

Short Summaries

The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time (2003)

by Mark Haddon

15-year-old Christopher Boone lives with his single father in Swindon and attends a special needs school. When the neighbour's dog is stabbed to death, he decides to investigate the case. During his investigations he discovers that his mother, who supposedly 'died' two years ago, is in fact still alive. It turns out that she moved to London with her lover, even though Christopher's father told him that she had died. Christopher also discovers that his father killed the dog and subsequently decides to run away and live with his mother. He overcomes several obstacles, including travelling alone for the first time and taking the tube, before arriving at his mother's new apartment. Christopher's mother admits that she could not cope with a disabled child and that it eventually drove a wedge between her and her husband. However, when her lover refuses to let Christopher stay with them, she decides to move back to Swindon and resumes her caretaker role. The novel ends with Christopher moving in with his mother and his father apologising for his lies.

Autism: Christopher is portrayed as having the mind of a child but the body of a 15-year-old. Those aware of his intellectual deficits tend to be either kind and understanding or patronising, whereas outsiders often react with incredulity or hostility, of which Christopher mostly seems to remain unaware. In fact, throughout the novel, Christopher shows a very limited range of emotions, i.e. he is either happy, sad, or scared/angry. His matter-of-fact way of reporting events contributes to the idea that he simply does not have a 'thick' layer of emotions. Although Christopher is highly mathematically gifted, it is unlikely that he will ever be able to care for himself, including making his own food, changing clothes, or doing the laundry, thus fulfilling the criteria of a savant. More than once, Christopher's parents are shown to be struggling with their son's behaviour, which is also hinted to be the main cause for their separation. By the end of the novel, Christopher has neither changed nor grown, despite his adventurous trip to London.

The London Eye Mystery (2007) by Siobhan Dowd

12-year-old Ted lives with his parents and his sister Kat in London. During the holidays, his aunt Gloria and his cousin Salim are visiting for a few days. When his cousin disappears during a ride on the London Eye, Kat and Ted begin to investigate. With the family being in a state of emergency, Ted struggles to cope with the changed atmosphere and the rising tension and emotions. During the course of the novel, he is also met with several challenges such as navigating the London underground on his own, going to a motorcycle convention, and having to learn how to tell lies. Ted eventually cracks the case, and it turns out that Salim had run away to evade having to move to New York.

Autism: Ted struggles to read body language and express his own emotions. He pointedly refers to his brain as a computer, running on a different operating system, thus somewhat alluding to the stereotype of autists as robotic. Although the novel centres around Ted and his sister trying to solve the mystery of their cousin's disappearance, one characteristic of Ted is his loneliness and his wish to make new friends (as of the beginning of his novel, he only lists his parents and his teacher). Because of this, Ted is constantly trying to be 'more normal', by following rules others explained to him, e.g. looking somebody in the eye, laughing when others laugh, etc. Ted is not contrasted with any children his own age; most characters are adults who tend to be both patronising and impressed by his exceptional memory. Although Ted's abilities help solve the case, they are also hinted to be an obstacle to finding friends at school, because he is called a nerd and a geek.

By the end of the novel, Ted has self-reportedly made new friends, including his cousin and his aunt. Moreover, he has learned some new skills, such as navigating the London underground and lying, as well as improved his ability to understand body language. Although Ted does at times struggle with pragmatic competency and shows some naivety, the stereotype 'Childlike' only partly applies due to his age.

Marcelo in the Real World (2010) by Francisco X. Stork

17-year-old Marcelo has lived a sheltered life when his father decides that he should take a summer job. Having previously attended a special needs school, Marcelo is thrown in at the deep end when he starts at his father's law firm where the colleagues are ruthlessly competitive. However, when Marcelo discovers a conspiracy, he takes action, even against his own father. With the help of his co-worker, Marcelo uncovers the truth. He befriends Jasmine and gains a new perspective on life when she takes him on a trip to her family. In the end, Marcelo decides to attend mainstream school so that he can become a nurse.

Autism: Marcelo fulfils the criteria of the stereotype 'Childlike', having led a sheltered life between his family and his special needs schooling environment, which did not provide opportunities to learn skills such as riding the train or navigating town on his own. While his father insists that 'nothing is wrong' with his son, he nonetheless tells his colleagues about Marcelo's 'cognitive disorder'. Consequently, Marcelo encounters curious questions (to the point of harassment) when he joins his father's workplace for a summer job. However, not only does Marcelo quickly develop new skills when confronted with new expectations, he overcomes his fear in several instances, takes a stand against his father, and makes plans for his future, including wilfully forfeiting the opportunity of returning to his old school in order to help the victim of a corporate lawsuit. Several characters remain ignorant of his intellectual abilities and are blinded by the fact that Marcelo tends to refer to himself in the third person, while also being baffled by his literalness and honesty. Only when it is too late, do these characters realise that they underestimated his abilities.

