly understood condition.

Christopher is a 15-year-old with Asperger syndrome, who attends a school for pupils with special needs. Although other pupils are in this school because of their epilepsy, learning difficulties, or lack of basic skills such as toileting, Christopher is there because his poor social understanding causes him such confusion that he reacts with major behavioural problems. He makes strange sounds, blocks his ears, hits out at people, and wanders off. His behaviour problems are triggered by things not going according to his plan, or people saying things where the meaning is not black and white, or by crowds and loud noises.

Christopher is supremely logical, and he uses his logic in two different ways. The first is at school, for mathematics. Indeed, he turns out to be the first person from his school ever to take maths A level – and despite it being a special school, he is taking this exam 3 years earlier than is normal. The book is peppered with illustrations of how Christopher sees patterns in numbers, which enable him to solve even complex maths problems. He sees a mathematical dimension to everyday reality, and derives a sense of peace and satisfaction from the beauty of mathematics. As narrator, he even numbers the chapters of this book using the sequence of primes.

But the other way in which he uses his logic is to work out how things happen. To play detective. The book opens with the curious sight of his neighbour's dog, who has been killed with a pitch-fork. Like his hero, Sherlock Holmes, who can 'detach his mind at will' so as to see the facts of reality behind social appearances and so solves the mystery of the Hound of the Baskervilles, so Christopher decides to ignore his father's order not to poke his nose into other people's business, and sets out to find out who killed his neighbour's dog. In the small neighbourhood in Swindon, a boy

with Asperger syndrome digging up clues is a powerful literary device for exposing the social relationships of this community.

The idea of the central character of fiction being naïve is of course not new. Voltaire's *Candide*, or the child in *The Tin Drum*, or even the doll-turned-human in *Pinocchio*, are memorable examples of how – through the eyes of an innocent – the stormy, deceit-ridden, emotionally-charged world of adult relationships take on a fresh perspective. Christopher has to struggle not only with his Asperger syndrome, but also with his parents' rows, his father's temper which occasionally spills over into child-abuse, and his mother's stress spilling over into depression. His parents too struggle with the challenge of bringing up a child with such severe behavioural problems, but their human weaknesses also come through, such that they neglect Christopher. This is a portrait of Asperger syndrome in the real world.

Mark Haddon has a rare gift of imagining and communicating what it must be like to have Asperger syndrome, and from my experience of having met many people with this condition, I would also say he is remarkably accurate in his portrait. But Christopher is not being held up as typical of everyone with Asperger syndrome. Not everyone with Asperger syndrome will be able to take maths A level, for example. But he is an individual, powerfully conveyed. The book gives Asperger syndrome a voice, while at the same time providing highly readable, moving, entertaining fiction.

Finally, for this reviewer at least, the picture of Christopher also fits with the psychological theory of autism spectrum conditions outlined in my recent book *The Essential Difference* (Penguin, 2003): impaired empathizing alongside intact or even superior systemizing. In Christopher's case, the two foci of his obsessive systemizing are maths and forensics. Both involve seeing patterns in the data that point to rules governing events. For other individuals the system of interest might be different. Critically, however, Christopher's talent provides little support for the notion of weak central coherence: although he sees the minutiae with exactness, his understanding of maths was not a collection of fragments (as this theory would predict) but was beautifully systematic, leading him to provide elegant proofs. And the curious incident of the dog in the night time was not forever destined to be an isolated event, but was connected via a series of clues, leading to the systematic proof of the cause of the crime.

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