

THE LEFT ATRIUM

Book review

Comfortable in alien shoes

The curious incident of the dog in the night-time

Mark Haddon

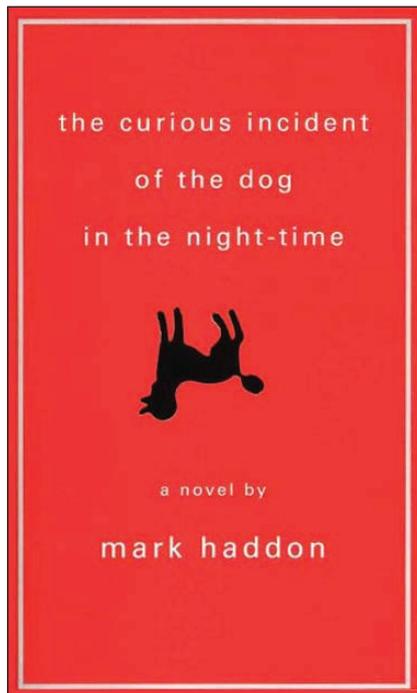
Toronto: Anchor Canada; 2004

224 pp \$19.95 (paper) ISBN 0-38565-980-6

Do you read the occasional book, as long as it's about medicine? When you sit down in front of the television, is it to watch an episode of *ER* that you've taped? This is a pattern of cultural exposure that I've observed in some of my colleagues, this inability, even when relaxing, to tear oneself away from work.

In general, I don't know that it's a bad thing. It's easy to come up with television shows set in hospitals, like *ER* and *Scrubs* and *St. Elsewhere*, that are as good as or better than most of what's on TV. The same is true of movies: *M*A*S*H* and *The Doctor* are entertaining, well-done films. And when it comes to nonfiction reading, we've all got our interests, and if yours happens to be medical history, there's nothing wrong with that.

When it comes to novels, though, if all you read are books about doctors and patients and hospitals, I'd say you're missing out. None of my favourite novels is about medicine. For every rich, vibrant medical novel like *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, there are many duds. To name just a few of the more famous ones: *House of God* quickly becomes tedious with its overwhelming and relentless cynicism. *The Magic Mountain* is a pompous intellectual display. I'd like to be an oncologist one day, but *The Cancer Ward* had me so bored with the whole subject



of cancer that I quit reading it fewer than a hundred pages in.

The problem is that medical novels seem always to focus on the institutions of medicine, most often in the form of hospitals. I'm old-fashioned: I like novels that are about people, not buildings. So I enjoyed *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, a novel that is medical in that it is about an illness — autism — but that steers clear of hospitals entirely and focuses not on the illness but on the kid who's got it.

Meet Christopher. He loves math, he's confused by other people, and sometimes he hurts himself. He's autistic. He's the protagonist and narrator of Mark Haddon's story.

Either role, hero or storyteller, would be risky to give to a boy with autism. In the hands of a bad writer, this decision could have been a disaster. There's no particular reason that a book written from "the autistic's point of view" should work any better than some woeful drivel from "the vampire's point of view." On the other hand, in the hands of a gifted writer, just about anything can be made to work. Kipling's "The Ship that Found Herself" is a wonderful short story written from the perspective of the parts — not the crew, but the *parts* — of a steamship.

Haddon is no Kipling, but he certainly hits the mark with *The Curious Incident*. Early on, I had my doubts: Christopher starts out so autistic that he's almost a cliché. He allows only prime-numbered chapters in his story. His inability to deal with other people or the slightest change in his routine is a little overstated. At first, the book appears to be a somewhat ham-handed treatment of its subject.

Things quickly get better, though. Christopher has interesting and credible relationships with his dad, his neighbours, and his social worker at school. (He also meets a surprising number of police officers who are bewildered by his behaviour.) He applies his intelligence in creative but surprising ways to the curious incident at hand. He gets into all sorts of trouble during the course of his adventure. In the end, he solves the mystery he started out with, and a few others besides.

I'm not going to provide any more detailed description of the story than that. If *The Curious Incident* were just some gassy novel of ideas, I wouldn't

feel bad about giving out some spoilers. But I wouldn't want to ruin a book that is, as much as anything, a fairly ripping adventure story.

It's also quite a feat of writing. The actual use of language is somewhat austere — an unavoidable consequence of having a boy with autism as a narrator — but it has its own beauty, and it works. So persuasive and so effective is the construction of Christopher, not only is he a character you're rooting for, he's also the character in the story you understand the best. It's startling how believably and comfortably this story puts you into what you might have thought were likely to be some pretty alien shoes.

And that's the problem with only reading medical novels. Whether you're reading for escape or for some supposed loftier purpose, you have to read beyond your own experience. If all I ever read were novels about bookish but sarcastic pediatrics residents, I should quickly come to find them neither exciting nor enlightening.

But if I can't convince you of this, if I can't persuade you to rejoice in *East of Eden* or wonder at *Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell*, if you must read only medical novels, then please read this one.

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Poem

Untitled

I have no money
so I spend time
a pocket full of minutes
scattered across late August evenings
is my currency

I've spent time walking alone alongside the Canal
marveling at the boats like a tourist
wondering
whatever happened to you?

I've spent time screaming, cursing, pleading, threatening the moon
because I thought it was God's eye and wanted his attention
it never blinked but I still didn't get a response
Earth's orbit is always just outside of Heaven's peripheral vision

I've spent time restrained to the bed at the General Hospital psychiatric ward
watching the sun rise out my fourth floor window but unable to chase it
brown leather straps keeping me from going West
let me go
let me go
the hallways in here all sting of chlorine
and I don't anybody in this place is capable of feeling

Love

is a mingling of souls into an arrangement of protection
a gift and a demand
love is a removal of walls
an invitation and a warning
the best thing that could possibly ever happen to you
love is an exchange of worlds that creates a universe for you to play in

I've spent time in the shadow of the Peace Tower working for the government
earning \$17 an hour as a records management quality control officer
re-arranging inactive files so that they'll be in perfect chronological order
when they're shipped off to be destroyed
God bless the Liberals

I've spent time down in the Glebe
wandering tree-decorated streets with nice old houses that all look strangely empty
boycotting Starbucks' coffee shops
until they come clean, break down, drop the pretense, and finally just admit
it's not tall, grande, and venti
it's just plain old small, medium, and large

DOI:10.1503/cmaj.060398