- *Patricia Schultheis*

The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time **by Mark HaddonDoubleday, 2003, 226 pp., $8.40 (paper)**

Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* is a little gem of a book that illuminates a subject currently rising in the public's consciousness: autism.

Christopher John Francis Boone is fifteen, autistic and possessed of an extraordinary mind that can recall all the countries of the world and their capitals, plus every prime number to 7,057. But he is literally clueless about how to empathize with other people—or even that he *should* empathize with them. He lives in a world of almost pure phenomenology and subsequent sensory overload. "I see everything," he says.

Cut off from normal human interactions, unable to link events resulting from the interactions of others and powerless to appreciate the richness and purpose of those contacts, Christopher retreats into a world of pure logic, but it is logic so attenuated that it becomes skewed and, to the reader, chilling.

Finding humans too complex, Christopher prefers the company of his pet rat, Toby, and of dogs. When someone drives a gardening fork through Wellington, the poodle across the street, Christopher decides to use his powers of logic to find the culprit. He has read Sherlock Holmes, he assures us, and appreciates the master sleuth's ability to disassociate his mind from his emotions. The quest is a perilous one, taking Christopher far from his home in Swindon, England, and into the heart of London, on a journey of both discovery and self-discovery.

Told in the form of a book Christopher writes with the encouragement of his teacher, *The Curious Incident* engrosses the reader with its fully realized narrative voice. There is just enough poetry to capture the dreariness of Swindon, the anxiety of traveling in an unfamiliar city and the tension arising from family secrets. And there is even humor—in Christopher's unrelenting dislike for all things French, for example, or in this choice description of a police inspector's nose-hairs: "It looked as if there were two very small mice hiding in his nostrils."

Because *The Curious Incident* is Christopher's own book, the narrative unfolds in the rhythm of a mind that's completely focused but easily distracted. It swings from revealing the circumstances immediately before and after Wellington's death to Christopher's varied and vibrant internal world. Consequently, the reader learns that the word "metaphor" is itself a metaphor, how the constellation Orion can look like a dinosaur and how Christopher's beloved mathematics can be used to solve almost any puzzle.

While the logic of math helps Christopher discover who killed Wellington, it is only of minimal assistance when he sets out to solve the bigger resulting problem. On his journey to London, Christopher learns that sometimes approximations are all the information you're going to get, and **[End Page 193]** you just have to cope as best you can.

Instead of elevating Christopher to an innocent savant whose simplicity shames the rest of us, Haddon shows us the horror of autism and the havoc it wreaks on parents. If there is any remaining inclination on the reader's part to romanticize the autistic mind, there is the nightmare of Christopher's favorite dream: "Nearly everyone on earth is dead, because they have caught a virus. . . . And eventually there is no one left in the world except people who don't look at other people's faces. . . . And I can go anywhere in the world and I know that no one is going to talk to me or touch me or ask me a question."

What to do with such a child? The answer is the same as for any child: love him. Perhaps Haddon's greatest triumph is that we really believe it when Christopher's parents say, "I love you." More importantly, we really believe it when Christopher says, "I love you" back. But expressions of love, like most information, are just approximate. Only with an autistic child, they're more so.