

# The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time

LRJ Prompts

## 1. The Inadequate Narrator

Read the following article, “Through Innocent Eyes” by John Mullan (see below), and then respond to the following prompt: What does Mullan mean by the “inadequate narrator” and how does it differ from the more conventional “unreliable narrator.” In your own words, how does Christopher John Francis Boone function as an “inadequate narrator.” Be sure to provide examples from the novel – and not the ones Mullan uses in his article.

## 2. The Irony of Humor in *Curious Incident*

*Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* is a novel of different types of irony -- dramatic irony, situational irony, and verbal irony. (If you do not remember the difference between these three types of irony, now would be the prudent time to look it up.). In John Mullan’s article “Funny Old World” he suggests that, ironically, *Curious Incident* is a “very funny book.” Explain what Mullan believes when he says, “Yet there is irony here, for this is a very funny book.” Then, using Mullan’s criteria of evaluation, answer this prompt: Is *Curious Incident* a “very funny book”? You must support your evaluation with examples from the novel.

## 3. Meaning, Connotation, and Euphemism

Part I: Re-read Chapter 29 and then respond to the following prompt: What do we learn throughout Chapter 29 about the limitation of literal thinking? What kind of meaning do metaphors “carry”? What is the value of connotations? Why does Christopher want his name to signify only himself?

Part II: Re-read the first two paragraphs of Chapter 71. This passage concerns euphemisms, which Christopher might well have told you comes from the Greek meaning *good speak*. As he points out, modern British children are taught that words like *spastic*, *cripple*, and *mongoloid* are “nasty,” and the label “special needs” is to be substituted. What ironic effect does this change have on connotation? What does Christopher’s analysis of this situation tell us about the nature of meaning.

*The following articles go with prompts 1 and 2 above.*

### Through innocent eyes

By John Mullan, *The (London) Guardian*

The inadequate narrator in *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* by Mark Haddon

There is a special type of first-person narrative that requires the reader to supply what the narrator cannot understand. Much of what "happens" in *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* is not grasped by Christopher, its narrator. The reader comprehends, as Christopher never will, the farcical drama of parental discord that he witnesses. Even when he discovers the truth about his mother, but living in London with a lover, he has no idea of his father's reasons for lying (his cowardice and protectiveness).

Christopher, the book jacket tells you, has Asperger's syndrome, though this is never named in the novel. He has no understanding of others' emotions, though he doggedly records their symptoms. "He looked at me for a long time and sucked air in through his nose," he observes, when his father is, we

infer, near despair. Yet requiring the reader to fill in these gaps allows for a tragicomic intuition of characters' feelings that a more adequate narrator could not manage.

The "inadequate narrator" is not an established critical term. Yet the more usual "unreliable narrator" seems inaccurate for a narrator who, however un-comprehending, is entirely trustworthy. We are not invited to be sceptical about what Christopher tells us. As he says several times, "I always tell the truth". Indeed, his very truthfulness is a kind of limitation on his understanding of the world. He cannot negotiate his way through conversations.

Narrative inadequacy is not so unusual in fiction. Think of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, whose narrator is qualified by her inarticulacy. We infer what she suffers through her inability to express it. Then there is the model for the inadequate narrator, the eponymous heroine of Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740). A 15-year-old servant girl, she is too innocent to comprehend the schemes of her predatory master, though we as readers see them all too clearly. These narrators are innocent, like Christopher, but they are also limited by their language. One effect is a satirical indictment of those nominally sophisticated adults whom each narrator describes and tries to understand.

Christopher's peculiar ingenuousness is as much fictional device as medical condition. You do not have to check him against a psychiatric textbook to believe in him as a narrator. The reader is left to piece together the meanings and motives of the characters around him; he never explains or interprets. "When I was little I didn't understand about other people having minds... But I don't find this difficult now." He has decided to turn life into a detective story, for "if something is a puzzle there is always a way of solving it".

The inadequate narrator lets us glimpse the inadequacies of all the adults he encounters. The reader senses the torments and forbearance of Christopher's father, uncomprehended by him. Christopher knows things about others only by their conventional signs. When his father shouts, this means anger. When there are tears "coming out of his eyes", he must be sad, though he wrongly and characteristically supposes that the cause must be the death of their neighbour's dog, Wellington.

