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# Constituting Christopher: Disability Theory and Mark Haddon's

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

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In *Extraordinary Bodies: figuring disability in American culture and literature*, Rosemary Garland Thompson contends that disability is another 'culture-bound, physically justified difference to consider along with race, gender, class, ethnicity and sexuality' (1997, p.5). The two reigning models that have marked disability as a site of difference are the medical and the social; the former in both its benign and pernicious forms identifying the somatic and psychological markers of disability and scaffolding around these regimes of medical intervention and correction, the latter involving social recognition of disabilities, and identifying ways to 'establish social equity that do not depend on a medical response, but on modifying man-made societal arrangements' (Saunders 2004, p.2). The medical and social models have been critiqued by theorists in the field who have argued that they are not only underpinned by the view that disability is a 'personal medical tragedy' (Campbell 2004, p.443), but also that they are often mutually exclusive, failing to successfully cognate the culturally discursive, the socially regulated and the multiple realities of disabled people's lives (Price and Schildrick 2002). This paper will situate Mark Haddon's novel *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* (2003) within these current debates in disability theory, arguing that fictional representations such as Haddon's contribute powerfully to what Judy Singer calls a more 'ecological view of society', that is 'one that is more relaxed about different styles of being' (1999, p.67).

In mapping the conceptual terrain of disability, Mairain Corker and Tom Shakespeare argue that:

*Both the medical model and the social model seek to explain disability universally and end up creating totalizing meta-historical narratives that exclude important dimensions of disabled people's lives and of their knowledge.*

(2002, p.15)

In the light of this assertion, it would seem that literary and filmic representations of disabilities with their aesthetic remove from the real might have little to contribute to the complex webbing that is the experience, the theorizing and the administration of disability. This said, there have been recent forays by disability theorists into the area of

representation, particularly those who have found some usefulness in engaging with the 'symbolic, semiotic and textual dimensions of social life' (Smith 2002, p.72). The signifying/meaning dimension of culture is recognized by many cultural theorists as an important conceptual and ideological site which engages with the cultural dominant in ways that bolster critique or refute it (Garland Thompson 1999; Saunders 2004; Shakespeare 1999). Incorporating the representational into their socio-cultural purview, theorists of disability have exercised a robust scrutiny of the repeated deployment of disability as a category of non-normativity in circulating discourses (Garland Thompson 1999). Moreover the term 'disability' itself has been strongly contested as it is seen to be negatively tagging an abjectness of being; an 'other' to the 'good and proper' social and physical body (Campbell 1999). For many disability theorists however, too much of a focus on the symbolic/textual level of culture fails to comprehensively address the realities of the everyday lives of disabled individuals. One way out of this impasse in conceptual framings of disability is a more fruitful alliance between the lived and the symbolic levels of culture. Smith locates the possibilities of this conjunction in the ethnographic domain, contending "if one is prepared to accept a broader definition of culture as being about the role of meaning in social life, then ethnomethodological perspectives have much to offer" (2001, p.72). Such a position is not incompatible with a core focus of postmodern, postcolonial and gender theories of identity – the valorization of the local and contingent expressed for example in a 'recognition of the perspectives, voices and cultures of subordinate groups' (ibid, p. 232).

One area of representation receiving increasing attention is that of disabled children. Davis and Watson argue that discourses of disabled children have suffered from a failure to find the kind of symbolic/aesthetic register that might denote something of the fuller complexities of their subjects' lives. They are too frequently constructed 'objects of pity and redemption'; 'sad and despairing', 'vulnerable and dependent' (Davis and Watson 2002, p.159). Buttressing these images is a concept of 'normal childhood' which is privileged in White Western discourse as a fixed state with very specific developmental stages and forms. Measured



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against this one-size-fits-all model of childhood identity, the 'presence of an impairment excludes a child from taking part in that normal childhood: their childhood is invalidated by the impairment' (ibid). Recent analysis of disabled children's experiences have attempted to countersign meta-narratives of representation by engaging with an ethnographic approach which respects the multiple experiences of individuals within localized, everyday contexts. The ethnographic mode involves garnering and interpreting the views of children, and while these data are subject to specialized mediation and meaning-making, they nevertheless draw in the first instance on the agency, voice and self-reflexivity of disabled subjects. This approach would seem to broach some of the divisions between the medical and the social models of disability in its insistence on the importance of disability as an embodied, subjective, articulated experience as well as drawing attention to disability as it is mobilized in social discourses within particular environments, institutions and other organized structures and fields.

