

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

**The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time by Mark Haddon**

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# Introduction

*The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* is Mark Haddon's first novel written for adults, though the book does appeal to a younger audience. The story is told through the perspective of an intelligent fifteen-year-old boy with autism who includes a variety of clever visuals to enhance his narrative. But Haddon says the novel is not simply about disability: "It's about what you can do with words and what it means to communicate with someone in a book." As noted by Dave Weich of [Powells.com](#), Haddon never actually uses the word autism in the novel.

Christopher Boone narrates this novel after finding his neighbor's black poodle, Wellington, murdered with a garden fork. The book is Christopher's account of his investigation, and as he gets closer to the truth, he begins to investigate the personal mysteries in his family and discovers that the truths his father told him about his dead mother are indeed fiction.

Haddon's unique protagonist Christopher sees the world only in black and white, but through his ultra-rational and un-ironic prism, readers experience the spectrum of the boy's vibrant and vital mind. Many people suffering from autism and related disorders, as well as those who love and care for them, have celebrated the book as an enlightening peek into a mysterious world, though some have found fault with its presentation of the socially alienated. *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* also has broad appeal to fiction fans around the world who enjoy the sincere, fresh, and funny whodunit. It is an international bestseller, which garnered a multitude of awards and landed on the prestigious list of Man Booker Prize nominees in 2003.

## Author Biography

Born in Northampton, England, in 1962, Mark Haddon made a successful career out of writing children's books before publishing *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*. In 1981, after receiving a bachelor's degree in English from Merton College, Oxford, Haddon held a variety of jobs, including several volunteer positions in which he helped people with physical and mental disabilities. A few years later, he returned to his studies to complete a master's degree in English Literature at Edinburgh University.

As a student at Edinburgh, he did illustrations for a number of magazines, and he has been a cartoonist for the *New Statesman*, *Spectator*, *Private Eye*, *Sunday Telegraph*, and *The Guardian*, where he co-wrote a cartoon strip, *Men—A User's Guide*.

In 1997, Haddon returned to England, where he won several awards for his involvement in a multitude of television projects, including two British Academy of Film and Television Arts (BAFTA) awards and The Royal Television Society Best Children's Drama for *Microsoap*. He also wrote two episodes for the children's TV series *Starstreet* and the BBC screenplay adaptation of Raymond Brigg's *Fungus and the Bogeyman*.

Mark Haddon penned over sixteen children's books before publishing his first novel for adults. *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* has been published simultaneously in two imprints: David Frickling Books for young adult readers and the Jonathan Cape imprint for adults. The novel has sold co-editions in over fifteen countries and won both the Whitbread Book of the Year Award and a Commonwealth Writer's Award for Best First Book in 2003.

As of 2006, Haddon lives in Oxford with his wife and their son.



## Plot Summary

On the surface, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* is a story about a unique young man setting out to solve an unusual crime and record his progress in a novel. The young man is Christopher John Francis Boone, and he is unique because he is severely autistic. He is also a savant genius who knows the capital city of every country in the world, every prime number up to 7,057 and much more of equal importance, which he makes sure his readers know as well before the tale is finally told. Christopher has many delightful quirks of character, including a preference for prime over cardinal numbers. He numbers his chapters according to primes: 2, 3, 5, 7, 11 etc., continuing through Chapter 233. Christopher cannot stand to be touched or caught up in the confusion of being around many people, especially in small spaces. He reacts to such negative stimuli by screaming, moaning, hitting, hiding and threatening people with his Swiss Army knife, which has a saw blade that could cut off a finger. The unusual crime the fifteen-year-old autistic genius sets out to solve is the midnight murder of a standard poodle named Wellington, whom Christopher finds impaled with a three-prong garden fork.

While Christopher circulates among his neighbors in Swindon, England, his special school and his own home where he lives with his father, trying to solve the mystery of who killed Wellington, he keeps uncovering clues that the real world is not what he has been told it is. This becomes apparent to the reader almost from the outset, but Christopher doesn't realize it until the last one-third of the book. The real mystery is not about what happened to a dog, but about what happened to Christopher's family, especially his mother, whom Christopher believes is dead. After a delightful and remarkably insightful look into the workings of this autistic mind, it is revealed that Christopher's mother is not dead. She has run off to London with a neighbor, Mr. Shears, in large part because she could not bear the stress of living with her special needs son. In the meantime, Christopher's father has attempted a domestic liaison with Mrs. Shears, which ended in anger and resentment. When his father admits to Christopher that he is the one who killed Wellington, Christopher goes ballistic. He gathers up his pet rat Toby, and armed with his father's bankcard, he heads to London to find Mom. His adventures, attempting to navigate in the world outside his own head, are fascinating, occasionally scary, funny and tragic all at the same time.

Christopher manages to reach London, where he enters an already tense and argumentative relationship between his mother and Mr. Shears. After an uncomfortable period, Mom leaves with Christopher, taking him back to the house in Swindon. What is concerning the young detective most at this point is whether he will be able to take his advanced math placement exams, which will pave his way to university—and do wonders for his self esteem. Christopher does take his exams, and he aces all three sections. He and his mother settle in a rooming house in Swindon.

Christopher has never forgiven his father for killing Wellington and lying to him about his mother's death. In several scenes, Christopher's father—who clearly loves the boy deeply—pleads for forgiveness, often in tears. In the end, Father buys Christopher a



golden retriever puppy, which will have to live at his father's house because pets aren't allowed at Mom's rooming house. Christopher begins to relate to his father again. In the end, everything ties up nicely. Christopher sits in the catbird seat, having successfully manipulated the rest of the world into a condition that is acceptable to *his* real world—the one in his mind. Oh yes, Toby the rat also dies of old age.



## Chapter 2

### Chapter 2 Summary

At precisely seven minutes past midnight, the narrator sees a dog lying on the grass on Mrs. Shear's lawn, apparently asleep. He recognizes the dog as Wellington, Mrs. Shear's standard poodle. The dog has been impaled on a garden fork, the tines passing all the way through Wellington's body, pinning the dog to the turf. The narrator picks the dog up, and it is "leaking blood." The narrator strokes Wellington and wonders who killed him.

### Chapter 2 Analysis

Chapter 2 is only one page long, but within that short space Mark Haddon establishes himself as an innovative writer. Why, for example, would a writer begin his book with Chapter 2, instead of Chapter 1? The answer to that question is not revealed for several more chapters, but it is a powerful and integral component of the development of the narrator's character. Although the narrator's name is not revealed until the following chapter, it immediately becomes clear that this is no common teller of tales. Who, for example, recalls the precise time that an unexpected event occurs? The narrator does not say *about midnight* or *just past midnight*, but at *precisely* seven minutes past midnight. Within the first few words of the novel, Haddon has already deeply engraved this character's persona in the reader's mind. He uses very few adjectives, and those he does use are simply descriptive—never gratuitous or emotionally charged. Yet, even without words describing feelings, the reader senses deep feelings of pathos and grief as the narrator picks up the dead dog with "blood leaking out" and strokes the corpse.

# Chapter 3

## Chapter 3 Summary

The narrator introduces himself as Christopher John Francis Boone, who boldly states that he knows all of the countries in the world, all of their capital cities and every prime number up to 7,057. Christopher first meets Siobhan some eight years earlier, and when he first meets her, she shows him some “smiley face” pictures depicting a broad range of human emotions. Christopher has a pretty good understanding of the basic happy and sad faces, but he can’t figure out the other faces, which express subtler emotions. He says this is because people’s faces change too rapidly. To solve the problem, he carries the diagrams of the faces around with him and tries to compare the diagrams of the faces with the actual expressions of the people he is talking to as they are conversing. Siobhan thinks this might be confusing to the people he is talking to and draws a face with a wavy mouth to express how she suspects the practice makes the other people feel while Christopher is talking to them. Siobhan laughs when she draws the picture, so Christopher tears up his original chart. Then, Siobhan apologizes.

## Chapter 3 Analysis

As with Chapter 2, Chapter 3 is only one page long, and it is nothing short of masterful. The astute reader will already have a deep empathetic understanding of Christopher Boone. He states that he knows every prime number up to 7,057, and since two and three are the first prime numbers, it seems reasonable to assume that Christopher is using prime numbers to identify his chapters. A glance forward in the book confirms that, since the next chapter numbers are 5, 7, 11, 13 and 17. This chapter also hints that Christopher attends a special school or some sort of workshop and that Siobhan is one of his instructors or counselors. Christopher seems to experience a disconnect between the emotions he feels and the socially appropriate behaviors associated with those emotions. When Siobhan laughs at him about his chart of human expressions, he responds by tearing up the paper. Clearly, Christopher’s feelings are hurt, and Siobhan senses this deeply enough to apologize. It seems that Christopher can view the world only in black and white, logical terms. This suggests a knowledgeable insight into the autistic mind—an area of Haddon’s expertise—and that his character is indeed autistic. This sets up the delightful prospect of a detective who is capable only of logical, non-emotional thought. At least, those are the only thoughts he can actually express as the narrator of the tale of *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*—interpreting the actions of normal people, who are often driven by emotion and bereft of logic.



# Chapter 5

## Chapter 5 Summary

After the explanatory Chapter 3, Chapter 5 flashes back to the night of Wellington's demise. Christopher pulls the fork out of the poodle and lifts him into his arms. The dog is "leaking blood from the fork holes." He tells us that he likes dogs because they have only four moods: happy, sad, cross and concentrating. These are within his limited ability to comprehend emotions. Christopher has been hugging the dog for four minutes—not *about* four, but four—when Mrs. Shears comes running out of her house cursing and shouting and accuses him of killing Wellington. She orders him to put the dog down, and because he doesn't like being shouted at, he puts the dog down and moves back two meters. Christopher puts his hands over his ears, closes his eyes and rolls forward until he is "hunched up with my forehead pressed into the grass." He says that he likes the grass because it is wet and cold.

## Chapter 5 Analysis

Chapter 5 ends before the bottom of page 4 of this 226-page novel, and the central character is almost fully developed, a remarkable feat. Haddon continues to flesh out Christopher's autism (more specifically Asperger Syndrome) through Christopher's own voice, describing the events of the night Wellington is murdered. While many writers have displayed great sympathy and compassion for children with disabilities from the omniscient perspective, Haddon brings a sense of nobility—indeed superiority—to his character by letting him define his condition and behaviors in his own terms. This is an immensely complex creative process that can flow smoothly and credibly only from the pen of a truly gifted writer.



# Chapters 7, 11, 13 and 17

## Chapters 7, 11, 13 and 17 Summary

In Chapter 7, Christopher boldly states that, “This is a murder mystery novel.” He explains that Siobhan told him to write something he would like to read himself. Christopher says that he mostly reads books on science and math and that he doesn’t like proper novels because he does not understand the things that many of the characters say, and he suspects that other readers don’t either. With an apparently racing mind that quickly jumps from topic to topic, Christopher segues into a description of Siobhan, who has blond hair and wears glasses made of green plastic. Then, he describes Mr. Jeavons, who smells of soap and wears brown shoes with approximately sixty tiny circular holes in each of them. Then, just as quickly, he comes back to his reading tastes, stating that he does, however, like murder mysteries. He reports that Siobhan said a mystery should start with something to grab the reader’s attention, and that’s why he started with a dead dog. He also started there because it was something that actually happened to him, and it is hard to imagine things that didn’t happen to him. Siobhan points out that it is usually people who get killed in murder mysteries, not dogs. Christopher reminds her that dogs did die in the Sherlock Holmes mystery, *Hounds of the Baskervilles*. Christopher defends his choice of a canine victim, saying that dogs are faithful and honest, and brighter than people like Steve, who attends the school but can’t even feed himself and “couldn’t even fetch a stick.” Siobhan asks him not to repeat that comment to Steve’s mother.

In Chapter 11, the action returns to the night of the dog’s demise. The police arrive, and Christopher relates that he likes the police because, “They have uniforms and numbers and you know what they are meant to be doing.” As a policewoman leads Mrs. Shears away to comfort her as she mourns the loss of Wellington. Christopher lifts his head off the grass. In response to a flurry of questions from the police officer who interrogates him, Christopher relates that he is fifteen years, three months and two days old. The police officer keeps asking Christopher if he killed the dog, clearly believing that he did. The police officer keeps pressuring him until Christopher resumes his safe position, hunched up with his forehead in the grass. The police officer attempts to lift Christopher up, but because he can’t stand to be touched by others, he hits the police officer.

In Chapter 13, Christopher tells readers that this will not be a funny book. He can’t tell jokes because he doesn’t understand them. He then tells a joke that he doesn’t understand, and he gives a detailed analysis of why he doesn’t understand it. The joke —“His face was drawn, but the curtains were real,”—is a complex and subtle triple entendre, involving multiple meanings of the same words. Christopher says it is like three people trying to talk to you at the same time.

Meanwhile, back at the scene of the murder, the police officer kicks off Chapter 17 by informing Christopher that he is arresting him for assaulting a police officer. This makes Christopher feel more comfortable because that is what policemen say on television. He



notes that the police car smells of hot plastic, aftershave and take-out French fries. On the way to the station house, Christopher stares out the window at the Milky Way. He explains to his readers that the Milky Way is not really a long string of stars but a disk-shaped assemblage of stars that make up our galaxy. He informs readers that if you look at the galaxy from one angle you see only a few stars, but if you look toward the center, you see many stars. Then, he launches into a remarkably lucid explanation of the Big Bang Theory and an expanding universe, which is why the night sky is black instead of filled with starlight. That is, the stars are racing away from us almost as rapidly as their light is rushing toward us. Christopher says he likes this fact because, “It is something you can work out in your own mind, without having to ask anyone.” Christopher also notes that the universe will eventually begin collapsing back in on itself, with billions of stars rushing back toward us. Then, he points out, the night sky will be filled with the blinding light of billions and billions of stars, but no one will see it because by then they will all have been burnt to death even if they live in tunnels.

## Chapters 7, 11, 13 and 17 Analysis

This spate of four chapters adds even more layers to the increasing intricacy of the complex—yet somehow refreshingly simple—personality of Christopher, a fifteen-year-old autistic genius. Looking at the Milky Way and figuring out the Big Bang Theory without anyone having to tell you about it is just the sort of thing every teenaged boy does in the back of a police car delivering him into bondage for assaulting a police officer, isn't it? What else would someone be thinking about in those circumstances? To the clinician, this inability to connect the proper emotions to the events and behave accordingly—that is to say, emotionally—might be viewed as a symptom of Christopher's disorder. When viewed through Christopher's eyes, however, this lunacy is endearing and, well, logical.

Christopher also reveals his penchant of quickly identifying people and things with the first, or most startling, stimuli to enter his sensory processing system. Siobhan has blond hair and green plastic glasses, while Mr. Jeavons wears brown shoes, each with sixty holes. The cop car smells of plastic, aftershave and French fries. How might this eye for detail serve a budding detective? Also consider Christopher's angle of focus. When he sizes up Siobhan, Christopher is looking at her hair and her eyes, and yet he stares at Mr. Jeavons' shoes. Does this imply that he trusts Siobhan more than Jeavons?



# Chapter 19

## Chapter 19 Summary

In this aside chapter that apparently has nothing to do with the plot, Christopher acknowledges that most book chapters are labeled with cardinal numbers, but he uses prime numbers because he likes prime numbers better than cardinal numbers. He then provides his readers with a chart for determining prime numbers and notes that no one has yet figured out a simple formula for identifying very large prime numbers. He says that in America, prime numbers are considered Military Material because they are used in codes, and you have to notify the CIA if you find one. If you find one more than 100 digits long, the CIA will buy it from you for \$10,000. Christopher closes the chapter by telling his readers, "Prime numbers are what's left when you have taken all of the patterns away." He equates prime numbers to life, noting that they are very logical, but you could never work out the rules, even if you spent all your time thinking about them.

## Chapter 19 Analysis

Is Chapter 19 simply a diversion intended to expand our awareness of Christopher's genius and eccentric way of thinking, or is it a key clue that relates to the murder of Wellington that only he can see? It is doubtful that Haddon felt a need to educate his readers on the rudiments of prime number, but can this be a red herring that his character waves under our noses?



# Chapters 23, 29, 31 and 37

## Chapters 23, 29, 31 and 37 Summary

This group of four chapters covers Christopher's adventures at police headquarters or, more accurately, follows his thought processes as the adventures surround him. He cites in detail all of the items he has to take out of his pockets while being processed. His Swiss army knife has thirteen attachments, including a wire stripper, a saw and a toothpick. He provides a drawing of a wooden puzzle he is carrying and reveals that he is also packing three food pellets for his pet rat, Toby. When the police try to take Christopher's watch, he fights back because it is important to him that he always know precisely what time it is. He prevails and keeps his watch. On his way back to his cell, Christopher speculates how he would escape the jail, if that were his intent. In his cell, Christopher acknowledges that he finds other people confusing, and he gives two reasons why. First, people do a lot of talking without using any words. Siobhan tells him that if people raise an eyebrow, it can mean that you are stupid or that someone wants to do sex with you. It is also confusing when they breathe out loudly through their noses. It can mean that you are relaxed, or bored, or angry, depending on how much air comes out of your nose, how fast, how you are sitting or standing and what shape your mouth is in. The second reason is that people use metaphors when they speak, and to Christopher, metaphors are simply lies. He also provides a treatise on the history of the word *metaphor*, tracing it to its Greek origin, which means to carry something from one place to another.

