

FOCUS POINTS AND THEMES

Because of his specific personal experience with autistic individuals and his general interest in the subject of disabilities, Mark Haddon presents this novel with a single goal: to illustrate and normalize the essence of autism and Asperger's syndrome.

In *Christopher*, we have a person whose behavior is seen by others as decidedly odd. By allowing us to hear from Christopher himself, we are forced to confront our personal reactions to him and to evaluate where his unusual behavior stands juxtaposed to our own “odd” behavior.

Haddon uses the following focus points and themes as a place to start our deliberation of this significant human condition.

The Power of Storytelling

... the framework of the story juxtaposed with the framework of the autistic condition

- Stories of all kinds help young children to organize their world and to learn about good and evil, about courage and bravery, about making difficult decisions and about interpreting their outcomes.
- The idea of storytelling and writing centers around the power of imagination, yet Christopher's own powers of imagination are severely limited. However, he is able to expand on and adapt what he already knows by using the language of logic in place of imagination and metaphor. He sees and learns new things through the discovery aspect of the mystery story, a literary style that Christopher likes very much.
- Christopher is the author and the narrator of his own story, a technique that Haddon chooses to use instead of relying on a non-fictional format to explain the mysteries of autistic behavior. (see **Suggested Beginnings**, p.7) According to Haddon, this novel is *"a book about books, about what you can do with words and what it means to communicate with someone in a book."* (Welch)
- There are two reasons for Christopher's decision to write his own novel:
 - He likes mysteries primarily because they are puzzles, which he likes to solve, and Christopher wants specifically to solve the puzzle of Wellington's death. He reads the Sherlock Holmes stories and because they are written in novel form, he decides to do the same.
 - On project day, his teacher, Siobhan, suggests that he write about finding Wellington and his experience at the police station.

- While Christopher does not like the idea of “*proper novels*,” (p.19) he does like books. For Christopher, the difference is as follows: novels are fictional, therefore they are about things that are made up and that happen only in the writer’s imagination. This idea would normally tend to make Christopher afraid because he would consider a novel to be a lie. Christopher hates lies.
- Although he does consider the irony of this literary conflict, Christopher makes the decision to solve Wellington’s murder by recording both his experiences and his investigation as a murder mystery novel.
- As the narrator of his own story, Christopher paints the truth as he sees it. True to his psychological framework, Christopher uses only similes, which are words portraying ideas that he can readily understand. He leaves the larger metaphors to us.
- There would normally be no other way to intimately get to know someone like Christopher, because he would never give anyone the chance. But because this novel is so well constructed, the reader can enter Christopher’s mind and thoughts more easily and naturally. Such is the power of a story.

Counterexample

- Christopher is different from other children and attends a school for children with special needs. Society has defined and identified the behavioral characteristics that lead to his placement in this special environment. Although Haddon, himself, never labels Christopher, it is understood that Christopher suffers from Asperger’s Syndrome. (see Last Thoughts, p.58)

- Christopher challenges the definition of “special needs,” although he does not challenge his placement in such a school. There is a measure of safety for Christopher to be surrounded by trained professionals who can help him develop his skills. They teach him to function in the outer world where he faces reactions such as the policeman’s “*you are a bloody handful, you are, Jeez*” (p.160) or by the man who tried to save Christopher from being hit by the subway train: “*Mad as a fucking hatter. Jesus.*” (p.184)
- Christopher, the character and the narrator, is Haddon’s proof that there is no simple, straightforward definition for autism or Asperger’s. (see **Key to the Novel**, p.11) Haddon takes society’s commonly shared experiences and feelings about Christopher’s condition and converts them into counterexamples. For example, Christopher exhibits autistic behaviors and is considered to be autistic. Other people who exhibit many of these same behaviors are not labeled autistic. Thus the converse of the statement about autism can be false. (see **Triangle**, p.52)

Paradox

The idea of paradox is an extension of the idea of counterexamples.

Christopher’s story, and indeed Christopher himself, is filled with paradox – ideas that seem illogical or contradictory but that actually illustrate certain truths.

- Christopher is quick to tell us he has no sense of humor, but there is much humor in his telling of the story.
- As the narrator, Christopher accomplishes what many writers dream of achieving – to tell a story without complication and to leave the reactions and conclusions entirely up to the reader.

- Christopher has an emotional range of zero. He cannot cry, and although he can feel either sad or happy, there are no nuances in between. Yet, in the novel, there is an emotional component to everything that Christopher does and discovers – for example, the murder of the dog, the discovery of his mother’s disappearance and reappearance, his distress over the knowledge that he may not be able to take his math exam, his pride at having surmounted the many obstacles on his way to London.
- Christopher’s voice is the narrative voice of the novel. But a real Christopher would be unable to write a book such as this because he would not be able to place himself into any situation other than his own. He would never be able to enter the thoughts of another person. (see *Theory of Mind*, p.60) The novel’s Christopher is completely true to his own perspective, yet the reader is keenly aware of Christopher’s thoughts, reactions and motivation, as well as those of his parents and the many others with whom he comes into contact.
- In a traditional fiction book, the narrator uses metaphors, imagery and symbolism to help define and detail the story. In this way, the narrative can bend and twist into shades of truth, for the purpose of illuminating that truth. Christopher cannot tell a lie. This novel is a made-up story about a character who only knows how to tell the truth.
- While Christopher fears strangers, the reader is made keenly aware of how the strangers really fear someone like Christopher. The reactions Christopher gets from people range from empathetic (Mrs. Alexander) to abusive (the policeman and the man in the subway).

The most obvious paradox is that Christopher, with his unusual and literal view of people and the world, has a deep and philosophical appreciation for life and the living. His poignant perspective contrasts with the often complicated, untruthful, simplistic, and cynical view of the so-called “normal” people around him.

The Truth About Lies

- Christopher cannot tell lies, not because he is a good person as his mother tells him, but because “*A lie is when you say something happened which didn’t happen.*” (p.19) The danger in talking about things that haven’t happened is that it opens the possibilities of talking about dozens or hundreds of things which never happened. Therefore, the lie, within this definition, has no boundaries. Christopher needs boundaries in order to feel safe.
- Christopher cannot differentiate the shades of grey that lie between the blacks and the whites of truth, and therefore Christopher dismisses all lies. Christopher’s logic allows for no exceptions or nuances.
- Christopher’s thoughts on the nature of lies and truth reveal to us that our own views of a lie depend on a mixture of content, situation, motivation, and relationship.
- Christopher’s perspective is usually all or nothing. However, Christopher does develop a sense of lying through omission, which is the basis of something called a white lie.

A white lie is not a lie at all. It is where you tell the truth but you do not tell all of the truth. (p.48)

- Despite his promise to his father that he won’t pursue his investigation, Christopher manages to circumvent his promise by logically working through the possible questions he might ask Mrs. Alexander. Christopher is determined to arrive at a level of truth that ranks higher on his ethical scale than his promise to his father.
- Christopher dislikes Sir Arthur Conan Doyle because Doyle had dabbled in spiritualism, something for which Christopher has no patience and which Christopher believes is not true. Christopher does not believe you can communicate with the dead and he understands that things like photography can be altered to show that