Mark Haddon's much acclaimed novel *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (2003) is a first-person narrative of an Asperger's syndrome individual, 15-year-old Christopher Boone. In its presentation of Christopher's everyday experiences of the society in which he lives, the narrative offers a rich canvas of experiences for an ethnographic study of this particular cognitive condition, and one which places a positive spin on the syndrome. The reader in this instance acts as ethnographer, invited to see what Mark Osteen claims is a 'quality in autistic lives that is valuable in and of itself' (cited in Adams 2005, p.1). Along similar lines, McClimens writes that Haddon's novel is 'an ethnographic delight' and that 'Haddon's achievement is to have written a novel that turns on the central character's difference without making that difference a stigmatising characteristic' (2005, p.24).

In brief, the narrative focuses on the experiences of Christopher who, finding the neighbour's dog dead one morning with a 'garden fork sticking' out of it, and obsessed with Sherlock Holmes mysteries, sets about as that great detective does in *his* case of the curious incident of the dog in the night-time, to solve it. Christopher's compulsion to find out who killed Wellington embroils him in familiar

and not so familiar environments; it involves a fraught and frightening journey to London to search for his mother and reveals in the process, some problematic familial relationships. This is the plot, but most of the interest lies in the characterization of Christopher, his voice, his views, his interactions with those around him. Haddon's constitution of Christopher as a somewhat unorthodox individual has resonated significantly with parents who have children with the condition known as Asperger syndrome and indeed with social workers and the medical community with significant investment in the disability field generally. This, despite the fact that Asperger syndrome is never named as such in the narrative and that Haddon did no specific research into the condition, confessing that he did not set out to write a novel about a boy with Asperger's (Woodroof 2003, np).

There has been much documented in medical, psychiatric, social science and educational texts about Aspergers, and while the jury is still out with respect to its etiology, its prognosis and its treatment, there is some general consensus about its symptoms. First noticed in 1944 by the man whose name was eventually assigned to the syndrome, Hans Asperger, the condition is described on the lower end of the Autism Spectrum Disorders; some have called it a 'mild form of autism'. Individuals with this 'disorder' experience problems in the areas of social interaction and communication but display normal intelligence and verbal skills.

*The child with Aspergers shows below-average nonverbal communication gestures, fails to develop peer relationships, has an inability to express pleasure in other people's happiness, and lacks the ability to reciprocate emotionally in normal social interactions. The condition appears to be more common in boys than in girls... While people with Asperger syndrome are frequently socially inept, many have above-average intelligence, and they may excel in fields like computer programming, mathematics and science. There is no delay in cognitive development, in the development of age-appropriate self-help skills, or in curiosity about the environment. Generally, there is no language development delay. (<http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/np>)*

Other characteristics of this condition as documented by researchers include ‘abnormal nonverbal communication, such as problems with eye contact, facial expressions, body postures, or gestures’; a ‘lack of spontaneous seeking to share enjoyment, interest or achievements with others’; an ‘inability to return social or emotional feelings’ as well as an ‘inflexibility about specific routines or rituals’, and an ‘unusually intense preoccupation with narrow areas of interest, such as obsession with train schedules, phone books, or collections of objects’ (Medical Encyclopedia Asperger syndrome [www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/ency/artoic/e/001549.htm](http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/ency/artoic/e/001549.htm))

Haddon’s confessions notwithstanding, his novel has excited interest in Aspergers, with responses that have been both positive and negative. The positive views from the medical, scientific, parental and educational communities, have acclaimed the text for not only ‘outing’ the condition, but more importantly providing a human face to it. Sarah Adams for example comments that Haddon’s novel is a ‘crossover novel appealing to both adults and children which has also – if not deliberately – facilitated the autistic spectrum crossing over into wider public consciousness’ (2005, p.1). Moreover it is unlike other fictional figurations of disability that have been labelled as ‘conversion narratives’; that is stories of redemption from the dark side of disability (Osteen cited in Adams 2005, p.1).

