The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time

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The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time is a novel written by Mark Haddon that won the 2003 Whitbread Book of the Year and the 2004 Commonwealth Writers' Prize for Best First Book. Its title is a quotation of a remark made by the fictional detective Sherlock Holmes in Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's 1893 short story, "Silver Blaze".

The story is written in the first-person narrative of Christopher Boone, a 15-year-old boy living in Swindon, Wiltshire in 1998, who has Asperger syndrome.

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Spoiler warning: Plot or ending details follow.

Protagonist

Christopher Boone goes to a school for students with special needs because he has a form of autism. Although it is never definitively stated within the story which autistic spectrum condition Christopher has, the summary on the book's inside cover states it to be Asperger syndrome. Christopher is a mathematical savant, has a photographic memory, and is extremely observant. However, he has difficulty understanding human behaviour, gestures and relationships. He dreams of being an astronaut and takes a deep interest in mathematics. He owns a pet rat named Toby, which he feeds with food pellets.

Christopher has many traits that set him apart from others because of his perception of life. He is unable to recognise and comprehend facial expressions besides 'happy' and 'sad' and also has difficulty in understanding metaphors. He likes lists and facts, has a fear of strangers and new places, and his favourite
dream is one in which everyone except people similar to him dies. In addition, he is over-sensitive to information and stimuli. For this reason, he screams and reacts violently to people who touch him. However, he doesn't mind pressing his fingers against those of his parents' as a gesture of love. He curls up and groans to protect himself against overwhelming noise or information.

Christopher hates the colours yellow and brown, but loves red. This extends to adding red food dye to brown- or yellow-coloured food (and being unable to eat two different kinds of food that are touching), and also his belief that seeing three, four or five red cars in a row means it's a "good", "quite good", or "super good" day respectively, while four yellow cars signify a "black" day. Finally, he dislikes eating food from new places and the furniture being moved.

**Other characters**

- **Ed Boone** — Christopher's father, who is a heating engineer. He looks after Christopher on his own after the death of his wife. He is usually very patient and understanding with Christopher.

- **Judy Boone** — Christopher's mother, Christopher is told she died of a heart attack before the start of the book. However, it turns out that she eloped with her neighbour Mr. Shears. Not much of an initial description is given, but Christopher describes more about her as the story proceeds.

- **Siobhan** (IPA: /ˈʃiːvən/) — A staff member at Christopher's school.

- **Roger Shears (Mr Shears)** — He lived near the Boones but has left his wife before the story begins.

- **Eileen Shears (Mrs Shears)** — One of the neighbours, who attempts to console Ed for a time after Christopher learns of his mother's death. At the start of the novel, Christopher finds Mrs Shears' dog, Wellington, has been murdered with a garden fork and decides to investigate like his hero, Sherlock Holmes.

- **Mrs Alexander** — One of Christopher's neighbours, who tries to help Christopher.

- **Rhodri** — One of Ed's colleagues.

- **Mrs Gascoyne** — Headteacher at Christopher's school who (reluctantly) allows Christopher to take A-level mathematics.

- **Reverend Peters** — The invigilator for the A-level maths exam. He becomes involved in a discussion with Christopher regarding the existence of God.

- **Mrs Peters** — Christopher's art teacher.

**Plot**

Christopher discovers the dead body of Wellington, his neighbour's poodle, speared by a garden fork. Having been blamed for it, he decides to investigate to clear his name. However, he is severely limited by his own fears and difficulties when interpreting the world around him. Throughout his adventures, Christopher records his experiences in the form of a book, entitled *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*. 
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During his investigation into Wellington's demise, Christopher meets people whom he has never before encountered (even though they live on the same street). Christopher chronicles his discoveries in his book.

Ed, his father, discovers the book and confiscates it from Christopher, after a brief fight between them. In his search for the hidden book, Christopher uncovers a trove of letters to himself from his mother, dated after she allegedly died — which his father had also concealed. Christopher had been told by Ed that she died of a heart attack. Christopher concludes that she is still alive and that his father has lied to him. He is so thoroughly shocked by this fact that he is unable to move, curls up on the bed, vomits, and groans for several hours till his father returns home.