Christopher's father arrives to take him home at 12:31 a.m. Christopher becomes aware of his father's presence when he hears him yelling at the officers that he wants to see his son and that, yes, of course he's bloody angry. The jailer takes Christopher out to greet his father and an inspector. Christopher knows that he is an inspector because he is wearing a suit, rather than a uniform. Christopher remarks that the inspector has a lot of nose hair, which looks like to tiny mice in his nostrils. This is not a metaphor, he insists, because they really do look like tiny little mice.

In Chapter 37, Christopher states simply that he does not lie. In his first reference to his mother, Christopher says that she was small and smelled nice. She said that he didn't lie because he was a nice person. He says that truth is one thing that happens in a precise place at a precise time. When he tries to consider other things that *could* have happened, he gets shaky and scared, like when he stands on top of a tall building and looks down at the buildings and cars. That is why Christopher does not like proper novels, because they are lies about things that didn't happen. They make him feel shaky and scared. "And this is why everything I have written here is true."

## Chapters 23, 29, 31 and 37 Analysis

There is nothing particularly revealing in these chapters, with the exception of the foreshadowing involving Christopher's mother. The two simple statements, "She was a small person who smelled sweet," and, "She said I didn't lie because I was a nice person," say much about Christopher's relationship with his mom. The use of the past tense hints of tragedy, and although Christopher is incapable of feeling and expressing emotions as so-called normal people do, these statements speak volumes about tenderness and love. While there's not much new information in the rest of the chapter, Haddon continues to weave the masterful tapestry that is Christopher.



# Chapters 41 and 43

## Chapters 41 and 43 Summary

In this pair of short chapters, Christopher introduces readers to his parents, or more accurately, to his father and the memory of his mother. On the way home from the police station, Christopher's father is withdrawn and silent, but he says everything is okay when Christopher apologizes for the inconvenience. His father assures Christopher that he knows he didn't intend to get into trouble, but he warns him to be more careful in the future. By the time they reach home, Father is frustrated because of a barrage of questions from Christopher about Wellington's death, and he orders his son to leave it alone. Then Christopher asks Father if he is sad about Wellington, his father responds in the affirmative. Christopher decides to leave him alone, because when he is sad, Christopher likes to be left alone.

In Chapter 43, Christopher informs readers that his mother died two years ago. His father owns a heating and boiler repair company, and he came home one day looking for Christopher's mother—who was not there—then left and came back later to tell Christopher that his mother was in the hospital. Christopher asked if it was a psychiatric hospital, but his father said no, that it was a regular hospital. Christopher was worried about taking food to his mother, but Father said he would take food each day from a deli that she particularly liked. Christopher said he would make a get-well card for his mother, and his father agreed to take it to her the next day.

## Chapters 41 and 43 Analysis

Christopher's father emerges as a caring, loving parent, dealing valiantly with the stress of raising a child with many special needs. He owns a blue-collar business, installing and repairing boilers and heating systems. There is something obviously amiss with the death of Christopher's mother, however. What sort of sudden illness would take her away from home for an extended stay in an environment where she could not visit with her son? Why does Christopher suspect that it might be a mental institution? This appears to foreshadow something more complex, perhaps a mental collapse or some sort of domestic separation.



# Chapter 47

## Chapter 47 Summary

On the way to school the next day, Christopher's bus passes four red cars in a row. This signals a Good Day, so he decides not to be sad about Wellington. At school, Mr. Jeavons, the psychologist, asks him why four red cars make a good day and three yellow cars make a Black Day. He says that Christopher is very logical but that this does not seem logical. Christopher responds that he likes things in order and that people use all sorts of illogical indicators to determine their moods. For example, people who work in offices feel glad when they walk out in the morning and see the sun, even though they won't see the sun all day in the office. Mr. Jeavons comments that Christopher is a clever boy, but Christopher demurs, saying that he is just observant, seeing things the way they really are. Being clever, he says, is when you look at things the way they are and then use the evidence to work out something new—like if the universe is expanding or how someone committed a murder. In another example he explains how he looks at someone's name and then assigns numerical values to each letter (e.g. A=1, B=2, etc.). Then, he adds up the numbers in his head and discovers that some names make prime numbers, such as: Jesus Christ (151), Scooby-Doo (113), Sherlock Holmes (163) or Dr. Watson (167).

Mr. Jeavons asks Christopher if this kind of thinking makes Christopher feel safe, and he affirms that it does. Jeavons asks if Christopher doesn't like change. The boy replies that some changes would be fine, like becoming an astronaut, which is about the biggest change you could make, except becoming a girl or dying. Jeavons asks if Christopher would like to be an astronaut, and he replies that he would. He then tells about Terry, the older brother of one of his classmates, who told Christopher that he could only ever get a job collecting supermarket trolleys or cleaning donkey shit at an animal shelter. He said that they didn't let "spazzers" drive rockets. Christopher's father told him that Terry is just jealous because Christopher is cleverer than he, which Christopher said is stupid because they aren't in competition. Then he adds that Terry is stupid, so *quod erat demonstratum*, which is Latin for "which is the thing that was going to be proved," meaning, "thus it was proved." Besides, Christopher says, he is not a "spazzer," which means spastic. He is going to go to college to study mathematics. His father says that Terry will never go to university and will probably end up in prison.

All of this, Christopher allows, is what is called a digression, and he now wants to return to the fact that it is a Good Day. Because it is a Good Day, Christopher decides to find out who killed Wellington. Siobhan says that writing is on the agenda for that day, so she encourages Christopher to write about finding Wellington and going to the police station. She says that she will help Christopher with spelling and grammar, so "that is why I'm writing this."



## Chapter 47 Analysis

Readers gain deeper insights here both to Christopher's disability and his genius. More importantly, we are exposed to the cruelty with which disabled children must contend on a daily basis. We saw some evidence of this in the previous behavior of Mrs. Shears and the police officer, but it is brought to the surface here as a full-fledged theme. What begins to emerge here is the notion that, although Christopher may not know the appropriate way to express his emotions, he does *feel* them. Obviously, being called a spazzer and being told he will never be able to do anything other than menial jobs hurts him. Since his world exists largely in his own mind, he really slams Terry with his sophisticated response. The question arises, then, whether he feels the same sweet revenge with this internal, cranial comeback as a normal person might feel in crafting such a devastating retort in verbal human interaction.



# Chapter 53

## Chapter 53 Summary

With the simple statement, "Mother died two weeks later," Christopher returns to the topic of his parents. He is not allowed to go to the hospital, but Father assures him that his mother is getting plenty of good food from her favorite deli. Father says that she sends lots of love and that his get-well card is posted right beside her bed. The get-well card Christopher makes for her is a picture of nine red cars, which means "Super, Super Good Day." Father says that she has died of a heart attack, but when asked, Father cannot tell Christopher what kind of heart attack. Christopher deduces that it was probably an aneurysm because his mother was healthy, exercised, ate healthful foods and was probably too young to have died from an embolism. Mrs. Shears comes over that night to cook and care for him and Father. Mrs. Shears holds Father's head close to her bosom and says, "Ed, we're going to get through this." Then, she plays Scrabble with Christopher, and he wins, 247 to 134.

## Chapter 53 Analysis

Christopher's matter-of-fact way of dealing with his mother's death underscores his disassociation of his emotions from the actual event. Christopher clearly loves his mother, and surely, he must feel something akin to remorse at her death. Still, he is unable to express it in any deeper way than a mere observation of the fact. Mrs. Shears introduces another interesting dynamic here as well. She is immediately on the spot as comforter and nurturer when they get the news of Mother's death. It is as if she is trying to move into the nest to replace Mother. This is inconsistent with her behavior on the night Wellington is killed, when she treats Christopher as some sort of frightful freak. It is possible that Christopher's mother hasn't really died, obviating the need for Mrs. Shears to observe a respectable mourning period before moving in.



# Chapters 59 and 61

## Chapters 59 and 61 Summary

In Chapter 59, Christopher decides that he is going to try to find out who killed Wellington, even though his father admonishes him to stay out of other people's business. He makes this decision, he says, because he doesn't always do what he is told. That is because people are confusing when they tell him to do things. For example, when people tell him to be quiet, they don't tell him how long he must be quiet. When a sign says "Keep Off the Grass," it doesn't say what grass to keep off of. Besides, other people break rules all of the time too, he says. His father drives over the speed limit, and the Crusaders killed many people, in spite of the command that "Thou Shalt Not Kill." Besides, he doesn't know what Father means when he says, "Stay out of other people's business." Father goes into other people's houses to fix their boilers, and that's getting into their business. Having resolved that dilemma—or at least rationalized it—he knocks on Mrs. Shear's door and says, "I didn't kill Wellington." She does not respond, except to say goodbye and close the door, so Christopher decides to do some detective work.

Chapter 61 is a discourse on the belief in heaven through Christopher's eyes. Mrs. Forbes at the school tells him that his mother has gone to heaven, which is a better place. He also says that Mrs. Forbes, who, by the way, wears tracksuit pants rather than proper trousers because they are more comfortable, believes in heaven because she is old. Old people believe in heaven. Christopher once asks Reverend Peters, who sometimes visits the school, what he thinks of heaven. When Christopher presses the Reverend about where in the universe heaven is, he responds that it is beyond the universe. When Christopher demonstrates that such a notion is neither mathematically nor physically possible, the good Reverend says he'll get back to him on that later. Christopher says that when people die they are put in the ground, where they decompose into smaller and smaller components—molecules and atoms—some of which are used by plants as they grow. His mother, however, was cremated and turned to gas and ash. The gas, of course, went up into the air, but he isn't sure what happened to the ash. He would have asked if he had been allowed to go to the funeral, but he wasn't.

## Chapters 59 and 61 Analysis

Chapter 59 provides further insight into the curious dynamics of Christopher's mind. It also highlights questions about his family's relationship with Mrs. Shears. This is the same woman who came over to love and nurture Christopher when Mother died, and now she treats him as if he were an alien from a hostile planet.

Chapter 61 delves further into Christopher's psyche, this time skirting on the spiritual, which is a realm that his logical mind rejects out of hand. This is to be expected in light



of what readers have seen of his character so far. What is more revealing, however, are his thoughts about the cremation of Mother. Why would a son be denied a final opportunity to pay his respects at his mother's funeral, unless there was no funeral?



# Chapter 67

## Chapter 67 Summary

On Saturday, Father elects to stay home and watch a soccer match between Rumania and England instead of taking Christopher on a weekly outing. Christopher, therefore, decides to devote his day to solving the mystery of the slain dog. Overcoming a deep fear of talking to strangers, Christopher decides to question all of his neighbors about the previous night—the night Wellington was killed with a pitchfork. He makes a point that this is both new to him and a brave thing, but it is necessary because detectives must do brave things. Christopher begins his quest by drawing a diagram showing the fourteen residences in his neighborhood that are nearest to his own address. They are numbered 34 through 47. Christopher lives in No. 36. Mrs. Shears lives in No. 41. He first goes to No. 43, directly across from Mrs. Shears. Mr. Thompson is out of town, but his brother comes to the door wearing a T-shirt with the message “Beer, Helping Ugly People to get Laid for over 2,000 Years.” The man knows nothing about Wellington, and after a few questions from Christopher, he suggests that the boy should not be going around the neighborhood asking such questions. There is no answer at No. 42, but Christopher talks briefly to the black lady in 44 and Mr. Wise in 43. No one knows anything about Wellington. Christopher skips No. 38 because the people there take drugs, and Father told him never to talk to them.

Then, Christopher talks to Mrs. Alexander from No. 39, who is out working in her garden. Mrs. Alexander is old, very polite and friendly. She is delighted that the boy stopped by, wants to engage in more conversation than he is up to and invites him to partake of refreshments. While she goes into her house to get soft drinks, Christopher grows uneasy because she is gone longer than he thinks appropriate and leaves.

As Christopher is crossing the street, he engages in another of his logical exercises, using the process of elimination to try and figure out who killed Wellington. He deduces that there are only three reasons to kill the dog: (1) because you hate the dog; (2) because you are mad; or (3) because you want to upset Mrs. Shears. Because he knows that no one in his neighborhood hated Wellington, if that had been the motive, it would have had to be a stranger. However, he also knows that most murders are committed by someone who knows the victim. That scenario is, then, less likely than the others are. He also knows that no one in the neighborhood is mad, therefore, if a non-stranger killed Wellington, it had to be because he or she wanted to upset Mrs. Shears. Since the only person he knows who might want to upset Mrs. Shears is Mr. Shears, he therefore becomes Christopher’s prime suspect.

Christopher explains that Mr. and Mrs. Shears were married and used to live together until two years earlier. That was when Mrs. Shears came over to Christopher’s house and did lots of cooking after his mother died. Sometimes Mrs. Shears would stay at Christopher’s house overnight. He liked those times because she made everything neat and tidy. The only thing he didn’t like about Mrs. Shears was that she said things such



as, “I’m going to hit the hay,” or “It’s brass monkey’s out there,” or “Let’s rustle up some tucker,” because he didn’t understand them. Christopher reasons that the only reason people get unmarried is because someone does sex with someone else or because they have lots of arguments and don’t want to live in the same house together. Christopher decides that Mr. Shears probably hates Mrs. Shears and, therefore, probably wanted to kill Wellington to upset her. He vows to find out more about Mr. Shears.

## Chapter 67 Analysis

If one were to use a visual metaphor to describe the character of Christopher that Haddon has drawn so far, it might be seen as a stark outline in India ink, filled with fading shades of pastel watercolor. The obvious parts of Christopher’s persona are precise and rigid—logic, fear and insight. His emotional side, except when he becomes violent, is muted and subdued. Such feelings as love, humiliation and kindness are there in abundance, but they are only hinted at in his ruminations as he recalls events. Having thus conjured a masterful portrait of Christopher as he is, in Chapter 67 Haddon begins to actually develop his character, which is to say that Haddon will now cause Christopher to grow before our eyes. It is a huge step for Christopher—presumably a positive one—when he balls up the courage to begin interviewing his neighbors. To the normal reader this might seem trivial, but to Christopher it is huge. Christopher’s father is fleshed out here a bit as well. Readers learn, for example, that he generally spends his Saturdays on outings with his son, although on this particular Saturday he chooses to watch a soccer match. This, of course, provides a perfect opportunity for Christopher to scour the neighborhood for clues to Wellington’s death.

A theme that has been evident since Chapter 2 comes into full blossom in Chapter 67 as Christopher interviews his neighbors. That theme is the way that normal people treat those with afflictions such as Christopher’s. With the exceptions of Mrs. Shears and Mrs. Alexander, the neighbors are at first sarcastic about this strange young man, becoming condescending as they realize he is different. The encounter with Mrs. Alexander illustrates the tragic side of this relationship Christopher has with the world outside his own thoughts. Mrs. Alexander seems somewhat lonely in her dotage, and she is genuinely grateful for Christopher’s company. Rather than benefit from her proffered friendship, however, Christopher becomes paranoid when she takes too long and abandons the potential warmth, security and camaraderie of a budding relationship.

A whole bunch of plot questions pop up in this chapter. What, for instance, is the reason for Mrs. Shears’ overnight visits with Christopher and Father, and what does this have to do with Mother’s supposed death and Mr. Shears’ absence? Why is Mr. Shears so angry? Why has Mrs. Shears gone from trying to ingratiate herself with Christopher to being downright rude and aggressive? Finally, what does any of this have to do with a dead dog and a pitchfork?



# Chapter 71

## Chapter 71 Summary

Christopher boldly states that all of the other children at his school are stupid. He is not supposed to call them stupid, even though that is what they are. He is supposed to say they have learning disabilities and special needs. That statement is stupid in its own right, though, says Christopher, because everyone has learning disabilities—such as learning French and understanding relativity—and everyone has special needs, such as Father, who must carry around little packets of artificial sweetener to put in his coffee. Siobhan says that Christopher must use those terms—special needs and learning disabilities—because people used to call the students at his school “spaz,” “crip,” and “mong,” which are nasty words. He doesn’t see how changing the words has changed anything else, however, because when the students get off of their special bus, children from the normal school harass them with taunts of “special needs, special needs, special needs!”

Christopher says he will have a chance next month to prove that he is not stupid when he takes his A-level in math. He is confident that he will receive an A grade, as well. Initially, Mrs. Gascoyne, the headmistress, was not going to allow him to take the exam, ostensibly because they didn’t have the resources to proctor an A-level exam, a height no one in the school has ever attained. Father, however, took Christopher’s side and got into a pissing match with Mrs. Gascoyne, who eventually revealed her real motive. She did not want Christopher to take the exam because it would be treating him differently. Then everyone would want to be treated differently, and order would collapse. In other words, if the school for children with special needs were actually to meet Christopher’s special needs, the school itself would collapse. Father prevails, however, when he agrees to pay for the proctor out of his own pocket.

Christopher explains that after he passes his A-level exam, he will go on to take exams in math and physics. Then, he says, he will go to university and get a degree in math or physics, or math *and* physics, so he can get a job and make lots of money. Then, he can hire someone to cook for him, take care of him and wash his clothes, or he will marry some lady so she can take care of him. Then, he can have company and not be on his own.

