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The Curious Incident of Ableism: Deconstructing Haddon's Portrayal of Autism in *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*

Klarina Priborkin

Abstract

Mark Haddon's 2003 international bestseller, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* is a novel about a 15-year-old, autistic boy Christopher Boon, who investigates the suspicious death of a neighborhood dog. Some critics interpret this text as a "liberatory model of disability" since "Christopher's disability is never named," thus suggesting that "disability is in the eye of the reader, not the character itself" (Ray, 2013, para.1). This paper will argue that the opposite is true. I will show that Haddon's "simplistic, vile [and often] ridiculous" (Yergeau, 2018, p.89) portrayal of Christopher is not a "critique of ableism," but rather ableism on its own right. It's the kind of novel that attempts to explain autistic people to the larger audience but ends up reinforcing the stereotypes without directly referring to the protagonists' diagnosis. Haddon's choice to ignore "the elephant in the room" might imply that autism is a source of shame or embarrassment rather than an integral part of the protagonist's identity. By contrasting Mark Haddon's fictional

representation of autism to the authentic autobiographical voices that appear in Naoki Higashida's *The Reason I Jump*, Tito Rajarshi Mukhopadhyay's *How Can I Talk When My Lips Don't Move*, and Donna Williams' *Nobody, Nowhere* this paper will demonstrate that the protagonist Haddon portrays in his novel is far from being a reliable, nuanced representation of an autistic teenager and should not be described as such especially when the novel is taught in Israeli high schools.

Keywords: Autism Representation, Autistic Autobiographies, Narrative Prothesis, The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time, Disability Rhetoric, Neurodiversity

Introduction- The Argument Against *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*

Mark Haddon's (2003) bestseller *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* is narrated by Christopher Boone, a fifteen-year-old autistic savant who is trying to solve the murder mystery of Wellington, the neighbour's poodle. While being popular with the neurotypical audiences, some autistic readers resent the shallow representation of autism in the novel. In her book *Authoring Autism: on Rhetoric and Neurological Queerness* Melanie Yergeu (2018) recalls a book club session to which she has been referred to by her "disability services counselor…in order to practice her social skills" (p.89). The book club consisted of 11 autistic participants and 4 neurotypicals. In order to decide which book will be read at the club, the participants cast a vote:

> Before the final vote, three autistic members voice their vehement objections to reading Curious Incident. They maintain that it's the most simplistic, vile, ridiculous book they've ever come across. We vote, and *Curious Incident* wins - only because two autistics have abstained from the voting, and all four of the nonautistic moderators have cast their votes for Curious Incident. And so, with the exception of those who call themselves neurologically typical, we all practice melting down in public. One person totally flips out in authentic autistic fashion, screaming and jumping and flailing and throwing hardcover books. Another covers her ears and hunkers down. Two others start yelling. Two leave the

> table. One looks bewildered. My hard drive shuts down, then crashes, and I mentally leave planet earth effectively mute and literally senseless. (p.89)

In the weeks that follow this dramatic scene, it becomes clear that the moderators expect the autistic participants to see themselves as little Christophers. They clearly think they know better as they dismiss the non-verbal, angry reactions to the book manifested by the autistic participants. The neurotypical members ask us questions like: "You know that time when Christopher wishes everyone on Earth were dead but him so that he can pursue his autistic interest and not be bullied – do you all wish the same thing?" (Yergeau, 2018, p. 90) While the neurotypical readers enjoy *Curious Incident* thinking it helps them to understand autism, some autistic readers find it offensive, stereotypical and humiliating. This article will demonstrate why *Curious Incident* should not be read as authentic representation of an autistic voice and provide several examples of autobiographies that can be read as much more reliable representations of autistic narrators that construct their identities through the autobiographies they write.

Theoretical Framework

In the 2004 interview, Mark Haddon admits that he chose several stereotypical behaviours to characterize Christopher thus using the character's disability as the main force that moves the plot. Mitchel and Snyder (2000) argue that disabled people became the "subject not only of governmental policies and social programs but also a primary object of literary representation" (p.47). According to their theory "disability pervades literary narrative first as a stock feature of characterization and, second, as an opportunistic metaphorical device" (Mitchel & Snyder, 2000, p.47). They term this perpetual discursive dependency upon disability "narrative prothesis", further claiming that "the very need for a story is called into being when something has gone amiss with the known world, and, thus, the language of a tale seeks to comprehend that which has stepped out of line. In this sense, stories compensate for an unknown and unnatural deviance that begs an explanation" (Mitchel & Snyder, 2000, p.53).