Christopher is also detached from his own torments. When things become too much, he curls into a ball and hides in a small space, or simply screams. When he reads the letters from his mother that his father has hidden from him, he has no description to offer of his feelings, just an account of a kind of seizure. "I couldn't think of anything at all because my brain wasn't working properly." This is no figure of speech. When the patterns of thought and habits of behaviour on which he depends collapse, there is nothing else.

The irony is that his inadequacy as a guide to human psychology is balanced by a fastidious accuracy in matters of report. "I am really good at remembering things, like the conversations I have written down in this book, and what people were wearing, and what they smelled like." His exactitude shows up the evasions of the other characters. Imagining things is what makes Christopher frightened. "And this is why everything I have written here is true."

### **Funny old world**

By John Mullan, *The (London) Guardian*

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Humour in *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* by Mark Haddon

I am told that a teenager with Asperger's syndrome might very well have a sense of humour, even if it might seem odd to most of us. But clinical accuracy takes second place to narrative intent in Mark Haddon's novel, whose autistic narrator, Christopher, is taken to have no such sense. "This will not be a funny book," he tells us. The statement is not made ironically: Christopher means exactly what he says. Yet there is irony here, for this is a very funny book.

It is presumed that Christopher cannot understand humour because it consists in the disparity between pretension and reality. Christopher either does not see such a gap, or registers it with bafflement. "I cannot tell jokes because I do not understand them." So jokes become funny by not being seen as jokes. Christopher is surrounded by grimly jovial adults, whose jests he uncomprehendingly records (and inadvertently satirises). Here he calls on a neighbour.

"Mr Thompson answered the door. He was wearing a T-shirt which said

Beer.  
Helping ugly people  
Have sex for  
2,000 years.

Mr Thompson said, 'Can I help you?' "

Mr Thompson, whose conversation is undistinguished by humour, bears his printed fragment of wit as a kind of blazon. Christopher cannot understand, but duly transcribes the message. In his blank recording, the declaration of the T-shirt wearer's drollness really does become funny, and just as nonsensical as it must seem to Christopher.

But then many a joke is unfunny. Arriving in London, Christopher asks a shopkeeper the directions to his mother's flat, and is told to buy an A-Z.

"And I said, 'Is that the A to Z?' and I pointed at the book.

And he said, 'No, it's a sodding crocodile.'

And I said, 'Is that the A to Z?' because it wasn't a crocodile and I thought I had heard wrongly because of his accent.

And he said, 'Yes, it's the A to Z'."

The retailer's sarcasm is no match for his customer's pertinacity.

There is a special humour to be gained from all exchanges with life's functionaries. Pedantically rational, Christopher sends ordinary exchanges off into strange directions. When he tries to buy a train ticket from Swindon to London, the man behind the window asks him if he wants single or return, and then has to explain these mysterious terms.

"And he said, 'Do you want to go one way, or do you want to go and come back?'

And I said, 'I want to stay there when I get there.'

And he said, 'For how long?'

And I said, 'Until I go to university.'

And he said, 'Single, then!.'

The ticket-salesman's wit is perfume on the desert air.

Haddon's is an unusual variation on a known technique. Think of Charles Pooter, the unconsciously absurd narrator of George and Weedon Grossmith's *Diary of a Nobody*. To hilarious effect, his authors gifted him with an utter earnestness in his genteel pretensions. In *The Curious Incident*, the narrator's humourlessness is the sine qua non of the humour. We all know the peculiar effect of deadpan humour, where our laughter is caused by the refusal of another person to acknowledge that what is said is funny. This is deadpan without the intent.

Christopher has found a neighbour's dog dead on the lawn, impaled on a garden fork. "I decided that the dog was probably killed with the fork because I could not see any other wounds in the dog and I do not think you would stick a garden fork into a dog after it had died for some other reason, like cancer for example, or a road accident. But I could not be certain about this." From any other narrator, the long sentence here would be self-consciously, irritatingly fantastic. From Christopher, it is an earnest approximation to logic. It is funny because many of the world's incidents are mysterious, and he is just trying to cover the possible angles. You never know. And we will indeed find that the normal adults in the story are capable of the funniest (peculiar and ha-ha) actions.