Ed realises that Christopher has read the letters and cleans Christopher up. He then confesses that he had indeed lied about Judy's death and also that it was he who killed Wellington, stating that it was a mistake due to his anger after a heated argument with Mrs Shears.

Christopher, having lost all trust in his father and fearing that he may also try to kill him, decides to escape from home and live with his mother. Guided by his mother's address from the letters, he embarks on an adventurous trip to London, where his mother lives with Mr Shears.

After a long and confusing journey, evading policemen who have been dispatched to find him (due to Ed, who called the police about his disappearance), and feeling ill due to the overwhelming information from the crowds and the signs in the trains, he finally finds his way to his mother and Mr Shears' home, and waits outside until they arrive.

His mother is happy at his appearance and tries to keep him with her, despite the objections of both Mr Shears and Ed, the latter having tracked Christopher down with the aid of the police. His mother eventually leaves Mr Shears, their relationship apparently broken down because of the conflict over Christopher.

She then moves into a rented room in Swindon and, after an argument with Ed, agrees to let Ed meet with Christopher daily for a little while. However, at this stage, Christopher remains terrified of his father; he hopes Ed will be imprisoned for killing Wellington. The story ends with Ed getting Christopher a new pet dog, and promising that he will rebuild trust with Christopher slowly, "no matter how long it takes" in his daily brief sessions, and Christopher asserting that he will take further A-level exams and attend university. He had completed his first mathematics A-level with top grades, plans to take further tests in the years to come, and wants to become a scientist.

**Spoilers end here.**

**Literary techniques**

The book's autistic narrator, Christopher, is gifted at and focused on mathematics: this is reflected by his inclusion of several famous puzzles of maths and logic. The book's appendix is a reproduction of a question from Christopher's A-level examination, with annotated answers. The book also includes the unlikely incident of seeing four yellow cars in a row which is bad, an event which holds significance to the narrator, who has an aversion to the colour yellow.
Christopher's mathematical interests are reflected in his numbering his chapters strictly with prime numbers, ignoring composite numbers such as 4 and 6. So the first is Chapter 2, followed by 3, then 5, 7, 11, and so on. In addition, the contents in consecutive chapters alternate: Chapter 2 is about the unfolding story; Chapter 3 explores some aspects of the narrator's inner life not necessarily directly relevant to the immediate action; Chapter 5 returns to the narrative. This alternation continues throughout the book with the story often digressing into seeming unconnected subjects such as Christopher's atheism and the Cottingley Fairies.

Another technique used to emphasise the different perceptions of the world experienced by people with autism, is the switching of fonts and use of long, run-on sentences when describing the surroundings. Thus the book's overall structure as well as its content supports the literary device that what we are reading is a novel penned by the autistic narrator, Christopher, rather than the author. This general technique of fictional autobiography was exploited by Daniel Defoe in what is regarded as the first novel in English, *Robinson Crusoe*. But it really follows the Sherlock Holmes structure.

Christopher's narration is very precise and reliable with regard to objective facts but his view of the events of the story is often very different from what might be expected. For example, in one scene, Christopher is nearly killed by an oncoming train as he retrieves his pet rat, who has scampered onto the tracks of the London Underground. Through his narration, we see the scene unfold completely, but he himself remains unaware of the danger he is in, and of the closeness of his brush with death. This is also an example of dramatic irony, in which the reader understands more about a situation than the character does. Christopher also represents (what would not necessarily be obvious to all readers prior to reading the book) the fact that not every child will think in the same way — another thing that the book has been praised for. Nevertheless, some readers on the autistic spectrum have criticised it for giving an inaccurate portrayal of their identity.[1]

**Spoilers end here.**

**References**


**External links**

- Mathematical Association of America book review ([http://www.maa.org/reviews/dogincident.html](http://www.maa.org/reviews/dogincident.html))
- Powell's interview with author Mark Haddon ([http://www.powells.com/authors/haddon.html](http://www.powells.com/authors/haddon.html))

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