In Haddon's novel Christopher's autism is stereotypically represented as

the cause of family drama when his mother, unable to take care of her son, leaves the family divorcing Christopher's father who becomes his son's sole caregiver. Even through the mother keeps sending letters to her son, the father hides the letters telling Christorpher that his mother passed away. Christopher's character becomes the narrative prothesis to explore "larger cultural anxieties regarding the instability of the postmodern family and the struggle to establish emotional connections in the postmodern world." (Lofits, 2015, p.108)

> In his interview to Terry Gross on Fresh Air, Haddon admits that he did more research about the London Underground and the inside of Swindon Railway Station, where some of the novel takes place, than [he] did about Asperger's syndrome. I gave [Christopher] kind of 9 or 10 rules that he would live his life by, and then I didn't read any more about Asperger's because I think there is no typical person who has Asperger's syndrome, and they're as large and diverse a group of people as any other group in society. And the important thing is that I did a lot of imagining, that I did a lot of putting myself into his shoes in trying to make him come alive as a human being rather than getting him right, whatever that might mean.

In his 2010, interview with *The Independent*, he was described as thoroughly irritated that the word Asperger's appeared on subsequent editions of the novel, because it made people believe he is as an expert on autism. Sadly, this interview demonstrates the main problem with the misrepresentation of autism in the popular culture and literature. The audience, fascinated by the flat representation of autism, crowns its own experts, developing a seemingly compassionate yet condescending approach towards autistic people who remain misunderstood and marginalized.

According to Loftis (2015), *Curios Incident* was written as a humorous parody of the autistic detective tradition. Christopher contemplates his neurodiversity comparing his analytical abilities to that of Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes, perceiving him as an autistic hero. While investigating the murder of the neighbor's dog, Christopher is writing a diary about his experiences which he is to submit to his Special Education teacher who initiates this assignment. Although Christopher's engagement with Holmes's

character is supposed to empower him, in fact the gap between Holmes' sharp analytic mind and Christopher's inappropriate interpretation of reality only emphasizes his disability. This irony, however, is apparent only to the reader. While Holmes' mysterious character is always ahead of the reader, Christopher always falls behind as the reader understands much more about the case than Christopher himself.

Conan Doyle's novels have two layers of mystery – the mystery of how Holmes' brilliant mind works, and the crime Holmes is currently solving. It is through Watson's character that the reader understands how Holmes solved the mystery. In *The Curious Incident*, on the contrary, the riddle is to decode the mind of the autistic teenager. Christorpher is completely unaware of the fact that by solving the mystery of the dog's murder he is actually solving a much more personal mystery of his mother's fake death. As Loftis (2015) suggests, pursuing the "wrong" mystery allows the neurotypical (and perhaps adult) reader to view [Christopher's] attempts with a certain amount of detached (and potentially condescending) humour (p.128).

The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time is not merely a parody of the detective genre; it explicitly aligns with the "defective detective" trope. Dolmage (2014) notes that this archetype was popularized during the Great Depression by American pulp publications such as *Dime Mystery Magazine*. The detectives in these stories were heroes who succeeded either in spite of or because of their disabilities (Hoppenstand & Browne, 1983). Often socially awkward or physically distinct, these characters overcame personal weaknesses to fight injustice, symbolically allowing society to "overcome its deformities and return to normal" (Hoppenstand & Browne, 1983, p. 2). The detectives' deviation from social norms is what enables them to solve the crime. This is a trait shared by literary ancestors like Sherlock Holmes and C. Auguste Dupin, who succeed only when they abandon "normal" thinking (Dolmage, 2014, p. 145). This literary lineage provides a behavioural blueprint for Christopher, who is inspired by Sherlock Holmes' character to validate and master his own cognitive distinctiveness.