Looping back to disability theories, it could be argued that unlike the social and medical models of disability, which relegate ‘phenomenological notions of the embodied self and biological impairment itself to the margin’ (Garland Thomson 1997, p.5), Haddon’s text foregrounds them. *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* works with a strong sense of the disabled speaking subject drawing readers into Christopher’s cognitive/corporeal space through an incremental layering of his perspectives and reactions. Armed with a working knowledge of Aspergers, one can certainly find compelling evidence to constitute Christopher in this way. Christopher’s voice is a distinctive one, recording all that he experiences in an atonal, honest, unselfconscious way, in the manner of an observer rather than participant – ‘I pulled the fork out of the dog and lifted him into my arms and hugged him. He was leaking blood from the fork-holes. I like dogs. You always know

what a dog is thinking. It has four moods. Happy, sad, cross concentrating. Also dogs are faithful and they do not tell lies because they cannot talk’ (p.4). He likes books about science and maths because these are straightforward, compelled by a logic which he appreciates. In Sherlock Holmes mysteries there is a similar reassuring formula based on an anchoring logic and the exercise of acute observational powers. In this they resemble Christopher’s own meaning-making mechanisms, expressed in his claim that ‘Prime numbers are what you are left with when you have taken all the patterns away’ (p.15). Christopher also likes routine and he has particular aversions, allegiances or phobias with food, colours and computer games. Literal-minded, Christopher cannot tell lies, which often brings him grief (p.24), and he also has problems with metaphor.

*I do not like proper novels. In proper novels people say things like. ‘I am veined with iron, with silver and with streaks of common mud. I cannot contract into the firm fist which those clench who do not depend on stimulus.’ What does this mean? I do not know.*  
(p.5)

His inability to understand the nuances of language exchange are often sites of a disarming humour. This verbal exchange with railway attendant when he is purchasing his ticket to London is typical of Christopher’s continued efforts to make the signifier fit the signified:

*And the man said, ‘Single or return?’  
And I said, ‘What does single or return mean?’  
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’ and then he said, ‘That’ll be \$17.’*  
(p. 185)

Like many Aspergers individuals, Christopher finds social connection with others difficult – ‘I do not like hugging people’ (p.21). When situations threaten to overwhelm him or he cannot interpret them, he retreats into confined spaces, screams, or buries his head in his arms and groans. He is

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often distressed by an inability to read social and physical signs, or unable to reconcile the gap between what people say and what they do, ‘when people tell you what to do, it is usually confusing and does not make sense’ (p.38). He cannot connect empathetically with this father’s distress, nor does he ever interpret it as such. When he finds his mother’s letters personally addressed to him that his father has kept deliberately from him, and when he finds out the his father has killed Wellington, no explanation from his father can allay Christopher’s apprehensions about his own safety. The logic is simple and understandable: his father lied about his mother being dead, his father has concealed letters to him from his mother, and his father has lied about and killed Wellington; conclusion – his life is in danger if he stays with his father, therefore he must leave for London to find his mother.

In its representation of other characters, as seen through Christopher’s eyes, the text destabilizes the disability/ability binary that often privileges the latter term. Adults for example are portrayed as ‘disabled’ by emotions such as jealousy in the case of Christopher’s father who killed Wellington in a fit of vengefulness, or handicapped by the frustrations of raising a disabled child and the limitations of suburban life, as Christopher’s mother is. In dealing with issues of representations of Australian Indigeneity, Marcia Langton calls for a constant interrogation of the use of otherness, because she claims that viewed and lived from the inside, a culture is often experienced as normative not deviant (1993). One of the strengths of Christopher’s characterization is his sense of self as ‘normative’, rather than ‘deviant’, in the centre, not on the periphery. This is illustrated when he dreams of a world struck down by a virus that destroys everyone except people who are ‘all special like me’ (p.243). On another occasion, Christopher observes some cows in a field, noting that other people, unlike himself, would not notice specific details; they ‘would do what is called *glancing*’ (p.174). He, on the other hand would not only observe how many cows there were, but would also identify their individual markings and how they were positioned in the field, remembering them long after the event subsided in time. We also learn of Christopher’s prodigious talent at advanced mathematic calculations, his special abilities in this area often leaving

the reader floundering and relegated to a position of (dis)ability (for example the Monty Hall problem). Christopher tells us that he knows ‘every prime number up to 7,507’, and Haddon cleverly deploys prime numbers to mark each chapter of Christopher’s tale further enriching the subjective texture of it, denying conventional narrative structural designation. The narrative also bristles with diagrams, maps, drawings, stories, texts that inform Christopher’s lexicon for mapping meaning in a world of bewildering signs and sounds. This collation of schema is not conventionally part of the linear design of narratives and works to substantiate and ratify Christopher’s unique perspectives.