Marcelo is a dynamic character who shows a lot of growth during the novel. Although he would still be considered naïve by the standards of other 17-year-olds, his transition from special needs education to mainstream school marks his progressive participation in society.

***Mockingbird* (2010) by Kathryn Erskine**

11-year-old Caitlin has lost her brother and best friend Devon in a school shooting. Without Devon's help she is feeling alone and struggling to fit in. With the help of her new friend Michael, lost his mother in the same shooting, and the school counsellor Mrs. Brook, Caitlin begins to understand the rules of friendship. She also convinces her father to finish Devon's scout project with her, which becomes the centrepiece of a dedication ceremony that brings some closure to the whole community.

Autism: When it comes to participation, Caitlin's biggest obstacle is her communication barrier. Although she does have feelings and emotions, she cannot communicate them in a way that others easily recognise. Consequently, she is often perceived as rude, ignorant, or cold. At times, her literalness or honesty causes offence to others. Because her brother and only friend Devon recently died in a school shooting, she now experiences loneliness and has to interact more with other children. Additionally, she heavily relied on Devon to explain the implicit rules of social interaction. Caitlin is contrasted with another child from school, Michael, who is several years younger but has a better understanding of social conventions. He teaches Caitlin new skills in a non-patronising way and thus becomes her first new friend. However, apart from difficulties in social interaction, Caitlin displays the same developmental level as her peers and insists that she is not 'autistic', since she does not have the same deficits as a classmate of hers. Although the stereotype 'Child-like' does apply, it must be taken into account that she is only 10 years old and has recently lost her brother. For example, while she insists that she 'can read anything', she also claims to attend a 'fun raiser' instead of a fundraiser.

Because of her brother's death, Caitlin is forced to change and adapt; she learns to express sympathy and her grief over her brother's death. What appears as indifference to others is in fact her inability to express her emotions and read those of others.

***Trueman Bradley* (2011) by Alexei Maxim Russell**

This novel tells the story of Trueman Bradley who wants to be a detective like his comic hero Slam Bradley. Having inherited several million dollars, Trueman moves to New York and quickly fiends several friends that help him start a detective agency. His genius mathematical abilities allow him to invent several gadgets that help solve several murders and a large conspiracy that involves the mafia and the NYC chief of police. Trueman successfully solves the cases and becomes a famous detective that consults with the NYPD.

Autism: Trueman fulfils the criteria of a genius detective, to the point where his memory and his abilities are superhuman. During the course of the novel, he invents a 'crime-fighting equation', a mathematical equation which leads directly to the perpetrator, as well as several other equations that power technical devices which help him navigate his surroundings, predict probabilities, etc. Upon moving to New York, to fulfil his dream of becoming a detective, he quickly finds people who help him found a detective agency and who will continue to mother him throughout the novel. Trueman is treated like a child prodigy, with everybody indulging his whims. He does succeed as a detective, not because he adapts and changes but because his mathematical abilities and his money allow him to adapt his surroundings to his own needs, thus creating his own niche. Throughout the novel, Trueman shows little emotional depth, except for being happy, sad, scared, or angry. Conversations tend to be repetitive, as he reprimands everyone for using figurative speech. His main characteristics are his naivety, his genius abilities, and his lack of pragmatic competence.

Although Trueman successfully solves several crimes and invents new equations, he is a static character. Interactions with others tend to amount to others being shown up as lacking compassion. He cannot be considered a stepping-stone, however, since all characters that act understanding of him also benefit from his money, his influence, or his reputation.

***The State of Grace* (2017) by Rachel Lucas**

15-year-old Grace struggles when her father has to go abroad for work for several months. Additionally, her mother decides to take up a new job and rekindles an old friendship from college. Meanwhile, Grace is struggling with being a teenager and with her increasing feelings for classmate Gabe. When the old routines fall apart, Grace becomes increasingly anxious. After an accident with her horse, Grace takes a break from everything at her grandmother's house. Upon returning, she finds most of the routines re-established and her friends and family still waiting for her. This novel focuses on the everyday struggles of being a teenager and autistic, but it also defies common assumptions about autistic people.

Autism: Grace is a non-stereotypical portrayal. Her main difficulty poses the fact that there is no rulebook for 'being human', i.e. for social interactions and being a 'normal' teenager, as well as her hypersensitivity. Both lead to a high level of anxiety, which intertwines with teenage angst. Grace emphasises that she has neither special abilities, nor an exceptional memory or a love for order. Her preference for routines is linked to her heightened senses which make navigating new surroundings stressful for her and hinder her participation in society. She also tends to overthink in social situations but has otherwise a good grasp of pragmatic force and will occasionally play the 'disability card', as she calls it, by pretending to be unaware of her surroundings. Although her hypersensitivity is technically linked to the stereotypical genius, it does not fit in this instance, since her abilities are not linked to the progression of the novel, such as a detective story would provide.