## Chapter 71 Analysis

Some good British humor is found in this chapter—the children being taunted with special needs instead of the old epithets and the irony of the notion that Christopher’s genuine special needs are subordinate to bureaucratic order. Still, it is dark humor. It underscores the tragedy that Christopher is smarter than the world that controls, limits and manages his entire existence. Christopher shares this common dilemma with another classic character from modern British literature, the Savage in Huxley’s *Brave*

*New World.* Christopher's summary of his options, either hiring someone to care for him or getting some girl to marry him, tugs sharply at the reader's heartstrings.



## Chapter 73

### Chapter 73 Summary

Christopher reveals that things were not all peace and love between Father and Mother. Sometimes he thought that they might get a divorce and that his “Behavioral Problems” were the cause of much of the stress. In his obsessive manner, Christopher provides a detailed inventory (with footnotes) of his behavioral problems, which include not talking to people, not wanting to be touched, screaming, smashing things, not smiling and not noticing when people are angry with him. His mother used to say things such as, “Jesus, Christopher, I’m seriously thinking of putting you in a home,” or “You are going to drive me to an early grave.”

### Chapter 73 Analysis

It is clear by now that the mystery of Wellington and the garden fork is purely tangential to the real story of what life is like in the family, the neighborhood and the cranium of a genius adolescent with autism.



# Chapter 79

## Chapter 79 Summary

Christopher returns home after canvassing the neighborhood. Father wants to know where he has been. He says that he has just had a call from Mrs. Shears, and he goes ballistic. Christopher tells him that he believes that Mr. Shears killed Wellington, which results in Father slamming his fists down on the table. This creates another dilemma for Christopher. When the table responds to the blow, all of the food on Christopher's plate slides around so that the ham is touching the broccoli. Now, of course, he can't eat any more of those two items. The baked beans, however, seem to have survived the quake in more-or-less pristine condition.

Christopher's mention of Mr. Shears as his prime suspect causes Father to erupt, shouting, "I will not have that man's name mentioned in this house." When Christopher asks why, Father responds, "That man is evil," which prompts Christopher to inquire if that means he killed Wellington. His father puts his head in his hands and mutters, "Jesus wept." Christopher acknowledges that Father told him to stay out of other people's business but that Mrs. Shears is a friend. To this, father replies, "Well she's not anymore." When Christopher asks the inevitable "why," Father responds in exasperation by making his son promise to give up this silly detective game. Christopher agrees.

## Chapter 79 Analysis

The plot thickens *vis a vis* Mr. Shears. Why does Father see him as evil? Why is Father so angry? What's going on with Mrs. Shears that now makes her unwelcome in Christopher's household? The plot is beginning to take on the aroma of a love triangle or, more accurately perhaps, a quadrangle.



# Chapter 83

## Chapter 83 Summary

Christopher digresses to inform his readers that he would like to be an astronaut, and he tells us why he would make a good one. He does not panic when confined to small spaces. He is good at understanding how machines work, and he wouldn't get homesick because he would be surrounded by things he likes. He claims that he would be comfortable because he could look out of his window and see nothing but stars, knowing that no one else was around for thousands and thousands of miles. He would enjoy the solitude, and he much prefers stars to people. He understands stars. He would like to take Toby, his pet rat, if he could find an experiment that NASA would let him do that wouldn't hurt him, but he would go even if he couldn't take Toby, because it would be a "dream come true."

## Chapter 83 Analysis

The timing of this diversionary chapter may be more revealing than its content. It comes in the midst of confusing revelations about Christopher's family life and mysterious new emotions voiced by his father concerning the Shears. Confused by the goings-on of adult humans, Christopher seeks refuge in something more easily understood, such as rocket science. Although he would prefer the comfortable and predictable camaraderie of his pet rat, he would even forego that simple relationship in favor of adventure.



# Chapter 89

## Chapter 89 Summary

When Christopher tells Siobhan the next day that he must quit writing his novel because of what his father has said, she rationalizes the situation by telling him that Joseph Conrad wrote a very short book called *Heart of Darkness*, which is acclaimed as an excellent novel. Christopher doesn't buy it, however, because his own book does not have a proper ending. He says he doesn't like the fact that Wellington's murderer is still at large, but Siobhan says that it is like real life because all human murders are not solved either. He asks why his father now hates Mr. Shears and thinks that he is evil and why Mrs. Shears is no longer a friend. Siobhan demurs, because she doesn't know and can't answer his questions.

The next day, Christopher sees four yellow cars in a row on his way to school, which makes it a Black Day. In response, he doesn't eat anything all day and sits in the corner reading his A-level math book, not speaking to others. The next day, he also sees four yellow cars in a row, so it is also a Black Day. He doesn't speak to anyone all day and sits groaning with his head pressed into the corner because it makes him feel good. On the third day, he keeps his eyes closed on the way to school, because after two Black Days in a row, he is allowed to do that.

## Chapter 89 Analysis

Curiously, when Christopher wants to do something he has been told not to do, he can create some very colorful and complex rationalizations to justify breaking the rules. Yet, when Siobhan offers a simple rationalization for not continuing with his book, he rejects it out of hand. His elaborate system for deciding good days and bad days based on the colors of the cars he sees on his way to school—and the permission he gives himself to close his eyes when things are consistently bad—seems irrational when viewed from afar. Still, his behavior makes an odd sort of sense when seen through Christopher's eyes and mind.



# Chapter 97

## Chapter 97 Summary

“But it isn’t the end of the book,” declares Christopher, “because the next day I saw five red cars in a row,” which makes it a Super Good Day. That, of course means that something special is going to happen that day, and since nothing special happens at school, it has to be something to do with Wellington. When Christopher gets home, he goes down to the local store to get some licorice laces and a Milky Bar. When he gets there, he sees Mrs. Alexander’s dachshund, Ivor, tethered to a pole outside the store. While he is playing with Ivor, Mrs. Alexander comes out of the store and engages him in conversation.

Realizing that the conversation with Mrs. Alexander is the special thing that is to happen to him today, Christopher creates an elaborate rationalization of the situation, concluding that he is not breaking any of his promises to Father. He agrees to walk with her in the park. He asks her about Mr. Shears and why Father might call him evil, but she hedges her response and asks him if this has to do with Wellington. Since he isn’t the one who brings up Wellington, he reasons, talking with Mrs. Alexander about it will not be detective work. As their walk continues through the park, and as Christopher continues to bombard Mrs. Alexander with questions, it becomes obvious that Mrs. Alexander is holding back something. When she says that Mr. Shears and Christopher’s mother were special friends, Christopher presses her until she reveals that they were having an affair. She assumed that Christopher knew all about it, and she asks that he not tell his father what he now knows. When Christopher innocently asks if Mrs. Shears killed his mother, Mrs. Alexander responds with sympathy, revealing that she did not know Christopher’s mother had died.

## Chapter 97 Analysis

What the astute reader may have already surmised is revealed as fact in this pivotal chapter. Christopher’s mother ran off with Mr. Shears, a banker, and Father sees Mr. Shears as an evil man because he is having an affair with Father’s wife. It is not yet clear why Mrs. Shears, who was apparently ministering to Father, has also fallen from grace. It may be that Mrs. Shears wanted Father to make other arrangements for his son so that she could move into the nest without competition, but given Father’s love of Christopher, he balked at the idea. More will be revealed.



# Chapter 101

## Chapter 101 Summary

In Chapter 101, Christopher explains something called the Monty Hall Problem, which once appeared in a newspaper column. In the problem, a quiz show contestant is asked to choose one of three doors, knowing that there is a car behind one door and a goat behind each of the other two. The contestant chooses one of the doors. The host then opens one of the doors that the contestant did not initially choose, revealing a goat. The host asks the contestant whether he wants to change his choice. The problem is, will the contestant have better odds of winning if he changes doors or if he sticks with his original choice? The intuitive answer is that the odds are exactly even—fifty-fifty—for the two doors, but Christopher offers a diagram that proves that the odds are two to one in favor of changing doors.

## Chapter 101 Analysis

The author's point in this chapter is not entirely clear. Perhaps the lesson is that, as with numbers, life is not always clear. This chapter also highlights the fact that, while Christopher has no problem solving difficult math problems, he has trouble discerning simple human emotional issues.



# Chapter 103

## Chapter 103 Summary

When Christopher returns home, Rhodri, a man who works for Father in his boiler repair business, greets him, asking what he's been up to. When Christopher responds that he has been to the store to buy a Milky Bar and licorice laces, Father says, "You were gone a long time." Rhodri then asks if Christopher always gets the third degree like that, but because Christopher doesn't know what the "third degree" is, he doesn't answer. Father puts one of those "Gobi Aloo Sag things" in the oven for Christopher—an Indian dish for which Christopher has a keen taste—then returns to his conversation with his employee. Christopher explains that Gobi Aloo Sag is yellow, so he has to add red food coloring before he can eat it. While waiting for his dinner, Christopher overhears bits and pieces of a conversation between Father and Rhodri. Rhodri says that someone named Parky, "stitched them up then," to which Father replies, "the circuit boards looked like they had come out of the bloody ark." Rhodri inquires if Father is going to tell anyone, to which he replies that it is better to "let sleeping dogs lie," since no one is likely to take them to court in any case, whereupon Christopher retires to the garden to watch the clouds make pictures. In the sky, the clouds made pictures ranging from fish scales to alien space ships, which Christopher explains do not necessarily have to be made of metal, but could be made of vapor too. When he tires of that activity, he goes into the house to feed Toby.

## Chapter 103 Analysis

Is the conversation about Parky and the ancient circuits relevant to the story of Christopher and Wellington, or is it just a clever device to slip in the double entendre about the sleeping dog? The cloud dreaming that Christopher does in this chapter tends to underscore the notion that he is, in many ways, just like other boys his age. What teenaged boy has not, at one bored time or another, lain on his back, creating fantasies from the clouds forming in a sunny sky?



# Chapter 107

## Chapter 107 Summary

Christopher reveals that the Sherlock Holmes novel *Hound of the Baskervilles* is his favorite book, and he proceeds to summarize it for his readers. James Mortimer visits Holmes and Dr. Watson in London, concerned about a friend, Sir Charles Baskerville, who recently died of a heart attack. Mortimer is convinced that someone intentionally frightened his friend to death. Mortimer tells the detective and his assistant about the legend of the Hound of the Baskervilles, which grew out of a story about one of Sir Charles' ancestors. It seems that Sir Hugo Baskerville was a "wild, profane and godless man," who chased the daughter of a workman into the woods with romance on his mind. When searchers found the couple, the girl was dead from fear and exhaustion, and a huge hound of supernatural proportions was ripping Sir Hugo to pieces. The hound was said to roam the forest, protecting the family name by waiting, alert and ready, for the next Baskerville cad.

As it turns out, a poor and distant Baskerville relative named Stapleton went to London, bought a huge dog, painted him with luminescence and set him loose in the forest to scare old Sir Charles so that he might inherit the great mansion of the Baskervilles. The only thing Christopher doesn't like about *Hounds* is that, in the end, Holmes has to shoot the dog. There are many things about the book that Christopher does like, though. For one, it has lots of red herrings in it—things that look like clues, but really aren't—and it has many legitimate clues as well. Another thing Christopher likes about Sherlock Holmes is that he doesn't believe in the supernatural, but he always looks for the logical answer. That, says Christopher, is how he wants to write his book.

## Chapter 107 Analysis

This chapter may be full of clues as to who killed Wellington, or it may be one huge red herring. More will be revealed.



# Chapter 109

## Chapter 109 Summary

The next day, Christopher takes his book to school and shows it to Siobhan, who reads it during recess. After she has read it, she asks Christopher if he has told his father what Mrs. Alexander told him about his mother's affair with Mr. Shears. Because he has promised Mrs. Alexander that he wouldn't tell his father, he replies that no, he has not. Siobhan says that is a good thing. Siobhan asks if Christopher feels sad about what he has learned, and he replies that he does not. She asks Christopher if he is lying, and he says that he never lies. Siobhan says that sometimes we are sad, but we don't tell others because we want to keep our sadness private. Christopher insists that he is not sad and that it would be illogical for him to be sad because his mother is dead and because Mr. Shears isn't around anymore. Siobhan reassures him that if he should ever want to talk about it, she will be available. Then Christopher does math until lunch, and then he does art in the afternoon by drawing robots.

## Chapter 109 Analysis

Christopher has now alerted the bureaucracy that he knows about his mother's dalliance, even though he has not told his father. The school becomes a co-conspirator—in the persona of Siobhan, along with Mrs. Alexander—in the deception of Christopher's father. Clearly, Father is the one person who has the most genuine love for Christopher, and one might wonder at these other adults urging Christopher to deceive him. This is understandable in the case of Mrs. Alexander, perhaps, because she unintentionally reveals the secret, but it seems somewhat sinister in Siobhan's case, since she works under an official mandate. There is also further insight in this chapter into the workings of Christopher's mind, since he does not feel sad because it would be illogical. This begs the question of how Christopher might react if he discovers that his mother is not dead.



# Chapter 113

## Chapter 113 Summary

Christopher reveals, not surprisingly perhaps, that his memory is like a video player, only it has a *smell*track as well as a soundtrack. He says that he can roll the memory film back to any moment in time and replay it exactly as it occurred. He says it's more like DVD, though, than a VCR, because he doesn't have to roll back through all of the film to get to the place he is going. For instance, if someone asks him what his mother was like, he can roll back to a specific incident and recall all of the details. If he rolls back to a happy incident, it makes him feel better. He acknowledges that other people have pictures in their heads too, but they are different because all of his head pictures are of things that actually happened—with nothing imaginary. His mother, for example, had head pictures of living in the south of France and being married to someone named Jean, which never happened. Siobhan has pictures in her head about living on Cape Cod with a friend.

## Chapter 113, Analysis

Christopher's DVD-like memory is consistent with what we have learned about the inner-workings of his mind. The revelation of his mother's daydream, however, is out of the blue—sort of a foreshadowing in retrospect. It is a precursor, perhaps, to her affair with Mr. Shears.



# Chapter 127

## Chapter 127 Summary

Christopher goes home after school and retires to the living room to watch videos about deep-sea creatures that live at tremendous depths along the venting chimneys of volcanoes. He overlooks the fact that he left his novel on the kitchen table. When he returns home, Father greets his son with a friendly, "Howdy partner," and then returns quite upset after he finds the novel in the kitchen. He confronts Christopher, who affirms that Mrs. Alexander told him the things he wrote about. His father is angry and a scuffle ensues. Because Christopher cannot stand to be touched, he hits his father when his father grabs him.

In reflection, Christopher recalls that his mother had a quicker temper than Father and that she would sometimes hit him when she was angry. This is the first time Father has ever grabbed him like this, though. When the fight is over, Father walks out of the house with Christopher's book, and the boy hears him open the trash can in the backyard and presumably throw the book away. Then Father returns to the house and opens a beer.

## Chapter 127 Analysis

Christopher and his father have apparently reached a new level of negative emotion. More significantly, perhaps, Christopher's narrative has become an object of conflict in the bigger, less defined, story of the demise of Christopher's family. Self-reflexively, Christopher's writings, which in actuality are fictional, become a real and literal part of the story, the subject of the dispute between Christopher and his father. This sort of labyrinthine path between the real and the imagined has a long and ancient tradition in English literature. Shakespeare, perhaps, perfected the technique when he included plays within his plays. Readers also gain a deeper insight into the workings of Christopher's usually precise mind when he says that he had no memory for a short while during the pique of emotion during his fight with Father. "It was like someone had switched me off, then switched me back on again. And when they switched me back on again I was sitting on the carpet with my back against the wall and there was blood on my hand."



# Chapter 131

## Chapter 131 Summary

Christopher treats the reader to a treatise on why he doesn't like yellow and brown. Among his reasons are the things that are yellow: custard, bananas—which also turn brown—yellow flowers that give him hay fever and sweet corn, “which comes out in your poo so you shouldn't eat it at all like leaves and grass.” Brown offends because it is the color of dirt, gravy and poo. Wood is also brown, and it's not good because machinery was once made of wood, and it broke. Also, wood gets rotten, and worms crawl in it. He doesn't like Melissa Brown, a girl at school who tore up his big picture of an astronaut. Some people tell him this is silly, and maybe it is sort of, but lots of people have favorite colors.

## Chapter 131 Analysis

At an emotional low point for Christopher, he ruminates on the things he dislikes. He rationalizes his hatred of yellow and brown, revealing again his need to impose logic on all things that are emotional.



# Chapter 137

## Chapter 137 Summary

The next day, Saturday, Father apologizes to Christopher for hitting him and takes him to the zoo for an outing. At the zoo, Christopher's favorite animals are the red-faced spider monkeys, the Patagonian sea lions and Maliku, an orangutan who fashioned his own hammock from leaves and branches. After visiting the animals, he and Father have lunch, and Father apologizes again for getting angry. He says that he did it because he worries so about Christopher, and he asks if Christopher understands that. Christopher says that he doesn't, but he responds in the positive when Father asks if Christopher knows that loves him.

## Chapter 137 Analysis

Readers gain two insights here, one into Father and the other into Christopher. This chapter brings out the frustration, anger, grief and remorse that are a part of the cycle caregivers go through when dealing with special-needs children who just don't react the way they are supposed to in the "normal" world. Readers also learn that, while the abstract values and properties of "caring for" are a bit too imprecise for Christopher, he does grasp the rudiments of *love*.