The section of the text which features Christopher’s hazardous, but ultimately successful journey to London hinges on Christopher’s lack of social skills, the limitations of his logical and literal mindset and his apprehension about journeying beyond Swindon, that is, beyond a familiar, safe space. Nevertheless Christopher’s resourcefulness in his embodied navigation of the unknown is achieved by his capacity to draw on sign systems which issue a comforting familiarity and a code for interpreting particular situations. These include computer games, Sherlock Holmes mysteries, mathematical systems, his teacher’s Siobhan’s crafted behaviour management systems; these are cryptograms that provide him with reference points to interpret the unknown.

There are many other aspects which can be positively embraced if this text is interpreted as a narrative about an Asperger’s individual, not because it demystifies the syndrome (which it does in part) but because it makes the syndrome, through Christopher’s characterization, such a phenomenological and engaging driver of the narrative. Reading the novel as the representation of the Asperger’s individual as speaking subject, the text is seen a positive articulation of disability as ability, where we are invited to appreciate differences not as ‘deviations to be standardised’, but rather ‘unique, even enriching aspects of individuals that might be accepted’ (Garland Thompson 1997, p.79). The characterization of Siobhan, Christopher’s teacher, is a barometer of this particular approach, acting as a participant observer who interprets and mediates Christopher’s experiences. Her careful and sensitive relationship with Christopher does not render him a special case or an

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object of pity; rather it is respectful and encouraging of his uniqueness and his capacity to self-reflect. She suggests that he record his experiences, and the resulting story, the novel we read, is a rich bricolage driven by Christopher's particular ways of seeing and being in the world.

There have been also negative responses to the novel from those who have or work with Asperger's children as well as from those who engage in a variety of capacities with disabled individuals. Many of these claims express a concern for perceived anomalies and inaccuracies in Haddon's characterization of Christopher, the way the text could mislead audiences if they read this as a definitive story of an Asperger's individual (Atkins 2006, p.35). They point for example to the impossibility of an Asperger's child being capable of making his way unaided to an uncharted, unknown space. They also point out that Haddon is inconsistent in his characterization of Christopher as when for example, he demonstrates that despite Christopher's aversion to metaphor he is quite capable of appreciating and constructing allegorical motifs himself (for example: 'I think prime numbers are like life. They are very logical but you could never work out the rules, even if you spent all your time thinking about them', p.15). Others have argued that like the film *Rainman* with its savant character played by Dustin Hoffman, Haddon's novel romanticizes Aspergers (Shamash 2005, p.6), thus removing any capacity it has for engaging more 'realistically' with the social stigmatization of disability (Adams 2005, p.1). In his article entitled 'The Curious Incidence of Novels about Asperger's Syndrome' which examines a number of novels dealing with autistic characters which were published either before or just after Haddon's text, Bill Greenwell writes that Gene Kemp's novel *Seriously Weird* is the 'one to buy if you want to begin to understand the frustrations of living with an Asperger's child. Haddon's is a more complex **entertainment**' (Greenwell 2004, p.283). Greenwell adds that Haddon's text does not set out to deal specifically with the 'problems of socializing and the perception of Asperger's individuals as being abnormal' (ibid). This might be so, but narratives such as Haddon's and characters like Christopher which unsettle normative regimes of behaviour and social structure provide the kind

of deconstructive services with which disability theory has more recently engaged.

In a telling comment, Haddon claims that Christopher is 'made up' - a composite, a 'patchwork' of 'normal' people's habits and 'it is only when you put these bits together do you get a person that people think has a disability' (Woodroof 2003, np). *Think* is of course the operative word. If we 'put the bits together' to constitute Christopher's characteristics as disabled, the adult, adolescent or child reader is perforce constituted as abled and normal, as is childhood, adolescence and adulthood. I suggest that the novel does not fully work in this polarizing way, and that in not naming Christopher as an individual with Asperger's syndrome, yet presenting a character whose behaviour and views are not easily classifiable as 'normative', the text places the reader in strange yet familiar relationship with him; most importantly it disallows any kind of hierarchical management of the character and disrupts those boundaries that are socially and culturally structured around same and other, familiar and strange, normal and abnormal. The brief analysis of the novel already undertaken here has indicated this destabilizing turn, as Christopher's account of his experience and perceptions fail to solidify his character as 'abnormal'.

