

Book Review

The Remains of the Dog

This novel's hero is a 15-year-old autistic savant who's investigating a neighborhood killing.

THE CURIOUS INCIDENT OF THE DOG IN THE NIGHT-TIME

By Mark Haddon.
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By Jay McInerney

THE difference between literature and its imitations might be defined in any number of ways, but let's be reckless, even elitist, and propose that a literary novel requires new reading skills and teaches them within its pages, while a conventional novel — whether it is about lawyers or professors or smart single girls — depends on our ingrained habits of reading and perception, and ultimately confirms them as adequate to our understanding of the world around us. Mark Haddon's stark, funny and original first novel, "The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time," is presented as a detective story. But it eschews most of the furnishings of high-literary enterprise as well as the conventions of genre, disorienting and reorienting the reader to devastating effect.

Fifteen-year-old Christopher Boone of Swindon, England, seems, at first glance, an unpromising narrator for a novel — a curious hybrid of reliable and unreliable. By his own admission he doesn't like fiction. He is incapable of lying, of understanding metaphor or jokes. He's also incapable of reading any but the most basic of human facial expressions. "Usually people look at you when they're talking to you. I know that they're working out what I'm thinking, but I can't tell what they're thinking. It is like being in a room with a one-way mirror in a spy film." His own range of emotional response is so limited he makes the repressed butler in Kazuo Ishiguro's "Remains of the Day" — a novel that this one resembles in its elegant economy of means — seem like Zorba the Greek.

The book's jacket copy identifies him as an autistic savant, but Christopher tells us all we need to know about his condition without reference to medical terminology — just as well, since the term "autism" encompasses a variety of symptoms and behavioral problems that are still baffling behavioral scientists. The American Psychiatric Association definition includes "problems with social interaction, verbal and nonverbal communication and a restrictive repertoire of activities and interests." The problems of autism are related to how the brain processes, organizes and retrieves information; Christopher compares his own brain to a computer that is easily overloaded by multitasking. He has a photographic memory and is capable of working out complicated factoring problems in his head but is so overwhelmed by

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unfamiliar visual or verbal stimuli that sometimes he shuts down, holding his hands over his eyes or his ears while he groans or screams. He abhors physical contact, new environments and the colors yellow and brown.

Haddon manages to bring us deep inside Christopher's mind and situates us comfortably within his limited, severely logical point of view, to the extent that we begin to question the common sense and the erratic emotionalism of the normal citizens who surround him, as well as our own intuitions and habits of perception.

Christopher's mind is logical and literal in the extreme; early on he suggests that metaphor is a form of lying, pointing out that very few people actually have skeletons in their closets or apples in their eyes. "When I try and make a picture of the phrase in my head it just confuses me because imagining an apple in someone's eye doesn't have anything to do with liking someone a lot and it makes you forget what the person was talking about." Christopher's inability to tell lies is one of the many reasons he has difficulty engaging in, or understanding, normal social intercourse. And his distaste for falsehood is one reason he doesn't like novels, except for murder mysteries, which are essentially puzzles, Sherlock Holmes being his literary hero — though he has problems with Arthur Conan Doyle, Holmes's creator, who became involved with spiritualism later in life. Christopher's mind is purely scientific.

One of the subtle ironies of the book, given the evolution of the murder mystery detective toward the tough guys of Hammett and Chandler, is that young Christopher is ultimately far more hard-boiled than any gumshoe in previous detective fiction; unlike Sam Spade or Nick Charles, he has no sentimental streak, no underground reservoir of emotional identification with other human beings — although he is fond of dogs.

When Christopher discovers his neighbor's poodle dead, skewered on a pitchfork, he sets out to solve the mystery and to write a true account of his detective work. In so doing he inadvertently stumbles upon the messy, illogical, emotionally compli-

cated secrets of his parents and their neighbors. And even as he is finally forced to come to some limited accommodation of this knowledge, he makes a kind of plausible case for his own, ostensibly crippled worldview. Perhaps the greatest mystery here is whether Christopher is capable of change — a question that goes to the heart of certain deeply held convictions about character.

If all this sounds somewhat grim and clinical, it's not. Christopher's skewed perspective and fierce logic make him a superb straight man, if not necessarily a stellar detective. In the course of interrogating one of his neighbors, while waiting impatiently for her to cut the chitchat, he observes: "Mrs. Alexander was doing what is called chatting, where people say things to each other which aren't questions and answers and aren't connected. . . . I tried to do chatting by saying, 'My age is 15 years and 3 months and 3 days.'" His inability to interpret basic social cues results in great moments of deadpan comedy, with strangers as well as with his patient, long-suffering father.

MIDWAY through the book, Christopher's quest for the dog's murderer becomes a search for his mother, who his father has told him is dead. His solo journey from Swindon to London is, for him, a terrifying leap into the unknown, as suspenseful and harrowing as anything in Conan Doyle. He literally sees everything around him and is unable to edit the onslaught of sensory data in a new environment. And he is afraid of strangers and ill equipped to ask for their help.

Christopher's book seemingly has a nice tidy ending, as he would have wished — horrified as he is of indeterminacy. But this tidiness is an illusion, as the gulf between Christopher and his parents, between Christopher and the rest of us, remains immense and mysterious. And that gulf is ultimately the source of this novel's haunting impact. Christopher Boone is an unsolved mystery — but he is certainly one of the strangest and most convincing characters in recent fiction. □