Grace's character is dynamic as she finds new friends, falls in love, and comes to new realisations about herself and her family.

***What to Say Next* (2017) by Julie Buxbaum**

This novel is told from two perspectives in alternating chapters.

16-year-old David has no friends, and his sister Miney has gone to college. He spends most of his days at school alone, listening to music. Kat, on the other hand, has recently lost her father to a car accident and

struggles to keep her life together. One day, Kat sits down next to David and the two strike up an unlikely friendship. David, who has a crush on Kat, constantly fears that she will turn away from him. Meanwhile, Kat is grieving her father and discovers that her parents had been close to a divorce because her mother had had an affair with Kat's uncle. By befriending Kat and defying the school bullies, David rises through the social ranks of his high school, but then he finds out that Kat has been omitting the whole truth of the accident: it was her who had been driving the car. David accidentally makes her secret public and their friendship suffers. When he realises that he has made a mistake he begins to atone and they grow close once more.

Autism: David has resigned himself to his socially isolated outsider role by following a strict routine throughout his school day, including a playlist that is linked to the time it takes him to navigate between classrooms or have lunch. Both staff and students seem to assume that he prefers loneliness and routine due to a lack of emotions, thus fulfilling the stereotype of a robot. His outstanding IQ and his abilities in maths and physics make him a genius and consequently change the course of events. David's characteristics, e.g. his tendency to talk to himself, also fit the stock character of the absent-minded professor. However, when David acts in self-defence, the headmaster suggests that he has criminal tendencies and should not attend a mainstream school, thus alluding to the mad scientist who turns against humanity. Because of his isolation, David has not had as many opportunities to improve his social skills. Thus, at times, he has an innocent and naïve view of things, as well as being very honest, but his quick thinking allows him to analyse social situations (and jokes) and navigate them successfully most of the time. Moreover, since many students know him from middle school, he already holds a certain reputation for being different, which contrasts starkly with his older sister's popularity. Once given the opportunity, David demonstrates that he has improved his social skills and is able to befriend others, as well as navigate the social aspects of school life. However, although David has not been labelled officially, i.e. has not received an 'official' diagnosis, he belatedly realises that his family and his teachers/headmaster have categorised him under 'special needs'.

It remains unclear why nobody talks about this, but his parents have secretly hired a social skills tutor disguised as a guitar teacher, thus obviously realising David's deficits.

Can You See Me (2019) by Libby Scott and Rebecca Westcott

This novel is interspersed with diary entries written by autistic Libby Scott.

11-year-old Tally mostly struggles with her Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA), which leads to her becoming anxious whenever demands are placed on her. When she starts at a new school, she fails to fit in, which increasingly burdens her friendships. Luckily, her new teacher is willing to learn about autism. For example, Tally prefers to wear a tiger mask in public because it makes her feel stronger, but when her mask is stolen and made fun of by her classmates, Tally flees school. Her teacher holds an intervention with the class and Tally's friends and classmates apologise. By the end of the novel, Tally's autism diagnosis has become public knowledge and she no longer has to hide behind her (tiger) mask.

Autism: Much of the novel's events focus on Tally's PDA. Because on the outside her behaviour is perceived as defiance, she tends to be judged as an unruly child, with even her parents struggling to differentiate cause and effect. Although the PDA should be considered an obstacle when it comes to participation in society, the general assumption that Tally lacks self-control reinforces the stereotype 'childlike'. Moreover, Tally has an honest and naïve perspective which sets her apart from her classmates, as well as difficulty understanding pragmatic force and figurative language. Consequently, her behaviour often leads to situations of othering, especially since Tally tends to be impulsive. Obviously, Tally is still a child, considering her age. However, her family is shown as struggling to deal with her defiance and being somewhat socially isolated, e.g. leaving social gatherings early, not being allowed in a restaurant, etc.

Tally prefers certain routines but not rules, which may at times interfere. She certainly does not lack emotions but often runs into a communication barrier, mostly created by a lack of understanding for her PDA. Her ability to reflect on the feelings of others is portrayed in her relation-

ship with the dog whom she treats like she prefers to be treated herself, however, she often appears selfish to others. Although Tally realises that others may struggle to fit in as well, she mostly serves as a stepping-stone for her family, teachers, and friends to become more understanding of Tally's situation. Her progress is somewhat limited; while she does resolve to be more 'herself' in the future, she also gives up trying to fit in and relies on the accommodation of her surroundings instead.