

Humans have always seen the idea of a mystery as a thing that has an exact answer; they just have not found it yet. The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night Time, by Mark Haddon, is a story centered around and narrated by Christopher Boone, a 15-year-old boy with Asperger's Syndrome. Christopher, in a review by Jay McInerney, describes Christopher as "an unsolved mystery." This statement is both true and false. The mystery of how Chris thinks is technically solved; however, the reader still finds himself asking questions.

In many ways, the reader is able to understand and even relate to Christopher, through his explanations of his logic and his recognizable human characteristics, despite those characteristics being displayed in an alien fashion. Perhaps the thing the reader understands and relates to the most about Chris is how he breaks down and shuts out the world when he gets overwhelmed, such as when Chris is being interrogated by the police and says:

"He was asking too many questions and he was asking them too quickly...I rolled back onto the lawn and pressed my forehead to the ground again and made the noise that Father calls groaning. I make this noise when there is too much information coming into my head from the outside world." (Haddon 7)

It is easy for the reader to relate to this feeling of being overwhelmed, to have too many things all competing for one's attention, to the point that one just wants to curl up into a little ball and shut out the world. Though the reader may not be able to relate to having a nervous breakdown after being asked too many questions too rapidly by a police officer, most any person can relate to that despair, the feeling that one's head will explode from sensory overload. It is this very feeling of being overwhelmed that the reader comes to understand another facet of Christopher: his mathematical logic. Throughout the novel,

whenever Chris is confused, scared, or overwhelmed, he starts doing math in his head to calm his nerves, or seeks comfort in routine and the familiar. It is a well known feeling to have a desire to run to what one knows in a time of anxiety. Be it a traveler feeling homesick when in a strange country or a scientist refusing to accept a new radical theory and falling back on old ones, everyone can relate to Chris's longing for normality. As well, people can relate to playing mathematical mind games to calm nerves, although many do not realize they are even doing math; often a man will find himself counting to 10 to cool anger, counting sheep to help fall asleep, or even counting his blessings in a time of despair. Finally, the reader can well understand Christopher's hatred of lying, because he describes his distaste for lying quite well, by saying how "lies [are] about things which did not happen and they make me feel shaky and scared. And this is why everything I have written here is true" (Haddon 20). Though not easy to relate to, the reader can at least understand Christopher's hatred of lies, because the reader can understand enough of how Chris thinks to realize that Chris barely grasps the truth in world; lies would make his life so complicated that he would lose all grips of understanding and reality. Chris is trapped, "[m]arooned in a world in which all truths are literal and all are of equal significance," with no comprehension of wit, or tact (Armistead 33). These key ideas, these connections Chris has with "normal" people allow the reader a glimpse into Christopher's mind, through sympathy, empathy, and understanding.

This glimpse, regrettably, is somewhat brief; many aspects of Chris remain completely alien to the reader, mainly due to the complexity of Chris's mind, and his inability to articulate emotion. Perhaps the most incomprehensible aspect of Chris is his

inability to understand and articulate emotion, displayed most profoundly at the beginning of the book when Chris uses the images of faces to describe his emotions, and the emotions of others, because he cannot actually understand them himself. This lack of understanding creates a great rift between Chris and the reader because, to the average person, things are done for the sole purpose of appeasing one's emotion; students usually working hard in school in order to be successful because being successful is thought to lead to happiness, and a father protects his family because it fulfills his feelings of love and duty for his family. Without these driving forces, it is nearly impossible for the reader to understand what drives Chris to do what he does, or for the reader to truly understand his relationship with other people. It is this lack of emotion that causes perhaps another, even greater chasm between the reader and Chris: Chris's indifference toward love and attachment. This indifference is so clearly displayed when Chris finds out his mother is dead, and the first thing he asks is "'What kind of heart attack?' because I was surprised" (Haddon 27). Chris does not cry out in despair, or curl up into a little ball like he does when the police officer asks him too many questions, he simply asks a cold, scientific question out of surprise. Almost no one can relate to this complete indifference when such a close loved one dies. It is not just Chris's lack of love that throws off the reader; his complete lack of understanding of the minds of anyone other than himself makes him so hard to understand. As John Mullan put it so aptly, "[Chris] has no understanding of others' emotions, though he doggedly records their symptoms" (32). Finally, Christopher's sheer power of observation confounds the reader, such as when he describes his garden at a great length, or all the features of the lavatory he hides in. It has been said about Christopher that "[h]is descriptions are collections of 'things I

noticed', unsorted by significance or priority" (Mullan 32). This sentence clearly explains the problem the reader has when attempting to understand Chris's use of description: he does not organize his observations; he just records them as he sees them. It is a great challenge for a person who lives in a world where everything must be done for a reason, where there is a stigma against simply doing things for the sake of doing them, to understand the logic behind Chris's apparently senseless observations. It is these qualities, the ones Chris is unable to articulate, that creates a rift, a chasm, a void even, between Chris and the reader.

In the end, Chris is like the movie *Silence of the Lambs*: though technically the mystery is "solved," the audience still finds itself asking questions, questions that the writer probably never intends to answer. One example is Chris's mathematical mind mentioned before, and how, although the reader understands *that* he does massive math problems in his head, the reader really cannot understand *how* he does them, such as the game he plays in his head at the train station on pages 146 and 147, in which he organizes boxes in complicated a patterns, all in his head. Though the reader technically "understands" how Chris does the math in his head, often to calm his nerves, the reader can never really truly comprehend the processes that go on in Christopher's head that allow him to calculate the incredible equations that most readers cannot even do on paper. Herein lays the confusion: the mystery of how Christopher thinks in terms of math is technically "solved", yet the reader still finds himself asking questions about how Chris can comprehend such massive problems. Another aspect of Chris being a pseudo-solved mystery is his hatred of lies, partially because "his very truthfulness is a kind of limitation on his understanding of the world" (Mullan 32). Again, the reader understands why Chris

hates lies, but the reader still finds it confounding how he is unable to see the truths that are directly before him; the reader finds himself shouting at the book like a scared viewer shouts at a horror movie. The movie watcher is telling the character on the screen to turn around, because the serial killer is right behind them, while the reader shouts at Chris to see the truths that are directly in front of his eyes. The one exception is when Chris realizes that his mother is still alive, from reading her letters; however, upon this realization he breaks down again, and shuts out the world, because he cannot understand the lie, which causes him to become overwhelmed. The final piece of the pseudo-solved mystery is Chris's power of observation, because, although the reader cannot truly understand why Chris looks at the world in the way he does, the reader still finds himself smiling as he reads Christopher's elaborate descriptions, with just a tinge of understanding of why Chris is making the observations. The reader hardly knows what it is he understands; he just knows that he does understand something. Perhaps it is an understanding that Chris cannot categorize, or maybe it is a feeling that Chris uses it to pass time, or maybe concentrate better; whatever the reason, although this aspect of the mystery is unsolved, perhaps it really was solved, if only a little bit. In the end, Christopher will probably never be fully understood; however, most people who read the book can walk away and be able to say "Wow, I think I get it."

Most likely the reader is not supposed to be able to fully understand Chris, or perhaps a "normal" person is completely incapable of fully understanding a person with Asperger's Syndrome. Regardless, despite this inability to truly comprehend Chris's mentality, the reader can still sympathize, and sometimes empathize, with the way Chris thinks and acts. This is one mystery that indeed does not have one exact answer, but

instead many answers, none of which are complete. Maybe that is the way Chris wants it; after all, Chris loves a good mystery novel. He has succeeded in creating a clever and confounding mystery, one that he may be the only person on earth capable of answering.

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