

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 and 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 structure; it is messy and offers no simple answers to our most basic questions.

In *Curious Incident*, Mark Haddon has also written an anti-detective novel. His parody of the traditional rules is a source of humour, and gives the story its intriguing plot. It also highlights crucial aspects of Christopher's personality, and his life as a child growing up in a broken family. Moreover, Christopher's attempt to write an action-packed detective story balances the digressions and detailed descriptions which slow down the pace of the narrative. The framework of the genre sustains the illusion that we are following a dynamic, exciting story. Christopher's tale becomes a page-turner. Like him, we want to know who killed Wellington and, like him, we find out the shocking truth about half-way through the novel.

At this point, the story turns into a gripping

adventure, as Christopher makes his journey in search of his mother. The solo trip from Swindon to London is a real triumph for Christopher. As a traveller, he is definitely a hero, but as an investigator, he is clueless and doomed to failure. The gap between what he tries to do and what he actually achieves provides both comedy and pathos.

Christopher sets out to investigate the murder of his neighbour's dog, but he stumbles on the solution by chance. He fails to figure out the exact nature of the relationship between his father and Mrs Shears (Wellington's owner), and between his mother and Mr Shears. He also remains blind to the connection between this state of affairs and the 'death' of his Mum.

In deciphering Wellington's murder, Christopher uncovers two more terrible 'crimes': his father has faked his Mum's death, and his mother has run off to make a new life with Mr Shears. His parents' 'crimes' turn Christopher from a detective into a *victim*; from detached observer into someone *personally* affected by the events.

In the 1930s and 1940s, Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler created a new type of detective: the *private eye*. In their texts, 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 on the classic formula allow for a deeper engagement with and enjoyment of this cleverly plotted and kind-hearted book.

This article is an edited version of 'Postmodern Investigations: The Case of Christopher Boone in *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*', published in *Children's Literature in Education*, 40.4 (2009), p.320-32.

