



Lesson Plans and Resources

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These resources are all available, both separately and together, at www.freelibrary.org/onebook

Please send any comments or feedback about these resources to Larissa.Pahomov@gmail.com.

OVERVIEW AND ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

The materials in this unit plan are meant to be flexible and easy to adapt to your own classroom. Each chapter has discussion questions provided in a later section.

Through reading the book and completing any of the suggested activities, students can achieve any number of the following understandings:

- *We all see and interpret the world differently – and each way of looking at it provides its own unique insight.*
- *No matter how close people are, they will never completely understand one another.*
- *Humans can create fantastic systems and coping mechanisms to get through the world, despite significant disability or hardship.*

Students should be introduced to the following key questions as they begin reading. They can be discussed both in universal terms and in relation to specific characters in the book:

Universal

- *How do we know what we know? How do we use our brains to interpret the world?*
- *How well can children understand their parents?*
- *What tools do humans have to overcome challenges or hardship?*

Book-Specific

- *How does Christopher perceive the world? What mechanisms does he use to understand what is happening around him?*
- *What are the differences between Christopher and his parents? What does he understand about them? What might he never understand?*
- *How does Christopher get through his world without breaking down or giving up?*

Many of the reader response questions and suggested projects relate to these essential questions, and they can be looped back to frequently.

IN-CLASS INTRODUCTION

This lesson is designed to provide students with a one-class introduction to the book. The lesson can be used to start off a class reading of the text, or to encourage them to read it independently.

As a recipient of One Book resources, the Free Library requires that you devote one class period to introducing *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* to students, either using this lesson or your own plan.

Introduction

1. Individually or in groups, have students write down the name of a family pet on an index card. (Students can have one pet per group.)
2. Talk students through the following prompts:
 - a. Bad news: you've come home and just discovered that your dear pet has been killed – it's in the front yard with a fork (or a knife) through it. Respond to the following prompts on paper:
 - i. What's the first thing you say when you see your dead pet?
 - ii. What are you feeling like on the inside? Describe.
 - iii. What is the first thing you would do after walking in on this horrible scene?
 - iv. Do you have any idea who might have done this to your pet?
 - v. Who would make you feel better about what had happened? How would they do this?
3. Hand out copies of "The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time." Read sections 1-11 (pages 1-8).
4. Discuss:
 - a. What does Christopher think about the dog he finds?
 - b. How do you think he feels about his finding? How does his reaction compare to yours?
 - c. What do you think will happen to Christopher next, based on the events so far? Does this seem right or fair to you?
5. If students need an additional hook to visualize the novel, show the one-minute "trailer" for the play version of the book: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UVrOsXhG61Q>

Correlation to Common Core Standards for Grades 11-12

INTRODUCTION LESSON + DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Reading Standards for Literature

1. Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.
2. Determine two or more themes or central ideas of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to produce a complex account; provide an objective summary of the text.
10. By the end of grade 11, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems, in the grades 11–CCR text complexity band proficiently, with scaffolding as needed at the high end of the range.
By the end of grade 12, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems, at the high end of the grades 11–CCR text complexity band independently and proficiently

Speaking and Listening Standards

1. Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 11–12 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
2. Integrate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) in order to make informed decisions and solve problems, evaluating the credibility and accuracy of each source and noting any discrepancies among the data.

VOCABULARY

Reading Standards for Literature

4. Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including words with multiple meanings or language that is particularly fresh, engaging, or beautiful.

Language Standards

4. Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases based on grades 11–12 reading and content, choosing flexibly from a range of strategies.
6. Acquire and use accurately general academic and domain-specific words and phrases, sufficient for reading, writing, speaking, and listening at the college and career readiness level; demonstrate independence in gathering vocabulary knowledge when considering a word or phrase important to comprehension or expression.

ANALYTICAL + CREATIVE ASSESSMENTS

Writing Standards

1. Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.
3. Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences
4. Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience. (Grade-specific expectations for writing types are defined in standards 1–3 above.)
5. Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach, focusing on addressing what is most significant for a specific purpose and audience. (Editing for conventions should demonstrate command of Language standards 1–3 up to and including grades 11–12 on page 54.)
9. Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

READER RESPONSE QUESTIONS

Section 1 – Pages 1-21

- What is unique about the way Christopher views the world? How is it similar or different to the ways YOU view the world?
- What is unique about the way Christopher interacts with other people? Do you think he likes people?
- Do you think his reaction to finding the dead dog is normal? What would your reaction be?