Similarly, Christorpher believes that just as he has a special power of paying attention to details and hyperfocus, he can also detach his mind from his body thus teaching himself to control his emotions just like his favorite detective. When Christopher decides to travel to London alone to find his mother, he

is convinced that he'll be able to overcome his emotional reaction to the overwhelming environment by using Holmes as an example of a character whose emotions do not cloud his logical judgement. Yet his attempts to block his own emotions deny him of his authentic self. As Donna Williams, an award-winning autistic writer, explains: autistic people "live in the sensory;" they "excel in thinking in pictures, sounds, touches and smells" (as cited in Savarese, 2018, p.38). Neuroscientific studies from 2006 show that autistics "process language through the sensory regions of their brain in addition to the traditional language centers" (Gallese & Wojciehowski in Savarese, 2018, p.38-39). Thus, Christorpher's efforts to live only in the mind detached from his feelings are doomed to fail as he discovers when he is utterly overwhelmed at the railroad station on his way to London:

> And then there was a sound like people fighting with swords and I could feel a strong wind and a roaring started and I closed my eyes and the reading got louder and I groaned really loudly but I couldn't block it out of my ears and I thought the little station is going to collapse or there was a big fire somewhere and I was going to die (Haddon, 2003, p.176).

Ironically, it is when Christorpher becomes vulnerable and connects to his feelings that Haddon conveys his emotions in the most reliable and evocative way.

Literary Analysis

The Curious Incident is narrated in a simplistic, robotic and logical voice that attempts to escape emotion and thus flattens Christopher's character: "I sometimes think of my mind as a machine, but not always as a bread-slicing machine. It makes it easier to explain to other people what is going on inside it (Haddon, 2003, p.7). Christopher further explains that he "find[s] people confusing" (Haddon, 2003, p.14) because "they do a lot of talking without using any words" and because they're using metaphors (Haddon, 2003, p.15). When Haddon's novel was published, in 2003, it was believed that autistic people were not capable of interpreting the intentions of others as conveyed through paralinguistic signals such as the tone of voice and body language, and that's the characterization he used for Christopher. As the concepts of

neuroplasticity and neurodivergence became more prevalent in scientific discourse, it became clear that autistic people read minds differently than neurotypicals do. Just as neurotypicals misinterpret the unconventional body language of autistic people, so autistic people misinterpret the intentions of neurotypicals.

Despite their difficulties expressing themselves through spoken interaction, autistic people are keen on explaining themselves in writing and sharing their emotions through poetic language and complex narrative strategies. Wills (1995) argues that "writing is prosthesis par excellence" (p. 27) and John Dewey sees "tools and technologies as extensions of the body" (as cited in Dolmage, 2014, p.110). According to Timothy Dolmage (2014), we extend ourselves through our relationships with others and our use of tools because our knowledge of our bodies and of ourselves is fragmented and so is our understanding of the world. Yet we are afraid of interdependence and disability; we are afraid of change in our bodies even though all of us are only *temporarily* able-bodied. "A fear that the body is not static, rational, and whole" is manifested in our obsession with perfect, independent bodies, yet since human beings depend on each other, our existence is essentially prosthetic" (Dolmage, 2014, p.115). Thus, writing can be seen as a kind of cognitive affordance that allows us to remember information, emotions, concepts and thoughts and to transfer/convey them across space and time.

Throughout *The Curious Incident*, Haddon represents Christopher's linguistic abilities as deficient, claiming he does not understand metaphors, yet he is clearly able to use them in his diary and even explain the difference between a metaphor and a simile. When Christopher describes an inspector as someone who "looked as if there were two very small mice hiding in his nostrils," (Haddon, 2003, p. 17) he also provides a footnote that explains this figure of speech. This quote emphasizes the gap between what the protagonist thinks he understands and what the reader realizes the narrator/protagonist understands. Throughout the novel, Haddon undermines Christopher's reliability creating the cognitive dissonance between the reader's tendency to empathize with and follow the lead of first-person narration to the superiority the neurotypical readers feel when interpreting the described social situations better than the narrator. This inherent irony in the novel creates an emotional distance between the reader and the autistic narrator.

Authentic Counter-Narratives- Autistic Autobiographies

Conversely, autistic autobiographies bridge the gaps between the autistic narrators and the neurotypical readers by providing a firsthand experience of what it's like to grow up in a world that does not understand your behavior and sensibility. In these autobiographies the first-person narrators have the authority to tell the neurotypical readers about their autistic experience. For example, Naoki Higashida, the thirteen-year-old author of *The Reason I Jump*, titles almost every chapter of his autobiography as a question a neurotypical reader might ask such as "Why do you like spinning? "Why do you ignore us when we're talking to you? Why do you make a huge fuss over tiny mistakes?" (Higashida, 2013) On the one hand, the author is heavily concerned with the neurotypical perspective, trying to explain his autistic mindset and behavior, but on the other hand, he occupies the empowering position to express and author his experience.

