

Exposing the Autistic Mind Using Narrative Technique in Tammet's *Born on a Blue Day* and
Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*

Firstname Lastname

IB Candidate # 002904-108

Biotechnology High School

May, 2009 Exam Session

Diploma Programme Group 1

Supervisor: Michelle Ferrara

Word Count: 3,292

Abstract

The purpose of my extended essay is to compare the narrative techniques of Mark Haddon's novel *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* and Daniel Tammet's *Born on a Blue Day*. Specifically, it will prove that the narrative method used by Haddon is an accurate depiction of one that would be used if an autistic person actually wrote the novel. The paper will give respect to the physical characteristics of an autistic person and explain how they affect the narration.

Although Mark Haddon is not autistic, his novel does in fact incorporate the same technique Daniel Tammet uses in his novel. Inspired by his own work with autistic people, Haddon is able to use their characteristics to build a unique method of writing, which is astoundingly akin to Tammet's novel. They both integrate a penchant for mathematics and numbers, a misunderstanding of emotions, a lack of an abstract mind, and difficulty to explain what is going on around them within their narrations. Haddon reveals his ability to write from the perspective of another person, and does it well.

Word Count: 180

Contents

I. Title Page.....1

II. Abstract.....2

III. Contents Page.....3

IV. Introduction.....4-5

V. Body.....5-12

VI. Conclusion.....12-13

VII. Works Cited.....14

Unique human qualities in Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* and Tammet's *Born on a Blue Day* are explored in a self reflective manner, permitting the authors to provide the reader with a complete descriptive picture of the inter-workings of their mind. The question is, to what extent is the narrative technique in the fictional autobiography, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* an accurate depiction of the perspective of an autistic person, as compared to the real autobiography, *Born on a Blue Day*?

This topic is significant because fictional autobiography is used by many authors. In order for an author to be successful, he must not only write from the perspective of the fictional character, but also use accurate narrative technique. It is important to determine if Haddon is successful at his goal. Before reading *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*, I didn't do any research on the author. Consequently, as I was reading it, I did not realize it was not written by someone with autism. After doing more research on Mark Haddon, the author, I found out he wasn't autistic, and I was in awe. He had included so many technical aspects within his novel that I felt were specific to a person with autism and yet, he wasn't. Due to the fact that I was not a virtuoso in autism, I was unsure as to how accurate his narrative technique was. Therefore, I knew this was a topic worth investigating.

Christopher Boone, narrator of *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*, knows all the prime numbers up to 7,057. Daniel Tammet, author of *Born on a Blue Day*, knows all the prime numbers up to 9,973. Christopher and Tammet share a very special bond, they are both autistic, more specifically have Asperger's syndrome. Autism affects almost all aspects of a person's life. Social interactions are particularly difficult as well as, communication, imagination, and understanding empathy and abstract thoughts (Tammet 6). There is, however, one enormous difference between Christopher and Tammet. Daniel Tammet is a real person,

while Christopher Boone is completely fictitious, created by author Mark Haddon. Mark Haddon, author of *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*, used his past experience working with people with a variety of disabilities as the foundation for his fictitious narrator, fifteen year old Christopher Boone (Dasgupta, *n. pag.*).

Having the reader believe the novel is written by an autistic person, when in fact it is not is called fictional autobiography. Fictional autobiography is “an autobiography written from the point of view of a fictional character,” (Pryor *n.pag.*). In *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*, Christopher Boone is on a mission, trying to solve the mystery of who killed Wellington, his neighbor’s dog. His quest submerges him, unknowingly, into the deception of his father and the truth about his mother. The autobiography *Born on a Blue Day*, on the other hand, is an extraordinary account inside the mind of Daniel Tammet, an autistic savant. It is a memoir that consists of early childhood to adulthood, and everything in between, include falling in love and memorizing 22,000 digits of pi. Although one book is written by an autistic person and the other is not, they still achieve the same goal, for they provide the reader with a glimpse into the life and mind of an autistic person. The narrative technique within *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* is startlingly similar to *Born on a Blue Day*, making its narrative technique accurate.