Section 2 – Pages 22-43

- What do you think of Christopher's strategies as a detective? Is he effective in his work?
- Does Christopher's system for deciding what kind of day it will be make sense to you? What signs or symbols do you believe in?
- How does Christopher feel about his mother?

Section 3 – Pages 43-61

- Why do you think Christopher's father forbid him from doing any more detective work?
- What does it show about Christopher that he finds a way around his father using logic?
- Do you think it was appropriate for Mrs. Alexander to tell Christopher what she did?

Section 4 – Pages 61-83

- Why does Christopher like the Monty Hall problem?
- Why does Christopher describe his memory as working "like a film?" What advantages and disadvantages does this give him in life?
- Why is Christopher's father so angry when he finds out that Christopher is still doing his detective work?

Section 5 – Pages 83-102

Section 6 – Pages 102-124

- What does Christopher's mother reveal in the letters to her son? Do you approve of her choices?
- How about the decision Christopher's father made to hide the letters? What arguments could be made both for and against his choice?
- When Christopher's father tells him who killed Wellington, how does Christopher react? Do you agree with how he feels?

Section 7 – pages 125-155

- Do you agree with Christopher's process of elimination about where he should go to live?
- Why does doing math problems in Christopher's head calm him down?
- Why is it so hard for Christopher to be in a new place?

Section 8 – pages 155-179

- Why does Christopher like timetables so much? Why does he feel that "time is not like space?"
- Why does Christopher say that the creation of life on earth was a "very special kind of accident?" Do you think he values life?
- Why is being in the underground station so stressful for Christopher, and how does he cope?

Section 9 – Pages 179-198

- How does Christopher eventually manage to get on the train? What strategies does he use?
- How do mother, father, and Mr. Shears each react to what Christopher has done?

Section 10 – Pages 198-221

- Why does Christopher dream of most people getting a virus and dying? What does his people-free world look like?
- Do you think the adults in this story are acting rationally? More or less rationally than

Reading Group Guide Questions (provided by the publisher)

1. On pages 45–48, Christopher describes his “Behavioral Problems” and the effect they had on his parents and their marriage. What is the effect of the dispassionate style in which he relates this information?
2. Given Christopher’s aversion to being touched, can he experience his parents’ love for him, or can he only understand it as a fact, because they tell him they love him? Is there any evidence in the novel that he experiences a sense of attachment to other people?
3. One of the unusual aspects of the novel is its inclusion of many maps and diagrams. How effective are these in helping the reader see the world through Christopher’s eyes?
4. What challenges does **The Curious Incident** present to the ways we usually think and talk about characters in novels? How does it force us to reexamine our normal ideas about love and desire, which are often the driving forces in fiction? Since Mark Haddon has chosen to make us see the world through Christopher’s eyes, what does he help us discover about ourselves?
5. Christopher likes the idea of a world with no people in it [p. 2]; he contemplates the end of the world when the universe collapses [pp. 10–11]; he dreams of being an astronaut, alone in space [pp. 50–51], and that a virus has carried off everyone and the only people left are “special people like me” [pp. 198–200]. What do these passages say about his relationship to other human beings? What is striking about the way he describes these scenarios?
6. On pages 67–69, Christopher goes into the garden and contemplates the importance of description in the book he is writing. His teacher Siobhan told him “the idea of a book was to describe things using words so that people could read them and make a picture in their own head” [p. 67]. What is the effect of reading Christopher’s extended description, which begins, “I decided to do a description of the garden” and ends “Then I went inside and fed Toby”? How does this passage relate to a quote Christopher likes from **The Hound of the Baskervilles**: “The world is full of obvious things which nobody by chance ever observes” [p. 73]?
7. According to neurologist Oliver Sacks, Hans Asperger, the doctor whose name is associated with the kind of autism that Christopher seems to have, notes that some autistic people have “a sort of intelligence scarcely touched by tradition and culture—unconventional, unorthodox, strangely pure and original, akin to the intelligence of true creativity” [**An Anthropologist on Mars** by Oliver Sacks, NY: Vintage Books, 1995, pp. 252–53]. Does the novel’s intensive look at Christopher’s fascinating and often profound mental life suggest that in certain ways, the pity that well-meaning, “normal” people might feel for him is misdirected? Given his gifts, does his future look promising?

