

Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time

The following questions are to help you understand the novel more fully. As you read, answer these questions. We suggest that you spend time developing your answers either in a handwritten journal or a typed journal that you can bring to class in the fall. Since we will be studying *Curious Incident* during the school year, we will assume basic comprehension of the novel (characters, setting, plot, and major symbols/themes) prior to our studying the novel. These questions will aid you in gaining that basic comprehension as well as developing a deeper understanding of the work. Make certain that you complete this journal activity: You will be required to bring these questions and your written responses during the summer reading exams / activities check and during the quarter when we study *Curious Incident* as a class.

FYI—Reading *Spark Notes* and other such works might help you to a certain extent; however, they do not replace reading the novel. Furthermore, the following questions were generated by your NDP instructors and do not rely on these works; reading *Spark Notes* et al. may actually complicate this exercise.

NOTE: Read the novel before answering these questions; it is a relatively simple and short novel. The questions have “spoilers” and ask some questions require that you’ve a holistic understanding of the novel before you can answer them thoroughly.

1. What is the “curious incident”?
2. Look up autism and Asperger’s syndrome. Define them.
3. How is Christopher different from a typical narrator / hero?
4. 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?
5. Look through *Curious Incident* and take note how often Christopher defines terms and concepts. Make a list (include page number)—or annotate—as many examples as you can find. How does this technique help us understand Christopher as a character / how Christopher views the world? What could we gain from “defining our terms” before we discussed issues or analyzed problems?
6. Do you find any of his methods or views “unscientific” or “illogical”? What are they? Explain how this demonstrates Christopher is more like the average person than we might originally think.
7. 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?
8. On pages 67–69, Christopher goes into the garden and contemplates the importance of description in the book he is writing. His teacher Siobhan told him “the idea of a book was to describe things using words so that people could read them and make a picture in their own head” [p. 67]. What is the effect of reading Christopher’s extended description, which begins, “I decided to do a description of the garden” and ends “Then I went inside and fed Toby”? How does this passage relate to a quote

Christopher likes from *The Hound of the Baskervilles*: “The world is full of obvious things which nobody by chance ever observes” [p. 73]?

9. What *clues* and *red herrings* does the author give us in *Curious Incident*? What exactly is the mystery we as readers are solving?

10. Christopher is very literal, analytical, and observant. He is also a materialist; he thinks that God, souls, heaven, and other supernatural are stupid. Even when he states that ghosts may exist, he argues that their existence is a material one—one that scientists would authenticate through scientific means. Why do you think Christopher is a materialist? What approach might you use to argue to Christopher that spiritual world can be as real as the material world?

11. 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” [*An Anthropologist on Mars* by Oliver Sacks, NY: Vintage Books, 1995, pp. 252–53]. 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?

12. Christopher experiences the world quantitatively and logically. His teacher Mr. Jeavons tells him that he likes math because it’s safe. How does Christopher keep his world “safe”? How does Christopher cross boundaries that are “unsafe”?

13. What are some of the reasons that Christopher desires to be safe—and what are some of the reasons he desires to be “risky”? On pages 83–84, Christopher explains why he doesn’t like yellow and brown, and admits that such decisions are, in part, a way to simplify the world and make choices easier. Why does he need to make the world simpler? Which aspects of life does he find unbearably complicated or stressful? Do you make the world simpler in a similar way—give an example and explain.

14. One of Christopher’s strengths is that he does not (cannot?) jump to conclusions. He methodically reasons through each step before coming to conclusions. For example, we “intuit” that perhaps his mother is not dead after we hear Mrs. Alexander’s conversation with Christopher. We also “know” that the letter from Christopher’s mother indicates she is still alive even before we read much of it—or see the date. How difficult would it be if you had to reason through each step before arriving at a conclusion? What might you gain if you were more like Christopher?

15. Christopher’s journey to London underscores the difficulties he has being on his own, and the real disadvantages of his condition in terms of being in the world. What is most frightening, disturbing, or moving about this extended section of the novel [pp. 169–98]?

16. Christopher demonstrates himself to be very much like his hero Sherlock Holmes. How is Christopher a good detective? How is he brave and a risk taker like Holmes?

17. Why does Christopher seem to view animals as important as human beings? What qualities do animals have that humans lack according to Christopher? What other qualities can you think of that we find animals to possess in a manner or depth that we wished human beings possessed?

18. Discuss the role of Truth and Lies as a major theme within the story: Think about what Christopher says about metaphors and lies and their relationship to novels [pp. 14–20]. Why is lying

such an alien concept to him? In his antipathy to lies, Christopher decides not to write a novel, but a book in which “everything I have written . . . is true” [p. 20]. Why do “normal” human beings in the novel, like

Christopher's parents, find lies so indispensable? Why is the idea of truth so central to Christopher's narration? Is Christopher's definition of "truth" limited—if so how? If no—how not?

19. Select at least three scenes that are comical in this novel. Defend your position. Are these same situations also sad, or exasperating? Explain.

20. 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? How is she, perhaps, Mark Haddon's example of the power / importance of teaching?

21. As we start to "hear" from Christopher's parents, the reader becomes aware of a more complex world that has been surrounding Christopher from the start. How has Haddon (the author) made us feel "safe" in Christopher's world? How have these new voices (Mom and Dad) given us deeper insights into the complexities of Christopher and his world? Notice how Haddon starts adding more complex maps as the story progresses—why?

22. Christopher's parents, with their affairs, their arguments, and their passionate rages, are clearly in the grip of emotions they themselves can't fully understand or control. How, in juxtaposition to Christopher's incomprehension of the passions that drive other people, is his family situation particularly ironic?

23. What is the effect of reading the letters Christopher's mother wrote to him? Was his mother justified in leaving? Does Christopher comprehend her apology and her attempt to explain herself [pp. 106–10]? Does he have strong feelings about the loss of his mother? Which of his parents is better suited to taking care of him?

24. 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?

25. 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?

26. Mark Haddon has said of *The Curious Incident*, "It's not just a book about disability. Obviously, on some level it is, but on another level . . . it's a book about books, about what you can do with words and what it means to communicate with someone in a book. Here's a character whom if you met him in real life you'd never, ever get inside his head. Yet something magical happens when you write a novel about him. You slip inside his head, and it seems like the most natural thing in the world" Link to: <http://www.powells.com/authors/haddon.html>]. How is this novel a "book about books"? How does this novel demonstrate "what you can do with words"? To what extent has Haddon succeeded with you—do you feel as if you are "inside Christopher's head"? Discuss significance of this.

27. In his review of *The Curious Incident*, Jay McInerney suggests that at the novel's end "the gulf between Christopher and his parents, between Christopher and the rest of us, remains immense and mysterious. And that gulf is ultimately the source of this novel's haunting impact. Christopher Boone is an unsolved mystery" [*The New York Times Book Review*, 6/15/03, p. 5)]. Is this an accurate assessment? If so, why? If not, why not?

28. Why does Haddon spend so much time with the “counterexample.”? When does Christopher use this? How is it important to the plot? to character development? to literary theme of the work? (You will need to look up counterexample and Pythagorean theorem.)

29. The extension of the counterexample is the paradox. How is Christopher’s story and Christopher himself filled with paradox?

30. There are four significant symbols used by Christopher to represent himself: a prime number; the okapi, a triangle, and a tightrope walker. Look for these symbols within the book, annotate the book (underline/mark) How are they symbolic /what do they symbolize? Explain their significance within the novel. Which one do you find the most accessible? Which one do you find the most difficult? Explain your answer.