# Chapter 139

## Chapter 139 Summary

Christopher likes Sherlock Holmes because the famous detective does not believe in the supernatural. He does not, however, like Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Sherlock's creator, because he does believe in the supernatural. Christopher believes the supernatural is stupid and that Sir Arthur was stupid. He explains *The Case of the Cottingley Fairies*, a 1917 hoax involving five photographs of purportedly real fairies, which Sir Arthur Conan Doyle believed were indeed real. It was later revealed that the fairy photos had been rigged. Christopher concludes that, "Sometimes people want to be stupid, and they do not want to know the truth."

## Chapter 139 Analysis

There is a seeming incongruity here. How is it that Christopher can look at the clouds and envision alien spacecraft and other imaginary forms but is so totally closed off to the notion of anything that is not observable in the real universe? Much as Christopher sees metaphors as lies, he sees the supernatural also as lies.



# Chapter 149

## Chapter 149 Summary

On Monday at school, Siobhan asks about Christopher's cuts and bruises from his quarrel with Father. He tells her about the fight, about his father grabbing him and about him hitting his father. She asks if he is afraid to go home, and he replies that he is not. Once he gets home, Christopher gets the key to the back door from the "little jar that looks like a nun" and goes out to look in the dust bin to retrieve his book, but it is not there. He also looks in the compost, with no results, and he hopes that Father didn't take his book down to one of the big trash bins down the street, because then he would never see it again.

Christopher mounts an exhaustive search of the house until he finally reaches Father's bedroom. In Father's dresser and cupboard, Christopher discovers such things as aspirin, an old kitchen appliance, a tampon and a bunch of porn magazines. In the bottom of the cupboard, below a toolbox, he finds another box that contains his novel. He realizes he can't take the box because Father would know he was messing with his stuff, so he decides to leave it and transfer the stuff he remembers into another book. As he hears Father's van pull up outside, Christopher puts everything back into the cupboard, and that is when he sees a letter, addressed to him, stacked with a bunch of other letters beneath the book. He recognizes the handwriting as his mother's. Christopher keeps the top letter from the pile, greets his father, tells him about school over dinner and then goes to his room to read the letter. In the letter, his mother apologizes for waiting so long since her last letter to write, saying that "they" have moved to a new house and that she has a new job. She notes that, since Christopher hasn't written to him yet, she imagines he is still angry with her for leaving him alone. She assures him that she loves him and hopes he won't be angry with her for too much longer. He checks the postmark on the letter and sees that it is dated eighteen months after his mother died. Christopher considers all of the possibilities. Had his mother written the letter before she died, and then someone else mailed it? Had someone else with her name—and her handwriting—sent the letter? He resolves that he will look at the other letters the next time his father is not in the house. He is excited because he now has two mysteries to solve instead of just one.

## Chapter 149 Analysis

In this blockbuster chapter the reader learns for certain that Christopher's mother is not dead, although he does still not accept that he has been lied to these past two years. Unable to lie himself, the thought doesn't even cross his mind. His reaction to the purloined letters, rather, is excitement at the additional mystery they create. Clearly, Father is conspiring to keep the truth from his son. Is his motivation to save Christopher's feelings or to punish his unfaithful wife? We are likely to find out—albeit circuitously—now that Christopher is on the case.



# Chapter 151

## Chapter 151 Summary

This very short chapter follows Christopher for several days at school. He explains that some things are mysteries that are not really mysteries. Lightning, for example, was a mystery until someone discovered electricity, and then it became science. He relates the tale of an uncle who saw a ghost in a shop where the people say they see this particular ghost all of the time and that the ghost is not to be feared. Christopher, of course, does not believe in the supernatural, so he reasons that science will some day find an explanation for ghosts, just as science found an explanation for lightning. Christopher also outlines a rather complex formula for determining the population densities of species. The formula proves that some things in nature are simply too complex to predict, and he concludes that sometimes species become extinct for no reason at all, except that the mathematical tables say they will.

## Chapter 151 Analysis

This is a short segue chapter, which moves the character along in time without actually advancing the plot. The novel is a mystery, however, so some of the many digressions Christopher takes into seemingly irrelevant topics may in fact be clues that will come to light later as he deduces the solution. On the other hand, they may just be red herrings.



# Chapter 157

## Chapter 157 Summary

Christopher begins this chapter with a discourse on what happens at school during a six-day interval until he can get back to the letters from his mother when Father isn't at home. At school, things are pretty much as usual. One of his classmates goes to the bathroom all over the floor in the students' toilet. Christopher refuses to go in the toilet because there is poo on the floor, so he wets himself. Siobhan gets him a dry pair of pants, kept on hand for just such an occasion, and arranges for him to use the staff toilet for the next three days.

After the six-day interval, Christopher goes home on a day when his father has been called to an emergency repair and will be out of the house for several hours. Christopher goes into Father's room and removes the shirt box with all of the letters in it back to his room. Christopher reads four of the forty-three letters, and each resolves a bit more of the mystery surrounding his mother's absence.

*Letter 1:* In the first letter Christopher reads, his mother refers to a trip she and Mr. Shears took to dump off their old refrigerator and cooker and pick up new ones at a second-hand shop. Then, she recounts a very happy time when she and Father bought Christopher an electric train set, which he played with for weeks and weeks, refusing to go to bed. She recalls how she and Father explained to Christopher how timetables worked and then bought him more trains, stations and passengers. He made an elaborate timetable and made all of his trains run on time.

*Letter 2:* Mother apologizes again to Christopher and, in this undated letter, attempts to explain her absence to him. She recalls an incident when she took him shopping in a very crowded store at Christmastime, and he freaked out because of all of the people. He curled up on the floor of the store, and when she tried to get him to stand up, he became loud and violent. He lay on the floor, screaming and banging his head and feet on the floor, and he broke some merchandise, which she had to pay for. All of the people were watching, and she had to walk him all of the way home because she knew he would not get on another bus. She also describes an incident where she shouted at him because he wouldn't eat—and had not for several days. She became angry and threw his food across the kitchen. Christopher responded by throwing the carving board at her and breaking her toes. She had to go to the hospital, get a cast and hobble around for weeks. That incident ended in a huge fight with Father, and she hit him. That, she says, was when she started spending a lot of time with Roger (Mr. Shears). Although they had always spent time with Roger and Eileen (Mrs. Shears), she started spending a lot of time with Roger alone. She could talk to Roger, and she was lonely. Roger said he and Eileen had not been in love for a long time, and he was lonely too. They fell in love. Roger wanted to leave Eileen and be with Christopher's mother, but she would not leave Christopher. She says that she used to watch Christopher and Father together, and she noticed that he was much more comfortable with Father. He



didn't seem as nervous, and Father was so much more patient than she was. She says that she felt unneeded. It was then that Roger put in for a transfer to another branch of his bank in London, and he asked her to come with him. She says that she wanted to return and explain things to Christopher, and to come back to visit him as often as possible, but Father forbade it. She ends the letter by begging Christopher to return her letters or call her at the London number at the top of the page.

*Letter 3:* In this chatty letter, Mother relates that she has a new job as a secretary for a company that estimates building costs. She likes her coworker—another secretary—but she is not fond of her two bosses. One is too strict, and the other is a leech. She is now looking for a better job.

*Letter 4:* Mother has just had some teeth removed and had to take some days off. She describes the procedure and the effects of laughing gas, local anesthetic and painkillers. Christopher stops reading because he feels sick. The realization that his mother is not dead descends on Christopher slowly but heavily. He feels sick and giddy. The room begins swaying, and he does not understanding what is happening inside his head. His stomach hurts, and he lies down on his bed and curls up into a ball. His memory blanks out for what must be a long time, because when he regains awareness it is dark. There is sick all over his clothes and his hands and face. He sees his name written in his mother's hand, almost as if it is appearing on a computer screen. Then, he hears his father in another room. Even though he is aware, nothing is real to Christopher. It is as if he is outside his body watching things happen to him.

Christopher becomes aware of Father entering the room, but his voice sounds tiny and far away—unreal. At first, Father is angry, scolding Christopher for getting into the cabinet in his room, but when he sees the letters, he becomes ashamed and apologetic. He begs Christopher to forgive him for lying to him about his mother. He tries to explain how the lie got out of hand. He becomes comforting and nurturing. Father helps him to the bath he has drawn for him. Christopher does not resist. He does not fight being touched.

## Chapter 157 Analysis

At precisely the mid-point in this novel, everything changes. Up until now, almost all of the author's work has been devoted to a masterful development of the character Christopher. Now the pace of events—the forward motion of the plot—increases at an almost alarming rate. The mystery of Christopher's mother, which has been niggling at the back of readers' minds for a hundred pages, but which has not even crossed Christopher's unique mind because of a pure, albeit naïve, faith in the truth of Father's words, is suddenly solved. The impact on Christopher of this truth, however, is devastating, propelling him, at least temporarily, into a new reality. Even his most prominent phobia, that of being touched by others, has been erased by this new awareness. It will be intriguing to see what happens as Christopher adjusts to this new truth.



# Chapter 163

## Chapter 163 Summary

Christopher explains how he had to learn that other people had minds too. Julie, his first main teacher at school—before Siobhan—showed him a box that originally contained Smarties and asked him what he thought was in the box. He replied, of course, that he thought Smarties were in the box, but when he opened it there was a pencil in the box. Julie then asked him what he thought his mother would say if Julie asked his mother what she thought was in the box. He replied that she would think there was a pencil in the box, and Julie explained to him that his mother would have to go through the same process that Christopher did to learn, in her perceived reality, that the box actually contained a pencil. Christopher then offers a treatise on how the mind works, replete with examples from an educational TV show. He says that the inside of people's minds is like a complex machine with TV screens that show all different sorts of images. He talks about a phenomenon called visual saccades, in which, when the eye moves from point to point, it does not really see what is in between the two points. Rather, the mind creates screens, based upon what it remembers was in that space. Animals, says Christopher, do not have that capability, but have only the here and now screen. People can have pictures of just about anything from fantasies to memories, even pictures of complex chains of reasoning.

Christopher concludes that people's brains are like computers, but they are in denial about that and want to think they are special. He contends the only meaningful difference between computers and people is that people have feelings. Feelings, he says, are "just having pictures about what is going to happen tomorrow or next year, or what might have happened instead of what did happen, and if it is a happy picture they smile, and if it's an unhappy picture they frown."

## Chapter 163 Analysis

In the timeline of the plot, Christopher has just suffered a huge trauma. His whole world, his entire belief system, has been stood on its head. He has woken up from a complete emotional retreat from the ugliness of the reality of his father's lies about his mother. Clearly, Christopher writes this chapter well after the trauma, apparently laying the groundwork for something that will occur in succeeding chapters—or not.



# Chapter 167

## Chapter 167 Summary

Christopher returns to the plot timeline in this chapter, picking up where he left off after discovering Father's lies about his mother. After giving him a bath, Father asks if he can get Christopher some food, but Christopher is non-responsive. Father, still apologetic, guilty and uncomfortable, trundles off to the laundry room to wash the soiled clothes and sheets and continues with a seemingly endless apology. He desperately tries to regain his son's trust, but Christopher remains silent. He begs Christopher to forgive him, begs for his trust and promises never to lie to him again. To prove the truth of the promises, Christopher's father reluctantly admits to his son, "I killed Wellington, Christopher."

Once Christopher's father reveals that he killed the dog, Father tries to explain that he and Mrs. Shears were getting on really well, and he was hoping that she might move in with them—or them with her. Then, they could continue as a family unit. They began to argue, though, and Mrs. Shears "...she said some things I'm not going to repeat to you because they're not nice, but they hurt..." He goes on to complain that she thought more of "that damned dog," than she did of him. After one particularly vicious argument outside of Mrs. Shield's house while he was on his way home, Wellington attacked him. Wellington's occasional attacks seemed to be more of a nuisance than a threat, but Father says that he was so distraught that he killed Wellington with the garden fork. Father knows he should not have killed the dog, "but when that red mist... [rage] comes down..."

When Father completes the story of Wellington's death, he puts up his hands and spreads his fingers to sort of kiss and make up in their traditional ritual. Christopher says, though, "I screamed and pushed him backward so that he fell off the bed." Father backs off and says he's going to leave it for the night and that they'll talk in the morning. Christopher retreats into his own reality. Now, in Christopher's world, his father is not only a liar but a murderer as well. Christopher reasons that he must get out of the house because, even though Father said "trust me," he can't trust him, "because he told a lie about a big thing." He is afraid that Father might murder him too. Christopher waits for his father to come up to bed, but he never does, falling asleep in the living room instead. When Father is snoring loudly, Christopher grabs Toby's cage, "both of my coats," his special food box and sneaks out of the house. He goes out in the garden and hunkers down next to a drain barrel behind a storage shed. Even though he is not hungry, he eats his Milky Bar and two Clementines because he knows if he doesn't eat he will get cold, and he is using one of his coats to cover Toby's cage, "so he wouldn't get cold and die." He closes the chapter with the comment, "Then I wondered what I would do next."



## Chapter 167 Analysis

The mystery is solved. Readers know who killed Wellington, so why isn't the novel over? The mystery was never about who killed the dog. The whole scenario of Wellington's death, and Christopher's efforts to unmask the culprit, is nothing more than a giant red herring. It was a big fish, though, with an astute literary motive. The scenario provides Haddon with a broad canvas upon which to artfully evoke intense images of the curious and dynamic mind and personality of his character, through Christopher's own special perceptions. There are many cases in good literature in which an author's character is so vivid that the writer disappears. The character takes over and begins directing the author in how to proceed. To some, when this happens, it is thought to be the pinnacle of the novel form—an almost spiritual realm where only the best authors dwell. Christopher appears to be one of those creations, and Haddon seems to be one of those writers. Readers will now no doubt learn how Christopher, the curious boy genius, will fare in the world that other, less gifted creatures, tend to think of as the real world.



# Chapter 173

## Chapter 173 Summary

Chapter 173 consists of less than a full page of text and two illustrations. In the text, Christopher examines the Constellation Orion, commonly called “The Hunter.” He explains that, if you connect the stars with different lines and borrow a couple of stars from Gemini, you can also make it look like a bunch of grapes, Jesus or a bicycle, except they didn’t have bicycles when the Romans and Greeks named it Orion. With his pictures, Christopher demonstrates how, by connecting Orion’s stars one way it does look like a hunter, but with different lines, it looks like a dinosaur.

## Chapter 173 Analysis

This chapter is pure symbolism, representing what is happening in Christopher’s world. Things are not always what you are told they are. They are what you perceive.



# Chapter 179

## Chapter 179 Summary

Christopher stays awake until after 3:00 a.m., huddled behind the rain barrel behind the shed. He spends the time watching the sky because when he sees stars he realizes they are hundreds and thousands of light years away. Many of them may not even exist by the time their light reaches Earth. Thinking in such massive terms, he says, makes all of his problems seem negligible— “so small you don’t have to take them into account when you are calculating something.”

Christopher wakes up with early dawn to hear the birds sing the “Morning Chorus.” Shortly after he awakens, he hears his father calling his name, searching for him. He conceals himself further, clutching his Swiss Army knife with the lethal saw blade extended. After he hears his father leave, Christopher comes out of his hiding place and decides he will go live with Mrs. Shears, who will take care of him now that it is unsafe for him to live in his own house with Father, the murderer. When he knocks at Mrs. Shears’ door, however, there is no answer. Then the neighbors who do drugs come out of their house, and Christopher hides from them.

During this respite, Christopher weighs his options in his usual rigidly logical manner. He clearly can’t go home again because he fears his father. He can’t go live with Siobhan, because she isn’t actually a friend but a teacher. He doesn’t like Uncle Terry, because he smokes cigarettes and strokes Christopher’s hair. He can’t live with Mrs. Alexander, because he couldn’t stay overnight in her house or use the toilet there because she has used it and she isn’t a friend. The only remaining choice is to go live with his mother in London, because he has her address. This decided, Christopher sets out to journey to London. He asks Mrs. Alexander if she will watch Toby while he goes to London. She inquires if his father is going and how long he is going to be gone. He replies that his father is not going and that he is going to stay until he goes to university. She declines the loan of the rat and suggests that Christopher’s may not be the best of plans. She suggests they contact his father and goes off into another room to call him. Christopher bolts, and because he knows his father is gone and not likely to come back for a while, Christopher goes back to his house, chucks a brick through a window to gain entrance and goes inside. He sees his father’s wallet, cell phone and address book lying on the counter. He steals his father’s bankcard from the wallet, loads up with some food, disposes of Toby’s cage and consigns the rat to new quarters in his coat pocket. Christopher knows the PIN for his father’s bankcard because, rather than writing it down and hiding it someplace, he asked Christopher to memorize it, knowing that he would never forget it.

Christopher decides to travel by train, because he knows all about timetables and trains because of the model railroad he built. He sets off for his school, where he plans to ask Siobhan where the train station is. When he gets to school, however, he sees his father’s van, so he doesn’t go in. He asks directions of a strange lady, and she tells him



where the station is. She says, "Follow that bus," so he sets off running after the bus. He tires out before he gets to the station, however, so he establishes a spiral search pattern that eventually takes him to the station, as well as giving him a good mental map of downtown.

## Chapter 179 Analysis

The hero, who has led a life so sheltered that the farthest he's ever been on his own is down to the corner store, is now on his own, armed with the knowledge gained by playing with his electric train and on his way to London. Suddenly, of necessity, he is being forced out of his individual world into the one inhabited by so many others. He is adapting and succeeding, too. The boy who just a few chapters ago could barely screw up the courage to quiz his neighbors about Wellington can now accost total strangers to ask directions to the train station. When he gets lost, he can use his special ability to visualize spatial problems to develop a successful search grid. The smart money, it would seem, is on Christopher reaching London and his mother without much outside help, except perhaps his father's bankcard. The question remains, however, what sort of reception awaits him there?