8. Christopher experiences the world quantitatively and logically. His teacher Mr. Jeavons tells him that he likes math because it's safe. But Christopher's explanation of the Monty Hall problem gives the reader more insight into why he likes math. Does Mr. Jeavons underestimate the complexity of Christopher's mind and his responses to intellectual stimulation? Does Siobhan understand Christopher better than Mr. Jeavons?

9. Think about what Christopher says about metaphors and lies and their relationship to novels [pp. 14–20]. Why is lying such an alien concept to him? In his antipathy to lies, Christopher decides not to write a novel, but a book in which "everything I have written . . . is true" [p. 20]. Why do "normal" human beings in the novel, like Christopher's parents, find lies so indispensable? Why is the idea of truth so central to Christopher's narration?

10. Which scenes are comical in this novel, and why are they funny? Are these same situations also sad, or exasperating?

11. Christopher's conversations with Siobhan, his teacher at school, are possibly his most meaningful communications with another person. What are these conversations like, and how do they compare with his conversations with his father and his mother?

12. One of the primary disadvantages of the autistic is that they can't project or intuit what other people might be feeling or thinking—as illustrated in the scene where Christopher has to guess what his mother might think would be in the Smarties tube [pp. 115–16]. When does this deficit become most clear in the novel? Does Christopher seem to suffer from his mental and emotional isolation, or does he seem to enjoy it?

13. Christopher's parents, with their affairs, their arguments, and their passionate rages, are clearly in the grip of emotions they themselves can't fully understand or control. How, in juxtaposition to Christopher's incomprehension of the passions that drive other people, is his family situation particularly ironic?

14. On pages 83–84, Christopher explains why he doesn't like yellow and brown, and admits that such decisions are, in part, a way to simplify the world and make choices easier. Why does he need to make the world simpler? Which aspects of life does he find unbearably complicated or stressful?

15. What is the effect of reading the letters Christopher's mother wrote to him? Was his mother justified in leaving? Does Christopher comprehend her apology and her attempt to explain herself [pp. 106–10]? Does he have strong feelings about the loss of his mother? Which of his parents is better suited to taking care of him?

16. Christopher's father confesses to killing Wellington in a moment of rage at Mrs. Shears [pp. 121–22], and swears to Christopher that he won't lie to him ever again. Christopher thinks, "I had to get out of the house. Father had murdered Wellington. That meant he could murder me, because I couldn't trust him, even though he had said 'Trust me,' because he had told a lie about a big thing" [p. 122]. Why is Christopher's world shattered by this realization? Is it likely that he will ever learn to trust his father again?

17. How much empathy does the reader come to feel for Christopher? How much understanding does he have of his own emotions? What is the effect, for instance, of the scenes in which Christopher's mother doesn't act to make sure he can take his A-levels? Do these scenes show how little his mother understands Christopher's deepest needs?

18. Mark Haddon has said of **The Curious Incident**, “It’s not just a book about disability. Obviously, on some level it is, but on another level . . . it’s a book about books, about what you can do with words and what it means to communicate with someone in a book. Here’s a character whom if you met him in real life you’d never, ever get inside his head. Yet something magical happens when you write a novel about him. You slip inside his head, and it seems like the most natural thing in the world”

[<http://www.powells.com/authors/haddon.html>]. Is a large part of the achievement of this novel precisely this—that Haddon has created a door into a kind of mind his readers would not have access to in real life?

19. Christopher’s journey to London underscores the difficulties he has being on his own, and the real disadvantages of his condition in terms of being in the world. What is most frightening, disturbing, or moving about this extended section of the novel [pp. 169–98]?

20. In his review of **The Curious Incident**, Jay McInerney suggests that at the novel’s end “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” [*The New York Times Book Review*, 6/15/03, p. 5]. Is this an accurate assessment? If so, why?

VOCABULARY

Section 1 – Pages 1-21

Slander (14) – Because telling lies about people is a slander.

Apocryphal (16) – But he wasn't called anything because this was an apocryphal story, which means that it is a lie too.

