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

About the Book…

Christopher John Francis Boone knows all the countries of the world and their capitals and every prime number up to 7,057. He relates well to animals but has no understanding of human emotions. He cannot stand to be touched. Although gifted with a superbly logical brain, Christopher is autistic. Everyday interactions and admonishments have little meaning for him. Routine, order, and predictability shelter him from the messy wider world. Then, at fifteen, Christopher’s carefully constructed world falls apart when he finds his neighbor’s dog, Wellington, impaled on a garden fork, for which he is initially blamed.

Christopher decides that he will track down the real killer and turns to his favorite fictional character, Sherlock Holmes, for inspiration. But the investigation leads him down some unexpected paths and ultimately brings him face-to-face with the dissolution of his parents’ marriage. As he tries to deal with the crisis within his own family, we are drawn into the workings of Christopher’s mind. And herein lies the brilliance of Mark Haddon’s choice of narrator: The most wrenching of emotional moments are chronicled by a boy who cannot fathom emotion.

About the Author…

Mark Haddon is a writer and illustrator of numerous award-winning children’s books and television screenplays. As a young man, Haddon worked with adults and children with a variety of physical disabilities and learning difficulties. He teaches creative writing for the Arvon Foundation. He lives in Oxford, England.

Discussion Questions…

1. 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?

2. 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?
3. 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?

4. 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?

5. 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” [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?]

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

7. 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?

8. 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?

9. 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?

10. 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?