# Chapter 181

## Chapter 181 Summary

Christopher states boldly that, "I see everything." Then, he proceeds to illustrate the point by explaining the difference between his perceptions and those of normal people. A normal person might say, "I am standing in a field. There are some cows in the field. It is sunny with a few clouds. There is a village in the distance." Then, that person might go off wondering if he or she turned the stove off before leaving home or whether Julie has had the baby yet. In the same setting, however, Christopher would say, "There are 19 cows in the field, 15 of which are black and white and 4 of which are brown and white. ... There is a village in the distance which has 31 visible houses and a church with a square tower and not a spire." He would also see a discarded Coca-Cola can with a snail crawling on it and a plastic bag trapped in the hedge. That, he says, is why he doesn't like new places. There is just too much to take in.

## Chapter 181 Analysis

This chapter does not move the plot along but sets the stage for Christopher's adventures in the train station. It is also, perhaps, one of the most instructive chapters into the workings of an autistic mind, as perceived by author Haddon.



# Chapter 191

## Chapter 191 Summary

Christopher quickly determines that the real train station is a bit more complex than the one he built for his model railroad. He is surrounded by more stimuli, including people, than he has ever encountered before. He explains that when his mind fills up with all of this stuff it is just like a computer reaching the capacity of its memory. Like a computer, Christopher can shut his mind down, withdraw into himself for long periods, occupy himself with complex mathematical equations, puzzles or games and, essentially, reboot his mind. While exploring the train station, Christopher becomes overwhelmed with all of the stimuli and sits down at a table outside of a café. He withdraws into himself and plays a mathematically based game called Conway's soldiers in his head. When he next becomes aware, there is a police officer standing in front of him who tells him that the lady who runs the café told him Christopher has been there three and a half hours and seemed to be in a trance when she approached him. The police officer seems to be a good-hearted soul who, when Christopher explains that he is going to visit his mother in London, helps him withdraw money with the bankcard and shows him where to buy his ticket. Christopher manages to complete the transaction with only a couple more encounters, and he gets onto the train just before it pulls out of the station.

## Chapter 191 Analysis

Christopher's explanation in the previous chapter of how he sees everything is played out on a real-life stage in the train station. The thing that is most remarkable here about Christopher's behavior is that he is growing bolder and bolder with each encounter, and he begins to take more and more control over his own life. He is also leaving a colorful trail of tales that will no doubt amaze his father and others who are by now probably in hot pursuit.



# Chapter 193

## Chapter 193 Summary

Christopher explains that he likes timetables because he likes to know when everything is going to happen. He made timetables when he played with his trains and when he “lived with Father and thought Mother was dead from a heart attack.” He provides a detailed sample of his timetable, broken into increments as small as five minutes, of his daily schedule. His discussion of timetables leads into a highly scientific, esoteric and illustrated discussion of the nature of time, what distinguishes it from space and its relationship to the speed of light. Ultimately Christopher concludes that, “time is a mystery, and not even a thing, and no one has ever solved the puzzle of what it is, exactly.” Timetables, he assures readers, keep us from getting lost in the desert of time.

## Chapter 193 Analysis

Christopher is on a train by himself, a huge accomplishment. Trains are things that travel through space in time. What could be more logical and practical, from Christopher’s perspective, than a scientific discourse on time? His discourse is especially appropriate, concluding that there is no real answer. Again, the nature of mystery is broached. To some questions, there is no solution.



# Chapter 197

## Chapter 197 Summary

Christopher reiterates that he hates to be in a small room with people he doesn't know, and a train is like a room. He relates an incident from his past when he jumped out of a moving car to get away from some other children his mother was giving a lift home to. He had to get sutures, and it took three months for his hair to grow back like it was before. He is standing very still on the train when he hears someone call his name. It is the police officer who helped him get money from the ATM. The police officer tells him that Christopher's father is at the police station. Christopher assumes Father has been arrested for killing Wellington, and he tells the police officer so. The police officer says they will look into that but, for the moment, he needs Christopher to come to the station with him. When Christopher says no, that he is going to London to live with his mother, the police officer tries to take Christopher by the arm. Christopher screams, and the cop lets go. By the time they repeat that scenario once more, the train is leaving the station. The police officer uses his radio to call his partner and arrange for a car to meet him and Christopher at Didcot Parkway, the next stop. Once seated, Christopher retreats into himself. "I closed my eyes," he says, "and did counting and groaning." Then, he retreats even deeper and starts doing quadratic equations in his head. After a while, he says, "I wanted to go for a wee." Not realizing that there are toilets on trains, he ends up "leaking." The cop tells him about toilets on trains and sends him off to complete his business.

Christopher's encounter with the train's toilet is traumatic. "...There was poo on the toilet seat." He doesn't want to use it, but he has to, "...so I closed my eyes and went for a wee and the train wobbled and a lot went on the seat and on the floor." As he comes out of the toilet, Christopher notices a row of luggage racks along the bulkhead of the train. He crawls in behind a backpack on the middle shelf, out of sight, and waits there. When the train approaches Didcot Parkway, the police officer comes to the toilet and knocks on the door for Christopher. When he doesn't find the boy, he curses and goes running back. While others are running around on the platform looking for him, Christopher remains hidden.

## Chapter 197 Analysis

The adventure on the train is proving to be a great growth experience for Christopher. Although he has been sheltered and protected all of his life, he is readily demonstrating his ability to encounter new situations and adapt to change. In this chapter, out of public necessity, he overcomes his phobia about yucky toilets, albeit to a small degree, that previously Siobhan to get permission for him to use the staff bathroom at school. He's also doing a bang-up job of evading those who would interfere with his plans to go live with his mother.



# Chapter 199

## Chapter 199 Summary

Christopher gives a lecture on God and evolution. People who believe in God are basically stupid and illogical, confused by the complexities of life and the scope of the physical universe. He briefly discusses replication, mutation and heritability. He explains the notion that with enough trials over an infinite period, any outcome of events and things is possible. He touches on adaptation and suggests that man could be the instrument of his own destruction.

## Chapter 199 Analysis

This chapter is fairly didactic and seems to be purporting an agenda. Whether this is an expression of Haddon's voice or more character development of Christopher is not clear. The discussion of adaptation fits with the story line, as Christopher adapts to a world outside of his mind, and to some extent mutation does as well, considering Christopher's condition. It is curious, however, that this brainy young man spouts a rather archaic notion of evolution, omitting recent developments in evolutionary theory regarding the inherent organizational dynamic demonstrated in chaos theory and illustrated by fractal geometry.



# Chapter 211

## Chapter 211 Summary

Still hunkered down on the luggage shelf, Christopher worries that the train may have already stopped at London and is frightened that he might have missed his stop. Someone else goes in and out of the toilet, and Christopher can smell their poo. It is different from the poo he smelled in the toilet before. He withdraws again, closes his eyes and does more math puzzles in his head. He recalls that there is a map of England on the wall at school, reconstructs it in his head and calculates time and distance from Swindon to London. Then, he realizes the flaw in his calculations because he doesn't know if the train track runs straight to London or if it makes a "big curve."

The train makes several more stops, but Christopher stays put. He has several encounters with other passengers, the most humorous being with three young men, well into their cups, who call him a "train elf." The teasing is in good boisterous humor, however, and they go off in search of more beer. When the train stops for a considerable period, Christopher decides to get off. He returns to his original seat, but both his bag and the police officer are gone. Then he hears someone behind him, another police officer, and he decides he doesn't like policemen so much anymore. As he tries to make his escape, another passenger verifies that there is a police officer looking for him. The man tells him to wait while he goes to fetch the officer. Christopher doesn't wait.

Christopher walks out into the main terminal and, from the signs, figures out he is in London Station, but all of the signs and advertisements demanding his attention overwhelm him. The boy who "sees everything" is unable to process all of the stimuli, and the signs begin to censor themselves, which Christopher explains with illustrations in his book. He likens the process to a computer shutting down when it runs out of storage space. He solves the problem by curling the fingers of one hand into a tube and looking at only one of the signs at a time. A man approaches him, noting that he looks lost and intending to help, but Christopher draws his Swiss Army knife, and the man backs away. The lady at an information booth helps him find the subway tunnel that will take him to his mother's address.

Christopher enters the underground tube, convinced, "I can do this," because he is doing well. He is in London and will find his mother. He eschews the escalator in favor of the stairs and descends to track level. Put off by all of the people in the tube, Christopher crawls into a coin-operated photo booth to withdraw and "do detecting," by peeking out through the curtain to watch the people. By this process, he figures out how to use the automatic ticket machine and goes to buy a ticket. When a man urges him to hurry up, Christopher barks like a dog and proceeds through the turnstile to the tracks. To get to the next level down, Christopher has to take the escalator, which he doesn't like because of all the people. He wants to hit them so they will all go away, but he



doesn't because of the warning he got about staying out of trouble back when he went to jail.

Christopher finds a place on a bench in the waiting room for his train, but soon it fills with people and becomes uncomfortable. Then, there is the hellish noise of an approaching train, which triggers a huge fear reaction. He covers his ears and closes his eyes. After that, there is the lesser noise of the train starting up and moving on after the stop. When he opens his eyes, all of the people are gone. The same thing—noise, people, lesser noise, people gone—happens all over again as another train comes through, and Christopher is driven to a state of high panic.

## Chapter 211 Analysis

There are no significant revelations in this chapter. All of the reactions Christopher exhibits here he has exhibited before to a lesser degree in less threatening circumstances. This chapter provides a good picture, however, of what happens when his fears and phobias drive him to the threshold of total collapse.



# Chapter 223

## Chapter 223 Summary

Christopher begins this chapter with the declaration, “And this is another description because Siobhan said I should do descriptions and it is a description of the advert on the wall of the little train station opposite me, but I can’t remember all of it because I thought I was going to die.” The most interesting part of the advert, in Christopher’s eyes, is a picture of two orangutans hanging in a tree, which he illustrates for his readers in his book.

## Chapter 223 Analysis

Chapter 223 serves to underscore the extent of Christopher’s stress. The most poignant comment is, “I thought I was going to die.”



# Chapter 227

## Chapter 227 Summary

Transfixed by the terrifying distractions of sight and sound, Christopher remains on the bench for “approximately five hours.” During that time, he develops a technique to deal with his fear by bringing order to the chaos around him. The most frightening part of the train arrival and departure sequence is the arrival. It sounds like sword fighting. He imposes order on that by chanting “left, right, left right” in his head to match the rhythm of the train. Then he begins peeking and gets the macro sequence down—train coming, train stopped, train going. It is 8:37 p.m. when he finally regains full awareness and stands up. He sees an electronic reader box that lists the various trains and how soon they will arrive. This gives him enough predictability to feel more comfortable.

When Christopher finally become mobile again, he realizes that Toby has escaped from his pocket and goes on a search around the station for him. He finally spots him down by the tracks and climbs down to catch him. There are a couple of tense moments when he’s chasing the rat and hears the train coming. Toby eludes him long enough to build up some suspense. A man tries to help him back up into the loading area, but Christopher screams and resists him. Finally, the boy captures Toby and, against the rat’s will, lifts him back up to safety. He has another encounter with a would-be Good Samaritan, but he alienates her when he tells her that he has a Swiss Army knife with a saw blade that could cut her finger off.

Christopher gets on the next train and quickly figures out the timetable. He identifies the stop he wants from the information he got from the lady in the information booth. He sketches the patterns of the upholstery and bulkheads of the train, reads all of the signs and finally gets off at Willensden Station. He finds a magazine vendor and, after some humorous miscommunication, purchases a London Street Atlas. He figures out the maps and grids in the atlas and then sets off for his mother’s flat. When he reaches his destination, no one is home, so he hides behind an ash can and waits. He gets wet and shivers when the rain starts, but at 11:32, he hears his mother’s voice. She is arguing with Mr. Shears as they return from a night out.

Christopher’s mother, of course, is startled to see him. After some preliminaries, the three of them go inside. Mr. Shears does not seem particularly joyous about this touching reunion of mother and her peculiar issue. Inside, she asks why Christopher has not answered her letters, and he reveals the whole story about Father’s lies and how he is terrified of Father because he killed Wellington. His mother is devastated and livid. She trundles Christopher off to a hot bath, but he is interrupted by a knock on the door before he is finished. His mother says there is a police officer who wants to speak with him. The police officer asks Christopher whether he would rather stay with his mother or go back to his father, and Christopher wants to know why his father isn’t in prison for murdering Wellington. Christopher says he wants to stay with Mom. She concurs, and the police officer leaves. At 2:31 a.m., Christopher awakens to the noise of



a huge fight erupting outside of his room. It involves his mother, his father and Mr. Shears. Father demands to see Christopher, but Mother and Mr. Shears are resisting. Accusations fly between Father and Mr. Shears. Mother tries to calm the waters. Father is finally allowed into Christopher's room, to be greeted by a less-than-delighted son, holding him at bay with the saw blade of a Swiss Army knife. Father, crying, begs for forgiveness, but Christopher is frightened and unresponsive. While Father is in Christopher's room, Mr. Shears recalls the police officer who was there before. He tells Father to calm down and escorts him out of the flat.

## Chapter 227 Analysis

Christopher slowly brings internal order to the external chaos in which he finds himself. He breaks the frightening train sounds down into manageable components with rhythmic mantras and then orders the arrival, boarding and leaving sequence into an understandable pattern. This process isn't exactly new to his character, but certainly this is the most intense and severe example readers have seen so far. With this exercise, Christopher gains a great deal of self-confidence and bolsters his courage for further adventures. While down by the train tracks, for example, he is aware that the train is bearing down on him and threatening his life, but he chooses to continue his efforts to rescue Toby. Perhaps this is not the wisest thing he's done, but it is certainly courageous.

The interchanges and conflicts that occur at Mother's new flat are pretty much what might be expected. Clearly, the novel is beginning to wind down to a close, as all of the characters begin to come together in time and space. It is clear by the chapter's end that all is not going to be a bowl of cherries in Christopher's new situation. When Christopher first hears his mother coming home, she is already in an argument with Mr. Shears. That already strained relationship is about to be sorely tested by the addition of Christopher to the domestic mix.



# Chapter 229

## Chapter 229 Summary

While sleeping, Christopher has one of his favorite, and perhaps most chilling, dreams. In his dream, almost everyone on earth dies from a virus. This is not like other viruses, but like a computer virus. It spreads “because of the meaning of something an infected member says and the meaning of what they do with their faces.” People can contract the illness from watching people on television, and once they get it, they just sit on the sofa in front of the TV and do nothing. They don’t eat or drink, so they die. Eventually, the only people left alive are those who don’t look at other people’s faces and who don’t know what the facial expressions mean. Then, says Christopher, he can go anywhere in the world, and no one will touch him or ask him questions.

## Chapter 229 Analysis

Rage has reared its ugly head throughout this novel. Christopher expresses it when he is touched. His father kills Wellington in a fit of pique. Mother becomes livid when she learns of her husband’s deception. Mr. Shears becomes outraged when Father intrudes into his home. Christopher’s dream, however, may be the ultimate expression of everyone’s rage: everybody who is not like me dies.



# Chapter 233

## Chapter 233 Summary

Over Christopher's breakfast of fried tomatoes and green beans the next morning, he hears Mr. Shears already complaining about the flat being too small for three people. His mother says, "He can stay as long as he wants to stay." Mother takes compassionate leave from her job and takes Christopher shopping. It is crowded, however, and he curls up on the floor and screams. They ride home in a taxi. Later, he tells Mother that he must go back to Swindon to take his A-level math exams, and she says that may not be possible. When he is unable to sleep, Christopher goes outside, crouches down between two parked cars and contemplates the nighttime in London. He goes out of the window of his room because he fears Mr. Shears. When Christopher's mother finds him, she is frantic, reliving the stress of the past.

The following day, Mother loses her job because she is taking too much time off to care for Christopher. That night, when she is putting him to bed, Christopher reminds Mother that he must go to Swindon to take his A-level math exams. The issue is non-negotiable, so far as Christopher is concerned. Mother, however, says that she is just about to lose it and asks Christopher to back off. He begins to feel an oncoming panic attack. That afternoon, Mother takes Christopher on an outing to a high overlook. There, she informs her son that she has called his school and informed them that he will not be taking his A-level math exams. Christopher screams for a long time and stops eating. That night, Mr. Shears and Mother get into a loud fight, and Christopher turns his portable radio to static and holds it up to his ear so he can't hear them shout. The morning after the big fight, Mother bundles up Christopher and a couple of suitcases, "borrows" Mr. Shears' car and heads to Swindon.

Christopher reiterates his fear of his father, but Mother says they will have to stay at the Swindon house for a while. Christopher then asks if they are going back to Swindon so he can take his A-level exams, and his mother responds with surprise. Clearly she has forgotten about it. Then she says very slowly, "We are going back to Swindon because if we stay in London any longer...someone was going to get hurt. And I don't necessarily mean you." An argument ensues when Father returns, but it is resolved by Father going to stay with Rhodri while Mother looks for a new place. Christopher asks once again if he can do his A-level exams, and Mother reminds him that she has already called the school to cancel them. Christopher rocks back and forward and groans when his mother becomes apologetic but resigned. The next day Mother drives Christopher to school, where he introduces her to Siobhan. Mother explains that Christopher is upset because he can't take his exams. Later that day, Siobhan tells Christopher that she has spoken to the headmistress and that he can still take his A-level math exams. Even though he is very tired, Christopher decides to go ahead with the exams.

