

The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time By Mark Haddon

Random House
240 pages

Review by Tony Rella

Published after children's books such as Gilbert's *Gobstopper* and *Ocean Star Express*, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* is Mark Haddon's first novel for adults. His narrator, an autistic fifteen-year-old named Christopher Boone, has highly developed logical and mathematical faculties yet only a basic grasp of his emotions. This asymmetry compromises his ability to understand the complexity of the world around him. In the opening scene, Christopher encounters his neighbor's poodle, impaled by a pitchfork, and resolves to uncover the murderer in the style of his hero, Sherlock Holmes. Christopher's literalism of perception and his desire for objectivity become the source of his conflicts. Skeptical of metaphors, which he believes should be called "lies" because they "describe something by using a word for something that it isn't," his descriptions are straightforward and simplistic. There is an occasional simile, but Christopher often defends his choices through elaborate arguments:

This is not a metaphor, it is a simile, which means it really did look like there were two very small mice hiding in his nostrils, and if you make a picture in your head of a man with two very small mice hiding in his nostrils, you will know what the police inspector looked like. And a simile is not a lie, unless it is a bad simile.

The mystery explodes into new conflict when Christopher discovers his caretakers have deceived him, and decides to run away to London. He is confronted by a volatile world where protective authority turns against him and language has multiple and contradictory meanings; even the novel's form becomes unstable, changing from murder mystery to adventure. This instability endangers Christopher, causing him to make rash decisions in unfamiliar situations.

Haddon's skill at depicting the workings of Christopher's mind become apparent in the novel's opening, when Christopher discovers the impaled poodle. His forceful sentences marshal copious details, overloading the reader with information, much as Christopher is when exposed to an unfamiliar or unsafe environment:

There was a garden fork sticking out of the dog. The points of the fork must have gone all the way through the dog and into the ground because the fork had not fallen over. I decided that the dog was probably killed with the fork because I could not see any other wounds in the dog and I do not think you would stick a garden fork into a dog after it had died for some other reason, like cancer, for example, or a road accident. But I could not be certain about this.

Such language is brutal in its literalness. Its starkness, though, leaves space for the reader to put his emotional reactions in place of ones that Christopher cannot have.

Even at the novel's optimistic conclusion, in which Christopher is reunited with his father, one is left with the feeling that he remains essentially as he was in the beginning, clinging to an objective sense of self. Christopher has grown, but the reader feels the very limits of his psychic boundaries between the familiar and the foreign, safety and insanity, and understands how much he can change before it becomes too much.

Tony Rella was a Bridge intern during the summer of 2003