The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time and Detective Fiction

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The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time is full of references to detective fiction. Its title is a quotation from one of the adventures of Sherlock Holmes, Christopher’s hero and role model. In Silver Blaze, Holmes investigates the theft of a racehorse, and the failure of the stable dog to bark when the precious animal disappears. This “curious incident” leads Holmes to deduce the identity of the culprit and solve the case. The presence of a dog in Christopher’s story is also a reference to The Hound of the Baskervilles, Holmes’s most famous investigation.

Classic detective fiction is a genre with very strict ‘rules’: for example, the solution to the mystery must be believable and logical, and the criminal must be one of the main characters. These rules play a great part in the appeal of the genre because they turn a story into a puzzle. Readers can try to solve the mystery alongside the detective, but they also know that all will be revealed at the end of the tale.

In the classic (typically British) murder mystery, detection is an intellectual game: the hero relies on a rational approach to the case, and remains detached from it. As a result, readers root for the detective: they admire his cleverness and do not spare any real sympathy for the victims of crime. The aim of this type of narrative is to restore the status quo: the investigator’s deductive powers continue the myth that we live in a knowable and controllable world.

Novels such as Thomas Pynchon’s The Crying of Lot 49 (1966), Umberto Eco’s The Name of the Rose (1980) and Paul Auster’s The New York Trilogy (1987) have subverted the rules of this genre and created the ‘anti-detective’. In texts like these, the investigator either gets to the solution by accident, or fails to solve the mystery altogether. Readers are invited to reflect that life, unlike detective fiction, has no guarantee of truth. Christopher’s factual accuracy does not always capture all the possible nuances of meaning or those events that defy rational interpretation. I think that life, like the detective’s grip on reality, is not so tight and mirrors the uncertainties of society. The private eye becomes an anti-hero: he is cynical, full of doubts, and has an easy way with both guns and women. He inevitably becomes embroiled in the morally-questionable world of the investigation, which is another way of raising questions about the integrity of our own world. Undoubtedly, Christopher also experiences confusion about who and what to believe in.

Finally, Christopher’s search prompts an inquiry into the reliability of fiction: in spite of his protestations about his inability to lie, Christopher is an unreliable narrator. This is not because he sets out to deceive us, but because his attention to facts is not necessarily a guarantee of truth. Christopher’s factual accuracy does not always capture all the possible nuances of meaning or those events that defy rational interpretation. It fails to account for human emotions.

Haddon’s ingenious allusion to the conventions of detective fiction is one of the reasons for the novel’s success. While the mystery plot offers a compelling narrative ‘hook’ for children and adults alike, the twists in the classic formula allow for a deeper engagement with and enjoyment of this cleverly plotted and kind-hearted book.