That same day, Christopher does Packet 1 of three, while Reverend Peters watches him. He has some trouble concentrating at first, wasting twenty minutes, and has to



rush through without double-checking all of his work. The next day he does Packet 2. That night, Mr. Shears shows up in a taxi to retrieve his car. He throws a box of Mother's things in the yard. A picture of Christopher in a silver frame falls out of the box, and the glass covering the photo breaks. The next day, Christopher takes the last of his A-level exams. The night of his last exam, Father comes by the house and begs Christopher not to scream. He assures Christopher that he does not have to fear him and congratulates him on his exams. The following week, Father tells Mother that she must move out, but since she has no money, she can't.

Then, Mother gets a job, and the doctor gives her some pills to keep her from being sad. The pills work okay, but sometimes she gets dizzy and falls over. Christopher and Mother move to another house, where she rents a room. Christopher doesn't like it much because he has to share a bathroom with people he doesn't know, and the hallway smells like bleach and gravy. Besides, the walls in the room he shares with his mother are brown. Things get better, however, when he helps Mother repaint them *White with a Hint of Wheat*. Christopher gets paint in his hair, but he cuts it out with scissors so his mother will not have to scrub his hair. Mother's new schedule requires Christopher to spend several hours every day at his father's house. He pushes his bed up against the door for protection, and sometimes he hears his father sitting quietly outside the door for long periods. Then Toby dies, and since there is no garden at his new residence, Christopher buries him in a flowerpot. It isn't all that bad though, because Toby was two years and seven months old, which is a lot for a rat.

One day when Mother is picking Christopher up after work, Father asks if he may speak with his son. Christopher resists but ultimately relents. Father begs him for forgiveness and trust, and then he produces a big box with a gift for Christopher. The gift is a golden retriever puppy. This breaks the ice between father and son, and they begin a tentative dialogue. It is agreed that Father will let the dog stay at his house, since he can't be kept at the rooming house. Christopher will have total access to the dog for walks and play. That night there is a thunderstorm, and lightning strikes a huge old tree by Father's house, leaving nothing but some "carbonized wood." Later in the day, Christopher gets the results of his A-level exams, and in spite of the fact that he was worried because he was so tired, he receives an A grade on each section. Christopher reiterates his plans for Further Math and Physics, the university and a high paying job. Then he concludes *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* with the following comment: "And I know I can do this because I went to London on my own, and I solved the mystery of *Who Killed Wellington* and I found my mother and I was brave and I wrote a book and that means I can do anything."

## Chapter 233 Analysis

After a somewhat plodding but entertaining trip, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* winds up quickly and perhaps a little too neatly in this concluding chapter. Within the span of a single chapter, Mother loses her job in England but gets another one in Swindon. Christopher fears his father one moment and begins reconciliation with him the next. He can't take his A-level exams, but then he does and aces them. His rat

dies, but he gets a new dog. Everybody lives happily—sort of—ever after, at least in Christopher's head.



# Characters

## Christopher

In some respects, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* is a character study more than a novel. Fifteen-year-old Christopher, the autistic genius who narrates the book, is the center of everything. The gist of the novel is more about peeking inside a unique mind than it is about solving the mystery of who killed a dog. Christopher's life is about absolutes, logic and truth. When he discovers the dead dog, Wellington, a standard poodle, he decides to write a book about his efforts to solve the murder. Christopher is incapable of lying, which makes him an unlikely narrator for a fictional work, but within his narration, the fictional character Christopher speaks only the truth. The truth that Christopher speaks is as revealing of the foibles of normal people as it is of the internal workings of an autistic child's mind.

Christopher attends a school for children with special needs, where his primary teacher is a lady named Siobhan. Siobhan guides Christopher through the challenges of developing acceptable social habits, which is an often humorous, sometimes heart-wrenching process. Christopher is incapable of appropriately linking emotions and feelings with the thoughts in his mind, and he is thus incapable of appropriate emotional response. Christopher is totally self-centric and self-absorbed. To him, the world inside his mind is the *only* world. He is only tenuously and abstractly capable of grasping the notion that other people have minds too.

When things go wrong in Christopher's world (e.g., his mind) his emotional reactions manifest themselves in behavior that might be interpreted by observers as a tantrum or fit. He will curl up in a ball on the floor of a crowded department store and scream or "do moaning." If two foods on his plate touch each other, he won't eat them. He responds negatively, and sometimes violently, to encounters with the colors yellow and brown, but he loves red. He cannot stand to be touched, and he will hit offenders or threaten them with the saw blade of his Swiss Army knife, "which could cut off a finger." He will listen to loud static on a portable radio to drown out offensive noises or squeeze his head in between two bongo drums to avoid listening to others fuss and fight. In fact, these are not tantrums, which are engineered to attract attention to the perpetrator, but defense mechanisms that allow him to retreat from the over-stimulation of the outside world, into the relative order of his own world.

## Father

Christopher's father owns a company that installs and repairs boilers and heating systems. He is a hard-working, hands-on owner/operator. Father clearly loves his son very deeply. In the absence of Mother, he tries to be all things at all times to Christopher, but the tremendous stress of caring for his special needs son is sometimes



overwhelming. More than once, he throws his hands up in frustration or holds his head in his hands uttering such things as, “Jesus wept.”

In one case, he gives in to “the red mist” of rage. That is when he impales Wellington with a garden fork. Father goes to great lengths to protect his son, but his choices are not always wise. His decision to lie to Christopher about his mother, saying she has died when, in fact, she has run off with their neighbor, Mr. Shears, creates huge problems that cost him his son’s trust when he learns the truth.

At other times, Father is the gallant defender, standing up for his son’s dignity in the face of insensitive bureaucracy and inappropriate authority. When Christopher is arrested, Father vents his anger on the detective investigating the case, and when the headmistress at the school refuses to let Christopher take his A-level math exams, Father shames her into acquiescence. When Christopher learns on his own that his mother’s death is a lie, and when Father admits to murdering Wellington, Father becomes a monster in Christopher’s eyes. Since Father murdered Wellington, Christopher reasons, he might very well murder his son. In Christopher’s eye, murder is murder—dog or man. Because Father lied to Christopher, who views the world in absolutes, he is never to be trusted again.

## Mother

There are actually two mothers in Haddon’s book. There is Dead Mother, an invention of Father to reconcile his son to abandonment, and there is the Real Mom, who ran away to London with her lover. The dead mom is a creature of memories, truncated two years ago in Christopher’s mind, when Father wove a tale of heart attacks, hospitalization and death. She is someone whom Christopher recalls with mixed emotions, or Christopher’s substitutes for emotions. She was usually accommodating and understanding, but she often broke under the stress of Christopher’s relentless demands on her attention and the embarrassment he created by public displays of frustration. She clearly loved her son, but she would sometimes succumb to rage and strike him. She tries to explain her love, and her inability to cope, in weekly letters to Christopher after she leaves Swindon for London. To support the lie of her death, though, Father doesn’t show the letters to Christopher. It is a traumatic event when he stumbles across them. Real Mom lives in London with her lover in a relationship that is not going as smoothly as they may have hoped when they abandoned their respective vows.

Christopher’s first view of his newly resurrected parent is while she is chastising Mr. Shears for making her look foolish at some function from which they are returning. It is immediately clear that Christopher living in the small London Flat with Mom and Mr. Shears simply isn’t going to work. Christopher, though probably unaware that he is doing it, effectively engineers the dissolution of the two-year-old relationship. Following a series of arguments between Mom and Mr. Shears, and an expressive public demonstration when Christopher finds out that Mom has canceled his A-level math exams, Mom retreats to Swindon. Although she has forgotten about it, the move comes just in time for Christopher to sit for his exams.

## Siobhan

Siobhan is Christopher's principle teacher at the school for special children. She laboriously walks him through the tremendously difficult process of learning appropriate, or at least not hideously disturbing, social responses, and she stands back and facilitates his genius for math and physics. When one of Christopher's classmates defecates all over the floor because he likes to play in it and eat it, Siobhan allows Christopher to use the staff restroom for several days until the stigma of filth has passed from Christopher's mind. She tries to illustrate the nuances of human facial expression with smiley-face diagrams, but she laughs when Christopher uses the chart she has drawn to try to discern the hidden meaning of people's words by comparing their expressions to the chart while he is talking to them. Christopher doesn't like to be laughed at, though, so he tears up the chart. In her greatest gesture of heroism, Siobhan puts the pieces back together after Mother cancels Christopher's A-level math exams so that he can sit for them and demonstrate to everyone how brilliant he is.



## Objects/Places

Although Christopher's mind goes to the edge of the universe, the scope of Christopher's physical world is sorely limited—at least in the beginning. Before his trek to London, Christopher seldom goes anywhere except home, his special school and the store on the corner to buy sweets. As he begins to investigate Wellington's death, however, he begins to expand his horizons by interviewing his neighbors. During his trip to London, though, Christopher's environment explodes. Every step is a new place, and every destination is a monumental accomplishment, attained through colossal adventures, at least when viewed through Christopher's eyes. Significant places include the Swindon Train Depot, the train's toilet, his near-toilet hiding place, London and Mother's flat.

Significant objects include the murder weapon, which is a three-pronged garden fork, Christopher's Swiss Army knife, with "a saw blade that could cut off a finger," the purloined letters from Mother, red cars and yellow cars, which are harbingers of good and bad days, an electric train set Christopher had as a child, his special food cupboard and Toby's cage.

# Themes

## Spirituality and Darwinian Survival

There are intermittent discussions of God and atheism throughout *Curious Incident*, and in Chapter 199 Christopher offers a discourse on the fundamentals of Darwinian evolution. There is no obvious connection to the plot, although the discourse occurs at a time when Christopher is having to adapt to the incredibly confusing environments he encounters on his way to London. First, he walks to school, which is a new experience but not too hard because he knows the way. Then, he has to ask directions to the train station. When he becomes lost, he draws upon his knowledge of grids, maps and the computer game Minesweeper to set up a successful search grid. Then, he must learn how to use the cash machine and buy his ticket. Every step along the way to London, he has to adapt to a new environment, and with each success his self-confidence and his very ability to adapt grows and refines itself. If you view Christopher's malady as a mutation, which in a purely Darwinian sense it is, it is not difficult to see an allegory of evolution.

On a spiritual level, Christopher illuminates the delightful contradiction, or confusion, of his spiritual views. Christopher labels himself as an atheist because he can only see in black and white. He cannot accept both evolution and religion, and he rejects the emotional and therefore the spiritual world out of hand. For this reason, he loves Sherlock Holmes, who is also an atheist, but he does not like Doyle, Holmes' real-life creator, because he believes in mysticism. It is not unusual to see an author's views expressed in his characters, and so it seems with Haddon. In an April 11, 2004 interview in the *Guardian Unlimited*, Haddon notes that since *Curious Incident*, he is frequently asked if he is an atheist. He says that, indeed, he is an atheist, but then he adds, "I am an atheist in a very religious mold... And when I find myself in church, I edit the hymns as I sing them, like President Clinton giving evidence to Kenneth Starr about Monica Lewnisky, just to make sure I'm not technically lying." He goes on to explain that religion provides believers with two contradictory things. It gives answers, while it celebrates mysteries. Science and literature, he says, fulfill those needs for him. They answer questions, but they give him mysteries he will never be able to solve.

## Bureaucratic Suppression of Individualism

Throughout *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, people in sometimes arbitrary positions of authority thwart Christopher's dreams of ambitions for the sake of convenience or bureaucratic policy. On the surface, his experiences are not much different from those of any citizen who must make a trip to the IRS tax office or the post office (with or without a weapon). Christopher's world is small, though, at least where it overlaps the so-called real world. His needs and desires are so fundamental and tightly focused that a relatively minor frustration creates monumental repercussions. Readers see an example of this in Chapter 79, when Father forbids Christopher to "do detecting"



to discover Wellington's killer. Perhaps the most egregious example, however, is when the headmistress at Christopher's school forbids him from taking the A-level math exams because it has never been done before, and then everyone would expect special treatment. Throughout the book, especially when he is questioning neighbors and on his trip to London, it seems that everyone he encounters is trying to thwart activities that, for Christopher, are tremendous growth experiences.

## Rage

In a significant way, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* is about rage and stresses that slowly build until they blossom into inappropriate human behavior. It could be argued that when Christopher resorts to screaming, moaning, thrashing and hitting when he encounters crowds, bad news, unfulfilled expectations and physical contact with strangers, he is not expressing rage but, because of his emotional disassociation, is simply practicing survival techniques. On the other hand, can rage sometimes be a survival mechanism? Christopher's rage-like behaviors are only one item in a stew of stress and rage that pervades the book. Curiously, because Christopher expresses all of his first-person observations in a flat, monotonic voice, the rage of others does not come across as stark and severe as it would in a book written in a more conventional mode, in which the reader is drawn into the mud, the blood and the beer of a bar fight or battle. Because he simply observes these incidents in a disinterested observer's voice, they come across as "oh-by-the-way" incidents. There is nothing commonplace, though, about killing a dog with a pitchfork, as Father does, or hitting a fifteen-year-old special needs kid, which both Mother and Father do. Mr. Shears reverts to rage when arguing with Father. Mrs. Shears is vociferous to Mother when she encounters her after her return to Swindon. Throughout the book are many other examples of suppressed and vented rage.

## Contradiction

Contradiction is a rich element in *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, bringing life and delight to all levels of abstraction. At the highest level, the narrator cannot lie, although he occasionally does, behind some creative rationalizations. Yet, the book is a work of fiction. Christopher's view is that fiction is just lies, because it is about things that writers just dream up. Christopher's favorite literary character is Sherlock Holmes, whom he admires because he is logical and espouses disbelief in anything not of the physical world. On the other hand, he has great disdain for Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Sherlock's creator, because he dabbles in mysticism. Although Christopher is incapable of seeing things in any other light than the purely logical, he frequently succumbs to stress with irrational rage. Christopher doesn't believe in a god, but he fairly worships order. He creates irrational rituals, such as not letting two items on his plate touch each other or going into a day-long silent fast if he sees three yellow cars on the way to school, which have absolutely no connection to reality or logic. Within his illogical rituals, though, Christopher arranges the actions and items with



impeccable precision. Sometimes, in this regard, it is difficult to distinguish whether Christopher—or Haddon—is giving us a message about him or about us.

## Truth

Throughout the novel, Christopher Boone emphasizes his inability to tell anything but the truth. "I do not tell lies," he says in Chapter 12:37. "I can't tell lies." The conflict in the book comes from Christopher's desperate attempt to make sense of his father's lies. After Christopher finds letters from his mother in his father's bedroom cupboard, he realizes his father did not tell him the truth about his mother's supposed heart attack. As his father tries to explain that he was only protecting Christopher, another lie is revealed: Christopher's father killed Wellington the dog. Christopher cannot process lies, because he believes that there was "only ever one thing which happened at a particular time and a particular place."

## Attention to Detail

Although autism causes Christopher Boone to meticulously note every detail of the world around him with fervent need, the careful attention prompts the reader to examine his own surroundings more closely. Christopher's keen eye and precise plans may appear obsessive-compulsive, yet they teach the reader an important and positive lesson in how to interact with other people, how to experience new places, and how to approach new situations. Certainly not every cow in a field must be counted, but Christopher's reasoning reminds the reader that even those people who are not adventurous and often stay inside their comfort zone have nothing to fear if they plan accordingly and proceed one step at a time. When Christopher becomes overwhelmed by sensory overload at times, he calms himself by solving mathematical equations, counting cows, or looking at the stars. This self-comfort prompts the reader to imagine personal ways that one might handle stressful situations. Even Christopher retreating to a bench at the subway station shows it is possible to manage overwhelming anxiety.

## The Order of Life

In an interview for [Powells.com](http://Powells.com), Haddon says,

All of us feel, to a certain extent, alienated from the stuff going on around us. And all of us at some point, rather like Christopher, have chaos entering our lives. We have these limited strategies we desperately use to try to put our lives back in order.

*The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* focuses on Christopher Boone's need to put together pieces of this mystery. He uses his deductive reasoning skills and his keen eye for detail to find the truth, in terms of uncovering both Wellington's killer and his father's secrets. Only when the world encroaches on his personal space or overwhelms him does Christopher lose control.



# Style

## Point of View

Told in the first person, everything in *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* is seen through the eyes of Christopher, the fifteen-year-old genius but autistic narrator and is processed through his remarkable mind. The emotional outbursts of those around Christopher are told in a matter-of-fact style that makes episodes of rage somehow distant. The unique perspective of Christopher's logic-seeking and selfish mind colors everything in the narrative. At the same time, Christopher's own behavior is much more understandable from the point of view of his own mind than it might be to an outsider looking in.

## Setting

The setting is modern England, first in the small town of Swindon, then in London and eventually back to Swindon. Although Christopher's mind goes to the edge of the universe, the scope of Christopher's physical world is sorely limited—at least in the beginning. Before his trek to London, Christopher seldom goes anywhere except home, his special school and the store on the corner to buy sweets. As he begins to investigate Wellington's death, however, he begins to expand his horizons by interviewing his neighbors. During his trip to London, though, Christopher's environment explodes. Every step is a new place, and every destination is a monumental accomplishment, attained through colossal adventures, at least when viewed through Christopher's eyes.