It is known that people with autism find difficulty in understanding emotions, both others and their own. Tammet as well as Christopher experience this same hardship. When Tammet’s father suffers a mental breakdown and was placed into a long-stay psychiatric institution, Tammet admits that he could only attempt to comprehend the feelings he had toward his father but knew he should be feeling something due to his absence (Tammet 92). Tammet reiterates the difficulty faced with understanding emotions when he explains how he and his partner Neil met

within an internet chat room. “There is something exciting and reassuring for individuals in the autistic spectrum about communicating with other people over the internet” (Tammet 142).

Tammet notes that one of the best applications within the internet chat rooms is the use of emoticons (☺ ☹) to visually illustrate how a person is feeling.

The narrator Christopher Boone uses these same illustrations within his writing. In the beginning of the novel he explains that Siobhan, his teacher aid, drew many of these types of pictures to help him understand emotions. “...she showed me this picture ☹ and I knew it meant ‘sad,’ which is how I felt when I found the dead dog. Then she showed me this ☺ and I knew it meant ‘happy,’ like when I’m reading about the Apollo space missions, or when I am still awake at 3 a.m. or 4 a.m. in the morning and I can walk up and down the street and pretend that I am the only person in the whole world,” (Haddon 2-3). Finally at the end of the novel he states that he received an A on his A level math test and it made him feel like this: ☺ (Haddon 220).

Tammet may not use these symbols explicitly in his memoir to explain how *he* feels; however, the fact that Tammet acknowledges the use of them as a simple method for knowing how one feels supports the narrative use of them in Mark Haddon’s novel.

Both authors use other figures and illustrations to transport the reader into their mind and the mind of their narrator. People with autism often are unable to describe what is going on within their mind, or what they are experiencing. Daniel Tammet is not only autistic, but also a savant. This is a rare condition made well known by the film *Rain Man*. Since Tammet does not experience other debilitating disabilities that usually accompany savant syndrome he is able to explain what he is experiencing, to an extent (Tammet 6). As a savant, numbers to Tammet are unique and have personalities of their own. He visualizes numbers as well as words as colors and shapes in his mind. If he were to add two numbers the two shapes would combine, making a new

shape and in turn a new number. This visual experience with numbers is called synesthetic and makes Tammet extremely skilled at mathematics. In his memoir he is able to draw and explain these shapes and therefore, allow the reader to be transported into his mind. For instance, he provides an illustration of the multiplication of fifty three by one hundred and thirty one. Both numbers are their own unique shape, and when each are lined up spatially opposite to each other the space created between the two shapes creates a third shape: 6,942. This is the solution to the [problem] (Tammet 5).

Tammet again helps the reader understand what his mind focuses on when he explains the phenomenon of “interference”, in which he finds it difficult to see the “big picture” because his brain focuses on the individual details. For instance, when shown the letter H composed of many small letter A’s, he would only see the letter A’s, and not the overall letter H. Tammet illustrates this point by showing the reader the figure (Tammet 39). Christopher uses multiple illustrations as well to show the way his mind works, and to exemplify what he sees. When Christopher found himself in a predicament, in which he was unsure what to do he, drew a chart in his head with all the possibilities. Then he crossed out the decisions that were impossible thus was only left with one decision, and that was the right one (Haddon 131). Christopher also draws maps of his street, clouds he saw, aliens, signs, the train station, a map of England, his mom’s house set up, cars and so on. These illustrations allow the reader to see what the narrator sees, to experience what the narrator is experiencing, and therefore, dives the reader farther into the narrator’s mind.

Christopher’s and Tammet’s aptitude for math seeps through the pages and pulls the reader in yet again when they find the need to explain, in detail, different mathematical processes. Both Christopher and Tammet share a love for prime numbers and explain exactly

how to find them, each using a different process. Christopher writes down all positive whole numbers up to forty-nine and continuously deletes the multiples of two, three, four, and so on (Haddon 11-12). Tammet uses the sieve method, in which he writes down all positive whole numbers up to one hundred and starts at two and deletes every second number, starts at three and deletes every third, and so on (Tammet 9). Tammet and Christopher come to the same conclusion and even draw an extremely similar picture to depict their outcome. Since math is such a large part of their lives, it makes up a large portion of their books as well. Christopher set aside an entire appendix of three pages dedicated to one problem from his A level math class. Tammet takes three pages to explain the following problem from a book of mathematical puzzles: “There are twenty-seven people in a room and each shakes hands with everyone else. How many handshakes are there all together” (Tammet 58). Tammet explains how he came to his conclusion in his own unique way. He admits that doing math makes him feel both calm and pleased (Tammet 59 – 60), while Christopher says math makes him feel safe (Haddon 25). While math and patterns make Tammet and Christopher feel tranquil and secure, metaphors and other figurative phrases cause them to feel confused.