The stereotypical behaviors of autistic people are broken down by Higashida into heartfelt descriptions of sensory overstimulation the narrator experiences:

> It must be hard for you to understand why this could make me so unhappy…But it's almost impossible for me to keep my emotions contained. Once I've made a mistake, the fact of it starts rushing towards me like a Tsunami. And then, like trees and houses being destroyed by the Tsunami, I get destroyed by the shock. I get swallowed up in the moment and cannot tell the right response from the wrong response. All I know is that I have to get out of the situation as soon as I can, so I don't drown. To get away, I'll do anything (Higashida, 2013, p. 64-65).

Not only can the teenage writer make assumptions about the minds of his potential readers, a cognitive skill autistic people were thought to lack, but he does it by using poetic language that enables the reader to empathize with the first-person narrator. By embodying the powerful experience of drowning and being carried away by a Tsunami, the narrator evokes the readers' empathy, enabling us to understand what he experiences after making a mistake.

Similarly, in "How Can I Talk if My Lips Don't Move?" Tito Rajarshi Mukhopadhyay uses poetic language not only to explain himself to the

neurotypical readers, but also to construct his identity through language. In the opening pages of his autobiography, he describes his three-year-old self obsessively looking in the mirror:

> I would stand in front of it because I believed the mirror wanted to tell me a story…because I wanted to tell it a story…My stories were not meant for human ears…I believed that if you cared enough to listen you could hear the sky and earth speaking to each other in the language of blue and brown (Mukhopadhyay, 2008, p.1).

Poetic language characterized by repetition, metaphors, personification and other figurative devices lends itself to internal discovery, enabling the autistic author to access his internal world and make sense of his relationship with reality through the new language he creates:

> I saw the two mirrors interact with each other, not in any language of blue, white, yellow or brown but in a completely new language. They interacted in the language of reflections, something that they would not share with me. I could not understand their language, but I could appreciate it. I was fascinated by this new language of reflection and intimacy between the two mirrors. I wondered about all the secret stories they shared between them, like relatives talking about their family, reflection replying to reflection" (Mukhopadhyay, 2008, p.15).

The narrator personifies the mirrors and imagines their conversations: "I built my own stories about their communications. Sometimes I made the colors dispute each other. Sometimes I made the colors share their secrets with the wind" (Mukhopadhyay, 2008, p.16). Associating the colors he observes with storytelling, the narrator notices that shadows don't speak and "don't tell stories" (Mukhopadhyay, 2008, p.21) since they don't have colors - an observation that conveys his imaginative perception of reality.

Even though at this point, the narrator is non-verbal and can hear his own voice only when he laughs or yells, he imagines talking to mirrors and avoids distracting them with his own "talking, especially when [they] show [him] stories of the wind and the ceiling fan in the color of air" (Mukhopadhyay,

2008, p.18). Sometimes, the mirror shows him "the story of the curtains and the window in the colors of sunlight and green" (Mukhopadhyay, 2008, p.19). It seems that this mental conversation with objects serves as a preliminary stage that eventually enables the narrator to develop his speaking voice. Through the synesthesia described in the text, the narrator mingles color and sound to create an alternative language of communication first with objects and nature and later with human beings.

As Tito grows older, he learns to interact with the world through his speaking voice which he eventually develops through intensive speech therapy and his mother's close guidance and facilitation. Learning how to read and write opens up another channel of communication and self-expression. Throughout his autobiography, Tito's unique, poetic voice builds in intensity, often culminating in a poem at the opening or the close of a chapter:

> Voices of colors
> And voices of shadows
> Voices of movement
> And their echoes
> Voices of silence
> Spun near or far
> Through spaces and distance
> Soaking my ears. (Mukhopadhyay, 2008, p.3)

This excerpt emphasizes the tension between the narrator's desire for self-expression and his constant yearning for introspection as two opposing forces that nourish his unique creative voice. The succinct language of poetry which often leaves more gaps and silences for the readers' interpretation is a suitable genre to express this tension between silence and speech.

Similarly, in her bestselling autobiography *Nobody, Nowhere*. *The Remarkable Autobiography of an Autistic Girl* (1991), which was translated into 20 languages worldwide, Donna Williams often turns to poetry and music to convey her fractured self. In her words:

> through my music I began more and more to reach and express my true self. My music spoke of things I loved, of the wind and the rain, of freedom and hope, of happiness and simplicity

> and of triumph over confusion. However, the closer I came to bringing myself out, the greater became my fears which caused serious conflicts between my inner self and the character I used to communicate with the outside world (Williams, 1991, p.115).