## Language and Meaning

The language is simple and straightforward, spoken in the tongue of a fifteen-year-old who "sees everything," cannot tell a lie (although he does occasionally) and believes in nothing that is not real. Occasionally, Christopher's narration becomes bogged down in discussion of abstractions, math or science. His written voice lacks emotion, and his narration is colored with numbered lists, formulas, diagrams and illustrations. Christopher's style reflects his mind, where emotions are nearly impossible to deal with but where logic and math is a refuge.

## Structure

*The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* is a work of fifty mostly short chapters, all of which are narrated in the first person by Christopher, the central character. Christopher uses numerous illustrations, charts, graphs and formulas to illustrate his narrative points and to underscore his brilliance with math and science.



## First-person Point of View

*The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* is written from the first-person point of view. Christopher Boone writes his personal account of a mystery, the murder of Wellington the dog, and along the way, becomes involved in the mystery of his mother's death. Christopher's first-person account is credible and detailed. Perhaps Christopher's autistic condition allows the reader to easily believe him when he claims that he cannot tell lies. In any case, the vast amount of straight-forward, deductive detail that Christopher provides coaxes the reader into believing his tale.

## Structure

Prime numbers make up the most superficial structural element of *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*. Because Christopher Boone likes prime numbers, he uses them to order the chapters, rather than cardinal numbers. Prime numbers also reflect the mystery narrative in the novel. In Christopher's opinion, figuring out which numbers are prime is rather like solving a mystery because they "are what is left when you have taken all the patterns away."

Two mystery narratives frame the story: the murder of Wellington and the secret of Christopher's mother's "death." Just as Christopher details the world to move comfortably through it, he must pay attention to the events of each mystery to solve it. The book follows Christopher's process step by step, clue by clue, until the narratives culminate in the truth near the end of the novel. Among the chapters that push the mysteries closer to revelation, Christopher digresses, filling other chapters with personal thoughts on life, God, stars, and white lies.

## Motifs

Throughout the novel, plans, maps, drawings, and other visuals illustrate Christopher's need to physically and mentally record the world and his actions within it. Just as Christopher enjoys timetables because they note "when everything is going to happen," lists and pictures help Christopher remember how to predict and deal with certain situations and things.

Christopher Boone leans on numbers as a logical means to make sense out of the world. When situations, settings, and people confuse or upset him, he turns to mathematical equations to calm himself. Mathematics also represent the future for Christopher; he hopes to pass his A-levels, then go to university where he will study either mathematics or physics and make a new independent life for himself. Numbers also help Christopher keep track of his behavioral problems, his likes and dislikes, and his daily activities.



# Historical Context

## Autism

Autism is a brain disorder usually diagnosed in children younger than three. Like Christopher Boone, people with autism typically have problems with social interaction and communication, and changes in routine can often be upsetting for them. Repetitive preoccupations and an obsessive interest in languages, numbers, and symbols also characterize a person with autism. At this time, the cause of autism is unknown, though many experts believe it to be a genetic-based disorder that occurs before birth.

Christopher Boone has a particular form of autism called Asperger's Syndrome, or A. S. His obsession with detail, mathematics, colors, and astronomy, as well as his unwavering attention to routine and violent aversion to socialization, all reflect his condition, though it is unnamed in the novel.

Asperger Syndrome is a form of autism first noticed in 1944 by Hans Asperger, a German doctor. According to Barbara L. Kirby, founder of *Online Asperger Syndrome Information and Support* and co-author of *The Oasis Guide to Asperger Syndrome*:

[People with A. S.] have a great deal of difficulty reading nonverbal cues (body language) and very often the individual with AS has difficulty determining proper body space. Often overly sensitive to sounds, tastes, smells, and sights, the person with AS may prefer soft clothing, certain foods, and be bothered by sounds or lights no one else seems to hear or see.

The National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke explains:

Children with A. S. want to know everything about their topic of interest and their conversations with others will be about little else. Their expertise, high level of vocabulary, and formal speech patterns make them seem like little professors. Other characteristics of A. S. include repetitive routines or rituals; peculiarities in speech and language; socially and emotionally inappropriate behavior and the inability to interact successfully with peers; problems with non-verbal communication; and clumsy and uncoordinated motor movements.

## Math-related Jobs

In *The Curious Incident of the Dog in Night-time*, Christopher Boone imagines a future career in mathematics or physics. As Christopher demonstrates in the novel, studying mathematics requires patience, attention to detail, discipline, and keen problem-solving skills. The career office at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology lists medicine, government, education, environment, scientific writing, and information science as possible fields for students like Christopher who are interested in mathematics as a career choice. People skilled in math can work as computer programmers, accountants,



financiers, systems analysts, medical researchers, auditors, cryptographers, teachers, and software designers, to name just a few occupations. A civil engineer, for example, uses math to plan and design transport systems or to analyze construction materials. Comparably, a research scientist might need math to study automobile emissions and alternative fuels.

## Poodles

Christopher Boone's mysterious adventure begins when the dog Wellington, "Not one of the small poodles that have hairstyles but a big poodle," is murdered. The American Kennel Club describes the breed: "Carrying himself proudly, very active, intelligent, the Poodle has about him an air of distinction and dignity peculiar to himself." Thus, Mark Haddon's choice for a murdered dog quite symbolic and extremely relative to the novel's exceptional protagonist, Christopher Boone.

While Wellington may not have had a hairstyle, Christopher is wrong that "big" (standard) poodles do not have hairstyles. The poodle was bred as a water dog, retrieving its master's quarry from cold waters. Its distinctive cuts originated from a practical purpose: to streamline the dog for swimming while protecting its vulnerable joints and organs from the cold. The poodle comes in three sizes: The standard is over fifteen inches in height at the shoulder; the miniature is between ten and fifteen inches tall; and the toy is smaller than ten inches. The range of sizes available in a dog that is calm, intelligent, and less apt to shed than a straight-haired dog have made the poodle a very popular pet.

## Critical Overview

Although many readers shy away from books about people with disabilities, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* inspires the public to take a chance on Christopher Boone, a fifteen-year-old boy with autism who narrates the novel. As Jackie Gropman from the *School Library Journal* explained, "his story evokes emotions in readers—heartache and frustration for his well-meaning but clueless parents and deep empathy for the wonderfully honest, funny, and lovable protagonist. Readers will never view the behavior of an autistic person again without more compassion and understanding."

Said Mel Gussow of the *New York Times*, "Mr. Haddon performed the literary equivalent of a hat trick in hockey, scoring three goals with one book: high critical praise and the admiration of other novelists, from Ian McEwan to Anne Tyler; soaring sales; and wide readership by both adults and children." Gussow also noted, "the book is layered with mystery and deadpan comedy. It also offers a deeply sensitive portrait of one of the most unusual adolescents one is likely to meet in or out of fiction." On the publisher's website, Arthur Golden, author of the best-selling novel *Memoirs of a Geisha* is quoted as saying, "I have never read anything quite like Mark Haddon's funny and agonizingly honest book, or encountered a narrator more vivid and memorable."

*The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* won Britain's 2004 Whitbread Book of the Year Award. The novel won a 2003 Listen Up Award, a 2004 Alex Award, and a 2006 British Book Award.

# Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
- Critical Essay #4



# Critical Essay #1

Currently a literature scholar, Lee has published poetic and dramatic work, as well as both short and long fiction. In this essay, she discusses how both the stream-of-consciousness technique and a time motif serve to connect Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* with Virginia Woolf's classic *Mrs. Dalloway*, particularly in terms of style, structure, and characterization.

Though Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* follows a mystery written by a teenage boy with autism who lives in the present-day London suburbs and Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* follows the day of an upper middle-class woman in post-World War I London, the novels make for interesting comparisons stylistically and structurally.

With *Mrs. Dalloway* and her earlier novels, Virginia Woolf pioneered the stream-of-consciousness style. In *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*, Mark Haddon uses this same style to tell the story and explore the personal voice of Christopher Boone, an autistic teen. Though Christopher's repetitive, meticulous, and rambling language is characteristic of his autism, the patterns and rhythm resemble Woolf's inventive style. Not long after Haddon's novel opens, for example, Christopher writes:

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.

Christopher's thoughts spill naturally onto the page, without censorship, much like the thoughts of the fictional Clarissa Dalloway. Like Christopher, Clarissa begins to loosen her tongue early in the novel, reminiscing: "How fresh, how calm, stiller than this of course, the air was in the early morning; like the flap of a wave; the kiss of a wave; chill and sharp and yet (for a girl of eighteen as she then was) solemn, feeling as she did." The description continues for another fourteen lines or so, and although Woolf's language and punctuation differ from Haddon's, the technique is the same.

Both Woolf and Haddon employ a stream-of-consciousness style to enrich and develop their characters. By using this strategy, Woolf and Haddon allow their readers to get their character's full perspective. Nothing is withheld. This approach emphasizes the obsessive-compulsive behavior of Christopher Boone and the characters of *Mrs. Dalloway*. Christopher takes note of the world to anticipate how it will affect him. Bathrooms, books, and backyards are fully assessed before Christopher proceeds with any activity, decision, or even exploration. He explains this in Chapter 42: 181:

And when I am in a new place, because I see everything, it is like when a computer is doing too many things at the same time and the central processor unit is blocked up and there isn't any space left to think about other things. And when I am in a new place and there are lots of people there it is even harder because people are not like cows and flowers and grass and they can talk to you and do things that you don't expect, so you



have to notice everything that is in the place, and also you have to notice things that might happen as well.

Similarly, while the characters in Mrs. Dalloway sit on a bench or wait for traffic to pass, they notice everything, from omnibuses and the chime of Big Ben to Acts of Parliament, as illustrated by Clarissa's narration:

And everywhere, though it was still so early, there was a beating, a stirring of galloping ponies, tapping of cricket bats; Lords, Ascot, Ranelagh and all the rest of it; wrapped in the soft mesh of the grey-blue morning air, which, as the day wore on, would unwind them, and set down on their lawns and pitches the bouncing ponies, whose forefeet just struck the ground and up they sprung, the whirling young men, and laughing girls in their transparent muslins who, even now, after dancing all night, were taking their absurd woolly dogs for a run; and even now, at this hour, discreet old dowagers were shooting out in their motor cars on errands of mystery; and the shopkeepers were fidgeting in their windows with their paste and diamonds, their lovely old sea-green brooches in eighteenth century settings to tempt Americans.

Because stream-of-consciousness narration does not filter the thoughts of a character, this particular style helps reflect the common theme of truth in both *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* and *Mrs. Dalloway*. By following every twist and turn of Christopher Boone's thoughts, the reader feels nothing important is held back. Christopher is trustworthy, and when he makes remarks like, "I do not tell lies," the reader tends to believe him, particularly when the statement is demonstrated by other uncensored commentary such as,

I think I would make a very good astronaut. To be a good astronaut you have to be intelligent and I'm intelligent. You also have to understand how machines work and I'm good at understanding how machines work. You also have to be someone who would like being on their own in a tiny spacecraft thousands and thousands of miles away from the surface of the earth and not panic or get claustrophobia or homesick or insane.

In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf offers more than one narrator. But even though the stream-of-consciousness narrative is woven from the thoughts of multiple characters, the effect is the same. The mass of feeling and observation rolls forward with abandon, often suggesting a collective truth to the reader, as in this section in which the reader is simultaneously privy to Rezia's and Septimus's points of view. In the previous paragraph, Rezia begins the narrative, but in the section that follows, it is not obvious when Rezia ends and Septimus begins:

But he would not go mad. He would shut his eyes; he would see no more. But they beckoned; leaves were alive; trees were alive. And the leaves being connected by millions of fibres with his own body, there on the seat, fanned it up and down; when the branch stretched, he, too, made that statement.

Septimus Smith is growing mad from post-traumatic stress disorder brought on by his experiences in the war, and the stream-of-consciousness style connects his emotional



state with the world around him. Clarissa Dalloway makes a community narrative even more obvious:

Somehow in the streets of London, on the ebb and flow of things, here, there, she survived, Peter survived, lived in each other, she being part, she was positive, of the trees at home; of the house there, ugly, rambling all to bits and pieces as it was; part of people she had never met; being laid out like a mist between the people she knew best, who lifted her on their branches as she had seen the trees lift their mist, but it spread ever so far, her life, herself.

Though Christopher Boone records the mystery of the murder of Wellington the dog in his point of view, he also reaches moments of communal experience, particularly when he finds himself among crowds, as in this upsetting incident in the subway station:

And then the roaring turned into a clattering and a squealing and it slowly got quieter and then it stopped and I kept my eyes closed because I felt safer not seeing what was happening. And then I could hear people moving again because it was quieter. And I opened my eyes but I couldn't see anything at first because there were too many people.... And there was sweat running down my face from under my hair and I was moaning, not groaning but different, like a dog when it has hurt its paw, and I heard the sound but I didn't realize it was me at first.

For Clarissa, her engagement with the world is positive, a "mist spread ever so far." For Christopher, however, he is "safer not seeing" the "mist rambling" around him. He finds it hard to "survive" the "ebb and flow of things" and "moans" and "groans" when other people "spread" into him.

Although the stream-of-consciousness style provides a foundation for both *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* and *Mrs. Dalloway*, each novel is also structured by time and clocks. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, the strike of Big Ben urges plot and character forward and begins in Clarissa's point of view:

There! Out it boomed. First, a warning, a musical; then the hour, irrevocable. The leaden circles dissolved in the air. Such fools we are, she thought, crossing Victoria Street. For Heaven only knows why one loves it so, how one sees it so, making it up, building round one, tumbling it, creating every moment afresh.

Clarissa sees time controlling everything and everyone. She sees the joy in "every moment afresh," yet considers herself, and others, foolish for doing so. She hears her life moving toward an end with every "leaden circle," every "warning." Clarissa and other characters in *Mrs. Dalloway* react emotionally to time, as shown by this example when Peter, Clarissa's old flame, leaves her home after a tense visit: "The sound of Big Ben striking the half-hour stuck out between them with extraordinary vigour, as if a young man, strong, indifferent, inconsiderate, were swinging dumb-bells this way and that."

To Clarissa and Peter, time represents the missed opportunities in their past and the awkward feelings in their present. Christopher Boone, on the other hand, views time simply as "the relationship between the way different things change." He explains that



"time is a mystery" and that "no one has ever solved the puzzle of what time is exactly." Like Clarissa, he knows he cannot control time; however, he regards time in a logical fashion. He does not like "every moment afresh," though in a way, he does see that time can be a "warning" of sorts. Because of his autistic nature, Christopher prefers marking time with timetables "because [he] like[s] to know when everything is going to happen." If there is no "map of time," time can run wild, and, similar to Clarissa, Christopher fears becoming lost in the spontaneity of it all. Early in the novel, when Christopher is arrested for hitting a policeman after being found at the crime scene, he is asked to leave his watch at the front desk of the police station. Christopher refuses, "need[ing] to keep [his] watch on because [he] needed to know exactly what time it was." Christopher sees time "building round one" and prefers to keep track of every moment. Throughout the novel, as Christopher becomes emotionally distraught, he loses track of time and memories, as shown by the incident when he discovers his father had lied about his mother's death: "I don't know what happened then because there is a gap in my memory, like a bit of the tape had been erased. But I know that a lot of time must have passed because later on, when I opened my eyes again, I could see that it was dark outside the window. And I had been sick because there was sick all over the bed and on my hands and arms and face." After this incident and others, Christopher wakes up confused, his own personal clock upset because he does not know the precise time.

Although *Mrs. Dalloway* is a literary classic and the poetic lushness of Woolf's metaphorical language starkly contrasts Mark Haddon's spare, straightforward approach to *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*, the novels connect on a stylistic and structural level. The stream-of-consciousness style provides a strong foundation for both stories, as well as keen insight into their casts of characters. But the comparison does not stop there. Further study of number, pattern, and flower motifs, particular note of repetition, and an exploration of metaphor would deepen the relationship between both popular novels and enrich discussion about classic and contemporary masterworks.

**Source:** Michelle Lee, Critical Essay on *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*, in *Literary Newsmakers for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2007.



## Critical Essay #2

*In the following essay, Mullan analyzes the literary device of the "inadequate narrator" as a service to readers who want to explore Haddon's novel in greater depth.*

There is a special type of first-person narrative that requires the reader to supply what the narrator cannot understand. Much of what "happens" in *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* is not grasped by Christopher, its narrator. The reader comprehends, as Christopher never will, the farcical drama of parental discord that he witnesses. Even when he discovers the truth about his mother, but living in London with a lover, he has no idea of his father's reasons for lying (his cowardice and protectiveness).

Christopher, the book jacket tells you, has Asperger's syndrome, though this is never named in the novel. He has no understanding of others' emotions, though he doggedly records their symptoms. "He looked at me for a long time and sucked air in through his nose," he observes, when his father is, we infer, near despair. Yet requiring the reader to fill in these gaps allows for a tragicomic intuition of characters' feelings that a more adequate narrator could not manage.

The "inadequate narrator" is not an established critical term. Yet the more usual "unreliable narrator" seems inaccurate for a narrator who, however un-comprehending, is entirely trustworthy. We are not invited to be sceptical about what Christopher tells us. As he says several times, "I always tell the truth." Indeed, his very truthfulness is a kind of limitation on his understanding of the world. He cannot negotiate his way through conversations.