Bosom (19) – And it had a tiny label which said Berghaus on the left bosom.

Section 2 – Pages 22-43

Section 3 – Pages 43-61

Anemic (51) – Stops you from being anemic was made in a star.

Section 4 – Pages 61-83

Yeoman (70) – And he tried to do sex with the daughter of a yeoman. But she escaped and he chased her across the moor.

Goyal (71) – Sometimes it is fun not knowing what words mean because you can look them up in a dictionary, like goyal or tors.

Tors (71) – Sometimes it is fun not knowing what words mean because you can look them up in a dictionary, like goyal or tors.

Section 5 – Pages 83-102

Section 6 – Pages 102-124

Giddy (112) – I felt giddy.

Saccade (117) – The flicks are called saccades.

Homunculus (118) – They think this person is their special human mind, which is called a homunculus, which means a little man.

Section 7 – pages 125-155

Specimen (152) – “You are a prized specimen, aren't you.”

Section 8 – pages 155-179

Truncheon (163) – “He was really close so that I could see his walk-talking and his truncheon on his belt.”

SUGGESTED ANALYTICAL ASSESSMENTS

These prompts could be used for traditional essay assignments, or for responses across a variety of mediums (live presentation, digital stories via Powerpoint or video, etc.)

1. Pick one of the following math or logic problems that is presented in the book.
 - a. Prime Numbers (page 19)
 - b. The Monty Hall Problem (page 62)
 - c. The Case of the Cottingley Fairies (page 88)
 - d. Genetic mutation (page 164)

Research the history behind the problem and present how it was discovered and solved. What is the symbolic meaning or importance of this concept.

2. Is Christopher better or worse suited to solve mysteries than the “average” human? Explain using examples from the book.
3. If Christopher were given the chance to experience the world like the “average” human, do you think he would take it? Do you think he *should* take it? Explain using examples from the book.
4. Read the New York Times Review of Books review (in PRINT RESOURCES), this quote in particular:

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.

Do you agree with this assessment of the book? Does Christopher’s “normal” successfully make the rest of the world seem strange? Develop your response and then track the ways you think the text is successful in challenging your own perception of the world, or not.

SUGGESTED CREATIVE ASSESSMENTS

These prompts could be used for traditional essay assignments, or for responses across a variety of mediums (live presentation, digital stories via powerpoint or video, etc.)

1. Christopher explains to the readers early on that one of the hard things of his existence is that he can see (and remember) everything he witnesses. Write a story of your own day in this style, seeing and reporting on all of the little facts you might otherwise miss or ignore. Include drawings and maps of the places and things you encounter!
2. Christopher's viewpoint is what drives the book – but what about the other characters? What do they think and feel about all of the events? Pick one of the characters from the novel – Mr. Shears, Mrs. Shears, Mrs. Alexander, or Christopher's teacher Siobhan – and narrate the events of the book from their perspective.
3. At the end of the novel, Christopher has experienced some resolution in his life, but as one reviewer wrote, "the gulf between Christopher and his parents, between Christopher and the rest of us, remains immense and mysterious." For this assignment, fast forward ten years into the future for Christopher and write in his own voice. What is his life like? In what ways is he similar or different from the teenager he was in the novel?

ONLINE RESOURCES

AUDIO

NPR Interview

Nineteen minutes with the author, including a reading of the first pages (section 5) in the first few minutes.

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4707767>

VIDEO

Mark Haddon – 5x15 interview

Mark Haddon talks about the sources of his creative inspiration.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5hniLbHX1HI>

Creating “Curious Incident” for the stage

A six-minute video from the National Theatre in London about creating the stage version of the book. Includes an interview with Mark Haddon and the other creators about adapting the novel.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k2bV75ITXJw>

“Curious Incident” play trailer

A one-minute trailer that shows what the live play version looks like on stage.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UVrOsXhG61Q>

ON AUTISM & ASPERGERS

Autism Myths: The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time

A reader with Aspergers weighs in on the portrayal of Christopher in the book, with detailed notes and commentary on specific passages.

<http://iautistic.com/autism-myths-the-curious-incident-of-the-dog-in-the-night-time.php>

Mark Haddon: Don't Use Curious Incident... as an Autism “textbook”

Comments from the author about how his book is perceived by readers and professional institutions.