There is much in the text in the constitution of Christopher that works in the way Freud sees the uncanny operating, not as something entirely remote to us but something that is 'strangely familiar' especially to a young adult reader. Writing about the 'new' disability studies approach, Garland Thompson optimistically suggests such an approach would 'revision disability as something we can or will have in common rather than something that is alien to us' (1999, p.51). There are many things one could identify here which blur any indelible distinction between disabled and abled, in particular those aspects of Christopher's behaviour with which many children would connect and appreciate. These include the digressive stream-of-connectedness-and-disconnectedness way in which Christopher writes and thinks; the obsessive focus on minutiae; his musings about why animals behave the way they do; his quasi philosophizing on death and life and the afterlife; his ambition to be an astronaut, his inability to fully comprehend his parents' situation; his frustrations in trying to fit the

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signifier to the signified as well as his questioning of the efficacy of metaphor. In a section previously quoted referring to the bewildering bombardments of a metaphoric passage, Christopher commented that he was not the only one who did not understand it, neither did his father nor did Siobhan, his teacher. This linkage between Christopher and others who would be categorized as ‘normal’ invites us to see the ways in which language can shape or confound our understandings of self and others in the symbolic field; it is not just something specific to Asperger’s individuals. Likewise Christopher’s description of how his memory works - ‘my memory has a smelltrack which is like a soundtrack’ (p.96) – demonstrates the ways in which we all morph language in an attempt to better describe our feelings in all their suggestive nebulae. Christopher use of visual and written codes which identify familiar contemporary simulacra of self-articulation: diagrams, lists, graffiti; videogames are likewise common to the experiences of many children and young people; they are only abnormal if we name them so and if we have a solid view garnered from social dictates about what constitutes behaviour, views and emotional reactions ‘proper’ to normative stages and forms of childhood, adolescence, and adulthood.

Moreover the novel simply does not allow us to ‘settle’ Christopher’s characterization and there are many moments in the narrative which operate to unhinge our control. In the early part of the narrative for example we may well think from his somewhat childish language, that Christopher is eight years old, until we read that he is ‘15 years and 3 months and 2 days’ (p.7). Later his breathlessly articulated depth of knowledge about Science and Maths challenges any propensity to frame him. What then is strangely familiar about Christopher combined with an inability to fix him, incites in the reader a less secure hold on what constitutes his/her own normality and by extension what might constitute a ‘normal’ childhood or adolescence or adulthood. As Christopher himself comments, ‘all the facts that you take for granted can be completely wrong’ (p.100). This kind of unsettling experience generated by the text is similar to what Margaret Schildrick (2005), in her theorisings of disability, has called a ‘transhistorical anxiety about identity’, and in particular, an ‘underlying

fear of final classification’ that we all possess. This is particularly well illustrated in the references to the special school that Christopher attends, with its emphasis on the identification of disability, its isolation of disability within an institutionalized practice, and in its inculcation of standards of normativity that govern this. Within this environment, Christopher is encouraged to see other disabled children in the institution as ‘abnormal’ and to disassociate himself from them. In an article which expresses deep concern about the excessive medical surveillance and categorization of children’s behaviour patterns as either normal or abnormal, Katie Grant claims that the popularity of Haddon’s text has added a ‘fashionable’ dimension to this classification game (2006, p.3). I would argue just the opposite- that it in fact contests that very thing, underlining what Oliver Sachs has praised about Haddon’s text in performing the valuable task of writing about the way the world was before ‘we went diagnosis crazy.’ (cited in Woodroof, 2003, np) Through a reading of *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* as one which posits Christopher as both same and other in the social and symbolic order, the narrative invites us to ask questions about the foundationalist terms and processes we set up in our society to describe, categorise, judge and manage people and behaviours, including those that have been labelled as abled or disabled.



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