Narrative inadequacy is not so unusual in fiction. Think of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, whose narrator is qualified by her inarticulacy. We infer what she suffers through her inability to express it. Then there is the model for the inadequate narrator, the eponymous heroine of Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740). A 15-year-old servant girl, she is too innocent to comprehend the schemes of her predatory master, though we as readers see them all too clearly. These narrators are innocent, like Christopher, but they are also limited by their language. One effect is a satirical indictment of those nominally sophisticated adults whom each narrator describes and tries to understand.

Christopher's peculiar ingenuousness is as much fictional device as medical condition. You do not have to check him against a psychiatric textbook to believe in him as a narrator. The reader is left to piece together the meanings and motives of the characters around him; he never explains or interprets. "When I was little I didn't understand about other people having minds.... But I don't find this difficult now." He has decided to turn life into a detective story, for "if something is a puzzle there is always a way of solving it."



*A Spot of Bother* (2006) is Mark Haddon's second novel for adults and another humorous tale of an unlikely hero trying to navigate the perils of family and social relationships.

*Forrest Gump* (2002), by Winston Groom, is a story about an "idiot savant" that spans forty years of history and turns a simple man's life into an epic. The novel, like *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*, is written in first-person.

In *Hurricane Dancing: Glimpses of Life with an Autistic Child* (2004), poet D. Alison Watt and photographer Carole Ruth Fields reveal the emotional experiences of raising an autistic child through a striking combination of photographs and poetry.

Virginia Woolf's post-World War I novel *Mrs. Dalloway* follows Clarissa Dalloway through London on the morning before her grand party. Its stream-of-consciousness style and attention to detail reflect the narrative of *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*.

*Flowers for Algernon* (1959), by Daniel Keyes, is told through the viewpoint of Charlie, a mentally retarded adult who takes part in a science experiment and attains genius-level intellectual abilities only to lose them again.

The inadequate narrator lets us glimpse the inadequacies of all the adults he encounters. The reader senses the torments and forbearance of Christopher's father, uncomprehended by him. Christopher knows things about others only by their conventional signs. When his father shouts, this means anger. When there are tears "coming out of his eyes," he must be sad, though he wrongly and characteristically supposes that the cause must be the death of their neighbour's dog, Wellington.

Christopher is also detached from his own torments. When things become too much, he curls into a ball and hides in a small space, or simply screams. When he reads the letters from his mother that his father has hidden from him, he has no description to offer of his feelings, just an account of a kind of seizure. "I couldn't think of anything at all because my brain wasn't working properly." This is no figure of speech. When the patterns of thought and habits of behaviour on which he depends collapse, there is nothing else.

The irony is that his inadequacy as a guide to human psychology is balanced by a fastidious accuracy in matters of report. "I am really good at remembering things, like the conversations I have written down in this book, and what people were wearing, and what they smelled like." His exactitude shows up the evasions of the other characters. Imagining things is what makes Christopher frightened. "And this is why everything I have written here is true."

**Source:** John Mullan, "Through Innocent Eyes," in the *Guardian* (U.K.), April 24, 2004, p. 32.



## Critical Essay #3

*In the following essay, Mullan discusses the plainness of the narrator's prose in The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time.*

Many readers will have their experience of Mark Haddon's novel shaped by a technical peculiarity of which they might not be conscious. *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* uses a sans serif font: that is, a simple kind of print in which letters lack the little tails and plinths that printers call serifs. This is highly unusual in any published book; the conventional wisdom is that serifs help the brain's visual apparatus as a line of print is scanned. The tiny thickenings and thinnings of the limbs of every letter give the eye something to catch on to. Sans serif fonts may be used in advertisements, headlines and the like, but their simplicity is almost physically uncomfortable in any lengthy text.

The font's discomfiting simplicity is perfectly suited to Haddon's narrator, Christopher, in all his pedantic veracity. He narrates plainly (sometimes just cataloguing or enumerating) and the plainness is even there in the lettering. Reading a page printed like this is, I think, visually disconcerting. Graphically speaking, we are in Christopher's nuance-free world from the start. We are unsettled by its lack of variation, just as we will become conscious of his flat-voiced failure to sense the emotions and tones of the novel's other characters.

Christopher himself hardly has a tone except plainness. One of several reasons why this is intriguing in a novel (as it would not be in life) is that it comes close to parodying what the novel as a genre originally set out to achieve. In his hugely influential *The Rise of the Novel*, the critic Ian Watt described one of the distinctive features of the novel form, in its first 18th-century experiments, as "a prose which restricts itself almost entirely to a descriptive and denotative use of language." Its "realism" committed the novelist to a plain style, avoiding ornamentation and figurative extravagance.

The pioneers of whom Watt writes, Defoe and Richardson, were both mocked for their failures of elegance. Yet plainness in prose is as artificial and as difficult to achieve as figurative-ness. Haddon must have made great efforts to keep figures of speech out of his narrative. He has created a narrator for whom they are bewildering. Christopher complains about how people insist on using metaphors. "They had a skeleton in the cupboard"; "We had a real pig of a day." "I think it should be called a lie because a pig is not like a day and people do not have skeletons in their cupboards." When Christopher tries to picture such phrases "it just confuses me." He is disturbed when Mrs Shears, a neighbour who—we infer—is having a somewhat desperate affair with his father, says things like "I'm going to hit the hay" or "It's brass monkeys out there." "And I didn't like it when she said things like that because I didn't know what she meant."

For Christopher, all language's indirectness (metaphor, irony, understatement) is mysterious. His narrative is prose reduced to its most literal patterns, accuracy its only standard. It allows for some similes, but only, as Christopher himself tells us, to show us

some literal resemblance. When he says that a policeman with a very hairy nose "looked as if there were two very small mice hiding in his nostrils," it is because "it really did look like there were two very small mice hiding in his nostrils." A simile is not a lie, "unless it is a bad simile."

He reports things. He collects observations and strings together statements. Never can there have been a novel in which so many sentences, indeed so many paragraphs, begin with the word "And." Doggedly, he pursues a founding ambition of the novel: to be true to the world of circumstantial facts. "I see everything." Travelling on his own to London for the first time, he must describe exactly the condition of the lavatory on the train. His descriptions are collections of "things I noticed," unsorted by significance or priority. Sometimes he provides diagrams, as if these fulfilled the purposes of narrative in a more satisfactory way. He tells us things because they are true, and we begin to realise what a strange standard the plain truth truly is.

**Source:** John Mullan, "Letters Patent," in the *Guardian* (U.K.), May 8, 2004, p. 32.



## Critical Essay #4

*In the following essay, Mullan examines the humor in The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time as relayed by a narrator who does not perceive it.*

I am told that a teenager with Asperger's syndrome might very well have a sense of humour, even if it might seem odd to most of us. But clinical accuracy takes second place to narrative intent in Mark Haddon's novel, whose autistic narrator, Christopher, is taken to have no such sense. "This will not be a funny book," he tells us. The statement is not made ironically: Christopher means exactly what he says. Yet there is irony here, for this is a very funny book.

It is presumed that Christopher cannot understand humour because it consists in the disparity between pretension and reality. Christopher either does not see such a gap, or registers it with bafflement. "I cannot tell jokes because I do not understand them." So jokes become funny by not being seen as jokes. Christopher is surrounded by grimly jovial adults, whose jests he uncomprehendingly records (and inadvertently satirises). Here he calls on a neighbour.

Mr Thompson answered the door. He was wearing a T-shirt which said

Beer.

Helping ugly people

Have sex for

2,000 years.

Mr Thompson said, "Can I help you?"

Mr Thompson, whose conversation is undistinguished by humour, bears his printed fragment of wit as a kind of blazon. Christopher cannot understand, but duly transcribes the message. In his blank recording, the declaration of the T-shirt wearer's drollness really does become funny, and just as nonsensical as it must seem to Christopher.

But then many a joke is unfunny. Arriving in London, Christopher asks a shopkeeper the directions to his mother's flat, and is told to buy an A-Z.

And I said, "Is that the A to Z?" and I pointed at the book.

And he said, "No, it's a sodding crocodile."

And I said, "Is that the A to Z?" because it wasn't a crocodile and I thought I had heard wrongly because of his accent.

And he said, "Yes, it's the A to Z."



The retailer's sarcasm is no match for his customer's pertinacity.

There is a special humour to be gained from all exchanges with life's functionaries. Pedantically rational, Christopher sends ordinary exchanges off into strange directions. When he tries to buy a train ticket from Swindon to London, the man behind the window asks him if he wants single or return, and then has to explain these mysterious terms.

And he said, "Do you want to go one way, or do you want to go and come back?"

And I said, "I want to stay there when I get there."

And he said, "For how long?"

And I said, "Until I go to university."

And he said, "Single, then."

The ticket-salesman's wit is perfume on the desert air.

Haddon's is an unusual variation on a known technique. Think of Charles Pooter, the unconsciously absurd narrator of George and Weedon Grossmith's *Diary of a Nobody*. To hilarious effect, his authors gifted him with an utter earnestness in his genteel pretensions. In *The Curious Incident*, the narrator's humourlessness is the sine qua non of the humour. We all know the peculiar effect of deadpan humour, where our laughter is caused by the refusal of another person to acknowledge that what is said is funny. This is deadpan without the intent.

Christopher has found a neighbour's dog dead on the lawn, impaled on a garden fork. "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." From any other narrator, the long sentence here would be self-consciously, irritatingly fantastic. From Christopher, it is an earnest approximation to logic. It is funny because many of the world's incidents are mysterious, and he is just trying to cover the possible angles. You never know. And we will indeed find that the normal adults in the story are capable of the funniest (peculiar and ha-ha) actions.

**Source:** John Mullan, "Funny Old World," in *Guardian* (U.K.), May 15, 2004, p. 32.



## Quotes

“It was 7 minutes after midnight. The dog was lying on the grass in the middle of the lawn in front of Mrs. Shears’s house. Its eyes were closed. It looked as if it was running on its side. The way dogs run when they think they are chasing a cat in a dream. But the dog wasn’t running or asleep. There was a garden fork sticking out of the dog...”

“People say that Orion is called Orion because Orion was a hunter and the constellation looks like a hunter with a club and a bow and arrow... But this is really silly because it’s just stars and you could join up the dots in any way you wanted...”

“...because in life there are no straightforward answers at the end.”

“It was like somebody had switched me off and then switched me on again. And when they switched me on again I was sitting on the carpet with my back against the wall and there was blood on my right hand and the side of my head was hurting.”

“And then he held up his right hand and spread his fingers out in a fan, and I held up my left hand and spread my fingers out in a fan and we made our fingers and thumb touch each other.”

“...if you raise one eyebrow it can mean lots of different things. It can mean ‘I want to do sex with you,’ and it can also mean ‘I think what you just said is stupid.’”

“He was an inspector. I could tell that because he wasn’t wearing a uniform. He also had a very hairy nose. It looked as if there were two very small mice hiding in his nostrils.”

“This is another reason why I don’t like proper novels, because they are lies about things which didn’t happen and they make me feel shaky and scared. Everything I have written here is true.”

“...because my memory has a smelltrack which is like a soundtrack.”

“I don’t like it when people grab me... So I hit him, like I hit the police officer when he took hold of my arms and lifted me to my feet.”

“I have a Swiss Army knife and it has a saw blade and it could cut someone’s fingers off.” p. 184



## Topics for Discussion

Pathos and logos—emotion and logic—are in apparent and constant conflict throughout *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, on many different levels. In Christopher’s mind, for example, he identifies simple, stark emotions such as fear, sadness, happiness and anger, but he tends to observe these emotions as logical realities within his mood rather than actually *feeling* them. Can you find other examples of pathos in conflict with logos in other parts of the book?

There seems to be a tendency among the adults with whom Christopher comes in contact to judge him solely on the basis of his aberrant behavior. They often overlook the fact that he is incredibly bright, looking down on him rather than meeting his own level. Can you find examples of condescension and exploitation?

Euphemasia is a recently invented word, emerging from the modern fad of inventing euphemisms for every unpleasant or misunderstood aspect of life. The word “euphemasia” means the willful destruction of the English language through euphemisms. The high point of pathetic humor in *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* may be the scene in which normal students taunt Christopher and his classmates with the chant, “special needs, special needs, special needs,” a euphemism for the students’ varying conditions, mental and physical. It is true the bullies are no longer taunting with chants of “spaz,” “crip” and “mong,” but has changing the sound of the taunt actually changed anything?

What other examples of euphemasia or euphemism can you find in Haddon’s book? How does this relate to real life? Can you find real examples in your own world where more socially acceptable words may soften the label but have little to do with actual usage and meaning?

After reading *Curious Incident*, there can be little doubt that Mark Haddon has a sense of humor. Perhaps the most poignant bit of wit is in the structure of the novel itself. Here is a novel about a novelist who is incapable telling a lie, while a novel, by its nature, is fiction—a big bundle of lies. How does Haddon carry this off? Christopher, Haddon’s novelist character, has a rich and fertile imagination, and he doesn’t hesitate for a moment to take his readers on fantastic adventures in which Christopher becomes an astronaut or clouds become alien spaceships. Still, Christopher is not telling lies in this. He is simply reporting objectively on the images and thoughts that are, in fact, occurring in his mind. What could be more truthful? Discuss the relationship of truth and untruth in this unique novel.

Christopher is a champion manipulator, although he is apparently unaware of it, and his victims haven’t a clue. What are some specific examples of how Christopher manipulates “normal” adults into doing his wishes?

- Christopher Boone notices every detail of the world around him. Though Christopher’s autism inspires his attentiveness, every reader can learn from his



approach to life. Using Christopher's keen senses as inspiration, write an essay describing your bedroom, your classroom, or your favorite place to a friend.

- Throughout *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*, Christopher learns how to define and tell white lies. Early in the story, he says he "is a good person" because he "can't tell lies." Christopher defines a white lie as "not a lie at all," but "where you tell the truth but you do not tell all of the truth." Discuss the difference between white lies and regular lies with a friend or small group. Afterward, write an essay that summarizes your thoughts regarding white lies and regular lies. Include a personal experience to illustrate your thoughts.
- The entire novel is written from Christopher's point of view. Think about how this story would be different if it included Siobhan's, Ed Boone's, or even Mrs. Alexander's point of view. Write an essay answering one or more of the following questions: How would having the point of view of other characters in the novel alter the story's credibility? How would having their point of view change a reader's perception of Christopher? How would a different narrative style modify the mystery elements?
- *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* is an unusual novel for many of reasons. One obvious difference between this novel and others is Mark Haddon's use of visuals, rather than just text. Write an essay about at least three visual cues in the novel. Discuss how they add an additional dimension to the characterization of Christopher as well as to the development of the plot.
- Do you think that the term "love" applies to the relationship between Christopher and his parents? Between Christopher's mother and Mr. Shears? Is Christopher capable of love as you define it? Divide into pairs and examine these questions by taking turns adopting the perspectives of the pairs of characters in the novel who are arguably joined by love: Christopher and his father, Christopher and his mother, Christopher's mother and Mr. Shears, Christopher's father and Mrs. Shears.

## Further Study

Barrow, Judy and Sean Barrow, *There's a Boy in Here*, Future Horizons, 2002.

A rare autobiographical account written by a boy with autism, this book provides insight into life with the disability.

Doyle, Sir Arthur Conan, *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, Berkley, 1987 reissue.

This Sherlock Holmes mystery deals with a local supernatural legend about a seventeenth-century aristocrat and the violent family dog.



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Haddon, Mark, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*, Vintage Contemporaries, 2004.

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Oakes, Keily, "The Curious Tale of Author Haddon," in *BBC News*, [news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/3375965.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/3375965.stm) (January 7, 2004).

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Weich, Dave, "The Curiously Irresistible Literary Debut of Mark Haddon," in *Powells.com*, March 28, 2006, p. 8.

Woolf, Virginia, *Mrs. Dalloway* Harcourt, 1925, pp. 3-5, 9, and 22.



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## **Introduction**

### **Purpose of the Book**

The purpose of Novels for Students (NfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's "For Students" Literature line, NfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on "classic" novels frequently



studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

### Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel; and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of "classic" novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members—educational professionals—helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

### How Each Entry Is Organized



Each entry, or chapter, in NfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- **Introduction:** a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- **Author Biography:** this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- **Plot Summary:** a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- **Characters:** an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed—for instance, the narrator in *Invisible Man*—the character is listed as "The Narrator" and alphabetized as "Narrator." If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. • Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name "Jean Louise Finch" would head the listing for the narrator of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname "Scout Finch."
- **Themes:** a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- **Style:** this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- **Historical Context:** This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- **Critical Overview:** this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- **Criticism:** an essay commissioned by NfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).



- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an “at-a-glance” comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author’s time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

### Other Features

NfS includes “The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,” a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children’s Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Novels for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.



Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

### Citing Novels for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Novels for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from NfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

“Night.” Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234–35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from NfS (usually the first piece under the “Criticism” subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on “Winesburg, Ohio.” Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335–39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. “Margaret Atwood’s “The Handmaid’s Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,” Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9–16; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133–36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. “Richard Wright: “Wearing the Mask,” in *Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography* (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69–83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59–61.

### We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Novels for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: [ForStudentsEditors@gale.com](mailto:ForStudentsEditors@gale.com). Or write to the editor at:

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