Tammet talks a great deal about metaphors, yet, he does not use them in his memoir. He explains that as a child, he found idiomatic language extremely confusing, especially phrases such as “under the weather” and “woke up on the wrong side of the bed” (Tammet 163). Christopher is very much the same, for he does not use metaphors or any other idioms without stating that they are in fact an idiom. Christopher explains that he finds people so confusing because they use metaphors when they speak (Haddon 15). Unlike Christopher, however, Tammet’s synesthetic could account for a propensity toward the making of links between two unrelated things, hence a metaphor, which is why synesthesia is seven times as common in poets

and writers (Tammet 163-164). However, it is unclear whether or not he does have an inclination for them. It is as though the autism is what made idiomatic language so difficult for him to understand at a younger age, and even now. This would explain why he does not use them in his memoir.

Christopher, on the other hand, hates metaphors and believes that they should be called lies, “a pig is not like a day and people do not have skeletons in their cupboards . . . an apple in someone’s eye doesn’t have anything to do with liking someone a lot” (Haddon 15). Yet Christopher does not exhibit the same disgust for similes and actually uses them about twice in his novel. He clarifies that similes are not lies because it actually describes what something looks or sounds like and wouldn’t be a lie unless it was a bad simile (Haddon 17). Given that both novels lack the use of metaphors, or any significant amount of other idioms, it therefore buttresses the fact that the narrative technique is indeed accurate in *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*.

Narrative technique is not only limited to illustrations, figurative language, and mathematical designs, for it can also be the actual structure of the novels. Both books are divided in chapters. *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, however, is not set up with traditional chapter numbers. Instead of the customary one, two, three, four, five, etc. it follows the pattern of prime numbers, which is two, three, five, seven, eleven, etc. This exhibits Christopher’s love for prime numbers and lack of concern for the numbers in between. Just as Christopher uses prime numbers to denote chapters in *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*, Tammet indicates chapters with not only a number but also the visual representation of it. For example, Tammet describes sixes as “tiny black dots, without any distinctive shape or

texture” (Tammet 5). This perfectly describes the picture accompanying chapter six. In doing so, both are showing the reader how their minds function.

However, there is a difference between the two novels’ setups. This is the progression of the chapters. The chapters within Haddon’s novel are intermittent, while Tammet’s are constant with alternation within the chapters. For instance, the first chapter in *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* is dedicated to the plot of the novel, while the second chapter introduces Christopher Boone and the next chapter goes back to the plot. They alternate between the action of the novel and somewhat irrelevant topics. On the other hand, *Born on a Blue Day* is a continuous story that is written in a chronological order. It begins with the day he was born and continues through early childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. However, there were times within the chapters when Tammet would alternate between what he was originally focusing on, such as his school days, then jump to something completely different, such as how all of his childhood addresses were prime numbers and so were his next door neighbors. He goes on to explain they were “twin primes” as well as what “twin primes” are (Tammet 54). Christopher and Tammet may not use the exact same technique when structuring their novels; however, there are subtle similarities. One of the most important aspects of books is the descriptions within them. Both Tammet and Christopher take this feature to a whole new level.

When describing people or places, people with autism often go into a great amount of detail just simply explaining the way something looked, felt, or sounded like. Tammet says that when he was eight, he would write non-stop covering page after page with descriptions. The stories would often have entire pages dedicated to the details of a place or location, including its shape, color, and texture. They were descriptively dense with no dialogue, or emotions, just long run on sentences (Tammet 45). This statement is supported by the entire book, for Tammet’s

descriptions are exactly how he said they were. For instance, when recounting his classroom he writes, “[It] was rectangular and was entered from the right side... We were each given a plastic folder that also had a name label, stuck to the top left-hand corner. The folder had a colored zipper at the top... (Tammet 48).

