

**Interview with Mark Haddon, author of 'The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time'**

By Sanjukta Dasgupta

**Mark Haddon's** 'The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time' is proving to be one of the most applauded novels published in Britain in recent years. It is similarly popular with the fiction readers of our 11 British libraries in India.

'Curious Incident' was the 2004 winner of the Commonwealth Writers' Prize (best first book), the Europe and South Asia panel for which was chaired by Sanjukta Dasgupta of Kolkata University's Department of English. Dr Dasgupta discussed Curious Incident and his views on India with Mark Haddon and Connecting brings you the interview.

**Congratulations, Mark. You have received about 16 prizes since the book was published last year. Does winning the Commonwealth Writers Prize have any special significance for you?**

The best answer I can give is to repeat the acceptance speech I wrote for the prize: 'I am usually wary of writers with a message. But if Curious Incident has a message it is this: that no-one is a stranger, that the people we turn away from in the street are more like us than we dare admit, that the things we have in common will always outweigh the things which separate us'.

I am deeply honoured by this award. Not just because of the number of countries from which the novels are drawn. And not just because of the wonderful writers who have won the award in past years. But because, of all the literary awards around the world, this is the one whose principles lie closest to the message of the book itself. That literature crosses all boundaries. That you can open a novel and slip effortlessly into the mind of a complete stranger who lives in a culture of

which you know almost nothing. That in a world of twenty four hours news and high-speed information there is still nothing that bridges the gap between one human being and another quite as well as the right words in the right order.

**Who are the main readers of Curious Incident? Adults or children? I ask because the book was published in two identical editions with different covers, one for adults and the other for teenagers. What were the compelling reasons for publishing the book in two identical editions? Is this a regular practice or quite unique?**

The vast majority of my readers are adults (and the 'adult' British edition has outsold the 'young adult' by a factor of four to one) which has lead many people to assume that the book is more popular among adult readers. What those people forget, however, is that there are very many more adult readers than there are 'young adult' readers, so the sales figures mean very little. One of the advantages of the 'young adult' market, however (and the reason why good books aimed at teenagers often sell well for a longer period) is that every four or five years there is a whole new generation of 'young adults'.

As for the two identical editions, there were no compelling reasons for the strategy. It was simply one of the options offered by various publishers who were interested in publishing the book. Indeed, many people in Random House were worried that the idea might backfire as, though some children's novels have subsequently been published in adult editions and vice versa, a novel had never been published simultaneously in to parallel editions. Only with hindsight does it now look like a very good idea indeed, simply because the same book is reviewed in different places, advertised in different places and, most importantly, placed on two different shelves, and often in two different rooms, in the same bookshop. So I guess it may be happening a lot more often from now on.

**In The Observer in April 2004 you stated emphatically, “ writing for children is bloody difficult”. Was it even more difficult to write a crossover novel, as**

**Curious Incident is now often being called, as it very effectively generates responses both from children and adults?**

I didn't mean that writing for children was more difficult than writing for adults. I was simply countering the common assumption that writing for children is easy. It isn't. And there are a number of adult writers who have discovered this to their cost. As for the difficulty of writing a crossover novel, I never intended the book as a crossover novel at all. I wrote it as an adult novel with a teenage protagonist. It was my agent and my publishers who realised it had 'crossover potential'. Of course, there have been many, many novels with such potential written over the last hundred years - many of Dickens' novels would have been read out to the whole family, 'Paddy Clarke, Hah Ha Ha', 'The Lord of The Rings', 'Le Grand Meaulnes'. The sudden excitement about 'crossover' is not a sign that books have changed but that publishers have suddenly realised that they can market certain books to everyone from the ages of twelve to ninety.

**In this connection, I am often reminded of the case of Mark Twain's Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn. Huck Finn is taught in universities in India while Tom Sawyer remains a children's book, though the sub title of Huck Finn clearly declares Huck as 'Tom Sawyer's comrade'. T S Eliot was forbidden by his family to read Huck Finn as Huck smoked. Do you think parents may think Curious Incident to be a subversive book for children?**

They certainly do. Though the aspect of the book which concerns some parents and teachers is the occasional use of 'obscene' language. Indeed, you only have to take a look at Amazon reviews to find a handful of adult readers fulminating about the book's 'inappropriate language' which might corrupt young minds. Strangely, they never complain about the fact that the book opens with a dog being murdered with a garden fork, or that some of the adult characters do some fairly dreadful things (about which I shall keep quiet so that I don't give too much of the plot away).

And yes, I do hope that the book is subversive, if only in the benign sense that it turns some people's picture of the world upside down, breaking down the divide between ourselves and some of the people we despise.

**Did you have to do some extensive reading about autism and case studies of Asperger's Syndrome in order to authenticate the medical condition of Christopher Boone?**

I did no specific research at all. Many years ago I worked with people with a variety of disabilities, all of them more seriously disabled than Christopher, so I feel comfortable writing about the subject and have what you might call an interested layperson's knowledge of autism and Asperger's. Beyond that, I reasoned (rightly, I think, in retrospect) that the novel would work best if I simply tried to make Christopher seem like a believable human being, rather than trying to make him medically 'correct'. In short, if I treated him like any other character and didn't make him a special case.