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/culturenews/9311242/Mark-Haddon-dont-use-Curious-Incident...-as-an-autism-textbook.html>

LESSON PLANS

4-Week Unit Plan

A teacher-produced plan with rationale, daily plans, assignments, and materials. “Students will begin the unit looking at people with observable mental and physical disabilities, what they have overcome in life, and the achievements they have made.”

<http://tci12c.weebly.com/unit-plan.html>

EMC Unit Plan

Put together by a British media group. Includes a useful look at the different covers for the book, used to market it to adults and teens (page 6).

https://www.englishandmedia.co.uk/assets/uploads/preview_files/Curious_preview-preview.pdf

PRINT RESOURCES

Publisher's Interview With the Author

<http://knopfdoubleday.com/book/73405/the-curious-incident-of-the-dog-in-the-night-time/>

What research did you do into Autism and Behavioural problems before writing this novel, is Christopher's character based on anyone in particular?

After leaving university I spent several years working with adults and children who had a variety of physical and mental handicaps (as they were then known). Ever since that time I've been interested in the subject of disability and mental illness. As a result, hardly a week goes by without me reading a newspaper article or watching a television documentary about schizophrenia or manic depression or Tourette's... And hardly a month goes by without me meeting yet another person who is the parent or grandparent of someone who has been diagnosed as having Asperger's. I also know a number of adults (men, mostly) who would almost certainly be diagnosed with the syndrome if they had been born twenty, thirty, forty years later. And that was the extent of my 'research'. I deliberately didn't consult fat tomes on Asperger's or visit special schools when I was working on the book because I wanted Christopher to work as a human being and not as a clinical case study.

The book has been published for adults and children simultaneously; did you set out to write a book which would appeal to such a wide age range?

No. I wrote it to entertain myself (which is, I think, the motivation behind any half-decent novel) in the hope that there would be people out there who shared my interests and obsessions. So the much-vaunted 'crossover appeal' came as a very pleasant surprise.

Have you received any positive feedback from people with Aspergers Syndrome/ Autism, their families, or people who work with them?

To be scrupulously honest... the book had one very bad review from a young man with Asperger's who thought the book was bad, mainly because Christopher wasn't like him or like any other people he knew with Asperger's. But the review missed the point, I think. People with Asperger's are as diverse a group as Belgians or trumpet players or train drivers. There is no typical or representative person with Asperger's. And to try and create one would have produced a stereotype.

On the other hand I've been genuinely moved and completely taken by surprise by the number of parents and grandparents of young people with Asperger's who have written to tell me that the book rings completely true for them.

I have been even more surprised to receive several invitations to address academic conferences on Asperger's and Autism. Which misses the point in a different way, I think. If Christopher seems real it's because he's well-written not because I'm an expert in the area. We live in an age obsessed with documentaries, with biographies, with investigative journalism. We often forget that you can have all the facts but be no nearer the truth. And this is what novels are good at. A novel can put you inside another person's

head and give you an understanding of their life you could only get by moving into their house for six months.

How did you come up with such and original idea for a novel?

It happened piece by piece and without any deliberate seeking after originality or quirkiness. I began with the image of the dog stabbed with the fork simply because I was searching for a vivid and gripping way of starting a novel. I then realised that if you described it in a flat, emotionless, neutral way it was also (with apologies to all dog lovers) very funny. So I had the voice. Only after using that voice for a few pages did I work out who it belonged to. Having done that the difficult thing was to work out a believable way for Christopher to construct a novel given that he is utterly unaware of the reader's emotional responses to what he is writing. Having Christopher simply copy his hero, Sherlock Holmes, by borrowing the format of the murder mystery was the solution to this problem. Finally, because I genuinely believed that very few people would want to read a novel about a teenage boy with a disability living in Swindon with his dad, I arranged the whole plot round the central turning point (where we discover who killed Wellington and what really happened to Christopher's mother) to make it as entertaining as possible, hopefully dragging the reader up to a highest point right in the middle, like a roller coaster, then speeding them down towards the conclusion.

The Remains of the Dog – NYTimes Book Review by Jay McInerney // June 15 2003

<http://www.nytimes.com/2003/06/15/books/the-remains-of-the-dog.html>

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 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 complicated 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.

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