Just as Higashida and Mukhopadhyay turn to nature to describe their inner turmoils, so Williams is nurtured by the simplicity of musical sound, the wind and the rain.

Unlike Naoki and Tito, however, Donna experiences harsh parental neglect and abuse thus developing two personalities that help her cope with the world. As she puts it,

> within each of us are the survival mechanisms of fight and flight. Willie was the personification of my response to fears outside myself – my fight response. Carol embodied my flight response: to run from fears which were sensed as coming from within – fear of emotion (Williams, 1991, p.134).

Williams creates space for all her personalities, which she switches whenever necessary, thus deconstructing the notion of a unified, sovereign self. Through this rhetorical strategy, she validates these fragmented states as legitimate forms of existence, challenging the neurotypical assumption that a coherent, static narrative identity is the only prerequisite for a claim to selfhood. As Sidonie Smith (2001) argues, "if autism is a metaphor through which unknowable subjectivities...become culturally intelligible, then autistic autobiography continually works against the discursive limits of this cultural inscription" (p.231).

The narrator, Donna, finds her other self, Carol, in a mirror:

> when I was not in front of the mirror, Carol would disappear. I would feel deserted…I had realized that I had to walk straight into the mirror if I was ever to get into that room. For the next four years I tried. I would walk straight into it and wonder why I could not get through (Williams, 1991, p.24).

Donna's mental state deteriorates as she begins to hit herself, slapping her

face, biting herself and pulling her own hair in hope to escape her "mental prison." Eventually, she gets into a cupboard and in the darkness finds "Carol within [herself]" (Williams, 1991, p.25). Carol enables her to please others and become "everything that people liked. Carol laughed a lot…Carol had a mother" (Williams, 1991, p.25). Even though "to [her] mother's delight Carol could act relatively normal," she actually becomes her mother's "dancing doll" fulfilling her dreams to outdo her sister "who had only boys" (Williams, 1991, p.25).

While for Tito, the mirror serves as an interlocutor evoking Lacanian mirror stage, in Donna's case the character in the mirror robs her of individuality as Carol embodies all those socio-cultural demands Donna's internal world rejects. After Donna becomes Carol and lives to please her mother, the physical abuse takes another form: "my mother would twist and pull and damn near break my legs off, getting me to do splits or bend over backwards" (Williams, 1991, p.25). By the age of eleven, Donna is on painkillers for rheumatism, but for several year she keeps fighting the pain to remain her mother's doll.

It is only when she grows up and goes into therapy with the psychiatrist named Mary "who had been able to see the frightened little girl" (Williams, 1991, p.91) that Donna, whom the narrator refers to as "a ghost", comes back. It is fascinating to notice how the narrator plays with the different personas of her self: "Donna was called into the office; and Carol, carrying the bag of strawberries, entered. Carol was always sent out to test the water before Donna decided it was safe to jump in" (Williams, 1991, p.92). After eating the strawberries together, which is the first test Mary successfully passes, the psychiatrist reassures Donna that she won't be "locked up" for being "mad." Hearing these words, Donna sobs like a child. Finally, she is ready to receive the mental support she needed so desperately: "It was arranged that I would see Mary twice a week for the first couple of weeks. These weeks were to stretch on into months and then into years. Mary was to become the most important mental influence on my life" (Williams, 1991, p.92). Williams closes the chapter about her healing process with a poem:

> An adult trapped in a child's insecurity,
> Seeming complete, and yet not,
> To open its eyes to a world never seen,
> And hear the sound of people,
> As though for the first time, without fear,

> To express in its own words gratification,
> And to feel in its heart some of the security it's longed for,
> Is a gift.
> What better gift than to give someone their self? (Williams, 1991, p.92)

Poetry enables Williams to find the language of her fractured self. In the lines above she gives herself a permission to experience the world and accept her autistic self without masking. She does not have to fear rejection and hide anymore but rather relax into the security of being who she is. Finally, through the healing relationship with Mary, she is able to reframe her life experiences and express them through poetic language.

Conclusion

The excerpts of poetry discussed in this article are integrated into autistic autobiographies in order to express the authors' complex identities in the most authentic way. The poetic language and intense emotion characteristic of these texts stand in sharp contrast to the stereotypical depiction of Christorpher in the *Curious Incident* thus proving once more that to understand autistic people, we must let them speak, rather than be spoken for. The language of poetry incorporated into their narrative becomes the cognitive tool that enables autistic authors to express alternative ways of experiencing and imagining the world.

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