The choice of the name of Christopher for your protagonist is very intriguing- was it intended as an extended metaphor for a journey of discovery and self-discovery?

I have no memory of why I chose the name Christopher, though you are right in that it has some very appropriate resonances. Usually I choose names because I know someone who has that name, just as I choose addresses because I know someone who lives in that road, or that town. I like names and places which have been 'road tested', so that they don't feel as if they have been plucked out of thin air. Indeed, only after finishing the book did I realize that I had given the name of my fiction agent to a kindly elderly neighbour (Mrs Alexander) and that, more embarrassingly, I had given the name of my film and TV agent to Christopher's pet rat Toby.

You describe dysfunctional white British middle class families. Do you think *Curious Incident* registers the transitions that are fast transforming family systems in the West? That of course engages the roles of parents as providers and care-givers.

More importantly, I think that the novel dramatises something which has been happening in families of all sorts for a very long time indeed - that bringing up a child who is 'special', whether they have a serious disability, or whether they are the national junior tennis champion, puts huge stress on a marriage, with one partner often devoting their life to the project of looking after that child, and the other partner feeling excluded from that project.

In the Observer article you have said that you wrote *Curious Incident* in order to "entertain" yourself. That seems a very subjective agenda. Most authors refer to a need for sharing of ideologies when they decide to publish their writing. As you have been writing consistently for the past 17 years your agenda for writing cannot be self entertainment only.

**Do you wish to awaken responses in your readers regarding experiences, issues and dreams?**

Well, if you can't entertain yourself I don't think you stand a chance of entertaining anyone else. For me the process of writing involves constantly changing roles. One moment you're the writer, the next you're pretending to be a reader who has just taken this book off a shelf in a shop. Do you like it? Does it move you? Does it make you laugh? Does it make you want to read more?

Of course authors want to share. That's what writing is all about. Though I think that if you want to share a specific ideology, a specific view of the world, it is very easy to become sententious and wearisome. Readers are very much aware of writers who have designs on them and nothing loses their sympathies more quickly than an author who wants to persuade them that he or she is wiser or

more clever or better informed. You have to let readers make up their own minds about the fictional world you have created. Of course that fictional world is inevitably flavoured by your own ideology, but it's a bad tactic to advertise the fact.

**Though you have been compared with many writers of the twentieth century, very curiously however, you have mentioned your affinity to Jane Austen as you explain that you share with her the desire to represent the quotidian and mundane. Why do you choose an early nineteenth century woman writer as a possible likeness and link?**

Jane Austen wrote about boring people with desperately limited lives. Her heroines were bound by iron rules about what they could do, where they could go and what they could say. Their futures depended on the single question of who they would marry. Was it going to be the baronet? Or were they going to fall for a cad in tight red trousers and be discarded in a boarding house in Bath? Yet she writes about these humdrum lives with such empathy that they seem endlessly fascinating. Moreover, she writes about them in the kind of book these woman would themselves read - the romantic novel. This (I realised rather belatedly) was what I was trying to do in *Curious Incident* - to take a life that seemed horribly constrained, to write about it in the kind of book that the hero would read - a murder mystery - and hopefully show that if you viewed this life with sufficient imagination it would seem infinite.

**Do you think Indian writers such as Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, Rohinton Mistry, Jhumpa Lahiri are read by special interest groups because of the relatively “alien” culture that they seem to write about?**

One must remember that all of them write in English. Well, there are many Indian writers in English and many ways in which they get read; to lump them all together would be patronising to both authors and readers. However, it is certainly true that there are some Indian writers whose huge success is partly

due to the fact that they have shed something of what makes them culturally Indian and write in an easily digestible 'international' style, and it seems a pity to me that readers who devour these writers think they are getting an authentic insight into another culture. And there are other writers who deserve more success in the wider world - I'm thinking of someone like R K Narayan as I've just finished reading his wonderful version of the Ramayana - but whose readership remains small because they have refused to compromise in this way. And then, of course, there is that vast number of Asian Indian writers who remain untranslated.

On the other hand, while there are great barriers between cultures (and the sheer number of languages in India is obviously one of the reasons why so little of its literature gets translated) it also seems to me to be true that some of the best writers exist in that strange space between cultures (Salman Rushdie, Zadie Smith, James Joyce, Caryl Philips, Peter Carey - the list is endless), either because they live in exile, voluntarily or involuntarily, because they are of mixed race, or simply because there is no one culture that they can call home.

**Will your next novels be crossover novels too or will you revert to writing children's books?**

Neither. The next novel, which has the working title Bloods and Scissors, is very definitely an adult literary novel. It's a black comedy about, among other things, skin cancer and nervous breakdown. Mental dysfunction and black humour... it seems to be turning into my stock-in-trade.

**Any message for Indian readers?**

I was going to say that I hope to see you soon on Indian soil, and that the publicity tours for Curious Incident have finally cured my fear of flying, but I was being dropped at Rome airport last week, en route back to London, when I looked up and saw a 767 flying over with flames coming out of one of the

engines. So I might have to do a little more work on conquering my fear of flying before taking a long flight.

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