The same step by step descriptions are used in *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*. Both narrators depict locations and events in such specificity that the reader can piece together an entire mental picture of what they are describing. There is nothing left up to the imagination. Neither minces words nor makes things complicated. They keep things straightforward and do not use symbolism at all. It is as though the events within the book could be easily recreated if necessary. When Christopher is revealing aspects about the two police officers who interrogated him about the dead dog, this is what he writes, “There was a policeman and a policewoman. The policewoman had a little hole in her tights on her left ankle, and a red scratch in the middle of the hole. The policeman had a big orange leaf stuck to the bottom of his shoe, which was poking out from the side” (Haddon 6). Although Christopher’s descriptions are slightly more intricate, this could possibly be due to the fact that he is much younger than Tammet. Therefore, he is less mature, and not aware of how the “normal” world works (Scholfield *no.pag.*). Still, the similarities between the two are incontrovertible.

Another literary technique shared by both books is dramatic irony. Dramatic irony is when the reader understands more about the situation occurring within the novel than the character or the narrator (Braiman *n.pag.*). It is not that Christopher and Tammet do not care about the situation, they just lack the understanding of what is occurring. When Christopher lost his pet rat Toby on the lower deck, where the trains run, he goes after him. Christopher does not realize the danger he is in when the train begins to roar and is coming closer and closer.

Christopher is preoccupied by the fact that some man is touching him. He does not realize the man is saving him from the oncoming train. However, the reader knows exactly what is going on and the jeopardy that Christopher's life is in (Haddon 182-183). The same is true when he finds the letters from his so called dead mother. The reader can deduce what is going on, while Christopher on the other hand comes up with other conclusions, such as the letter being for another person with the same name, or being in the wrong envelope (Haddon 99). Tammet admits to the same lack of understanding. Tammet and Neil's cat, Jay came down with a kidney infection. "A week after we took her in, we received a call telling us that Jay was not responding to treatment and that it might be a good idea for us both to come in and see her... Even at that moment, I do not think the seriousness of the situation had really occurred to me" (Tammet 155). People with autism have an amazing analytical ability. However their inability to comprehend emotional situations affects their perception of what is going on around them. This is depicted in both novels with the use of dramatic irony.

Born on a Blue Day's and *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time's* narrative styles mirror each other, in a well written explorative and informative manner. Mark Haddon does a superb job of writing from the perspective on an autistic person. William Scholfield is an eighteen year old, also with Asperger's syndrome who agrees. In his review of the book *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*, he says "This book is a good murder mystery story but a better description of how the mind of a different person with some kind of special need looks upon how things work and come about" (Scholfield, *n. pag.*). Haddon incorporates many of the characteristics of an autistic person, which show through not only physically, but also in the approach in which he writes. For the confusion about emotions, he uses pictures of faces, for the aptitude for math, he explains mathematical problems, and due to the absence of an

abstract mind, his book lacks metaphors and other idioms. This is a new take on fictional autobiography. Haddon is not only writing an autobiography focusing on the physical characteristics of the fictional Christopher Boone, but also writing it using the technique Christopher would use. Both Tammet and Haddon accomplish their goal of pulling the reader into their mind using vivid descriptions, and allow the reader to feel as though they are experiencing events first hand. If one did not know the truth about the narrator of *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* they would not question if he were autistic or not. The reader is drawn within both novels becoming fascinated with the narrators' distinctive way of describing events within their own lives, while attempting to fully appreciate their uniqueness.

Works Cited

Braiman, Jay. "Literary Devices." *n.pag.* 2007 July 2008 <<http://mrbraiman.home.att.net/lit.htm>>.

Haddon, Mark. "Interview with Mark Haddon, author of 'The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time'." By Sanjukta Dasgupta. British Council Connects, *n. pag.* July 2008 <http://www.commonwealthfoundation.com/uploads/documents/Mark_Haddon_Interview.pdf>.

Haddon, Mark . The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time. United States: Vintage Books, 2003.

Pryor, Devon. "What is Autobiography." *n.pag.* WiseGeek, 2003-2008. Conjecture Corporation. July 2008 < <http://www.wisegeek.com/what-is-an-autobiography.htm>>.

Schofield, William. "A Journey to Shock and Enlighten." Rev. of The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time, by Mark Haddon. Guardian News and Media (2004). *n. pag.* July 2008<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2004/jan/29/whitbreadbookawards2003.costabookaward>>.

Tammet, Daniel. Born on a Blue Day. Great Britain: Hodder & Stoughton, 2006.