

THE CURIOUS INCIDENT OF THE DOG IN THE NIGHT-TIME — STUDY GUIDE

1. Introduction

- **Author:** Mark Haddon
 - **Published:** 2003
 - **Genre:** Contemporary Novel / Mystery / Psychological Narrative
 - **Narrative Style:** First-person, via Christopher's unique voice
 - **Setting:** Swindon and London, England
 - **Premise:** Christopher Boone, a 15-year-old with exceptional logical abilities and behavioural differences consistent with autism spectrum characteristics, investigates the death of a neighbour's dog — a mystery that leads him to uncover painful family secrets.
 - **Why it's studied:** Distinctive narrative voice; themes of truth, trust, family, and perception; innovative structure and use of diagrams, maths, and logic.
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2. Plot Summary

Overview

The story begins when Christopher discovers Wellington, the neighbour's dog, dead with a garden fork in its body. Determined to solve the mystery, he begins an investigation — which leads to revelations that change his understanding of family, trust, and independence.

Part-by-Part Summary

Part 1: The Investigation Begins

- Christopher finds Wellington and decides to write a "murder mystery novel."
- He interviews neighbours, against his father's instructions.
- His father becomes angry, forbidding him to investigate.

Part 2: Family Secrets Revealed

- Christopher discovers letters from his supposedly dead mother.
- He learns:
 - His mother is alive.

- His father lied about her death.
 - His father was the one who killed Wellington.
- Christopher feels unsafe and betrayed.

Part 3: Journey to London

- Christopher decides to travel alone to London to find his mother.
- His journey is frightening due to sensory overload and unfamiliar environments.
- He demonstrates resilience and determination despite overwhelming challenges.

Part 4: Resolution

- Christopher stays with his mother and her partner Mr Shears.
- His mother returns to Swindon with him.
- Christopher passes his A-level Maths exam (with top performance).
- He believes he can achieve anything — including going to university.

3. Setting & Context

Modern Britain

- Suburban life, ordinary homes, real-world locations
- Reflects everyday family struggles, communication issues, and societal expectations

Christopher's Perspective

- The world is unpredictable, noisy, and overwhelming
- Settings shift from controlled (home, school) to chaotic (train stations, London streets)
- These changes mirror his emotional journey from fear to independence

Social Context

- Challenges faced by neurodivergent individuals
- Miscommunication within families
- Pressure on parents coping with complex needs

4. Characters

Christopher Boone

- Fifteen, gifted in maths and logic
- Struggles with metaphor, social cues, and emotional expression
- Prefers rules, patterns, and order
- His honesty and literal thinking drive the narrative voice
- Represents resilience and the desire for truth

Ed Boone (Father)

- Loves Christopher deeply but struggles with frustration
- Lies about mother's death
- Kills Wellington out of anger
- His flaws create major conflict in the story

Judy Boone (Mother)

- Loving but overwhelmed by Christopher's needs
- Leaves family due to emotional exhaustion
- Wants to rebuild her relationship with Christopher

Siobhan

- Christopher's teacher
- Supports him emotionally and academically
- Encourages his writing and independence
- Represents understanding and stability

Mrs Alexander

- Kind elderly neighbour
- Helps Christopher understand his parents' past
- Symbol of unexpected kindness

Roger Shears

- Judy's partner
- Antagonistic presence based on father's perspective
- Represents conflict and adult tension

5. Themes

Truth, Lies & Trust

Christopher values truth absolutely; lies make the world unsafe.
Family breakdown stems from dishonesty.

Communication & Misunderstanding

Characters struggle to express needs or emotions.
Christopher's difficulty interpreting social cues leads to tension.

Family & Relationships

Complex portrait of imperfect parents doing their best but failing at times.

Independence & Courage

Christopher's journey to London is a turning point — he proves his capability.

Order vs Chaos

He uses logic, maths, and routines to impose order on a chaotic world.

Perspective & Seeing the World Differently

The novel highlights how environment, detail, and meaning shift depending on the viewer.

6. Form, Structure & Language

Form

- Written as Christopher's own book
- Uses diagrams, maths problems, maps, and lists
- Non-traditional narrative features emphasise his logical mind

Structure

- Chapters numbered using prime numbers
- Mystery structure (detective story) + coming-of-age narrative
- Two parallel revelations:
 - Who killed Wellington
 - Why his mother left

Language

- Literal, straightforward style

- Short sentences, precise descriptions
 - Minimal metaphors (Christopher dislikes them)
 - Calm, factual tone contrasts with emotional chaos surrounding him
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7. Key Quotations

Perspective

- "I see everything."
→ Emphasises detail-oriented thinking.

Truth

- "I cannot tell lies."
→ Fundamental to Christopher's character and conflict.

Fear & Sensory Overload

- "The noise was like people fighting with swords."
→ Shows how overwhelming the world can feel.

Independence

- "I can do anything."
→ Culmination of his self-belief after the London journey.

Family

- "Father had murdered Wellington. That meant he could murder me."
→ Illustrates how betrayal destabilises Christopher's world.
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8. Symbolism & Motifs

Prime Numbers

- Reflect order, logic, and Christopher's comfort with maths

Maps & Diagrams

- Tools Christopher uses to understand and control his environment

Animals (especially Wellington and Toby the rat)

- Symbolise trust, innocence, and vulnerability

The Colour System

- Christopher's rules about colours (e.g., red for good days) show how he creates structure

Trains

- Symbol of transition and personal growth
 - Represent both fear and freedom
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9. Important Scenes

- Discovery of Wellington's body
- Finding the letters revealing mother's truth
- Confrontation with his father
- Train station sensory overload
- Journey to London
- Reunion with mother
- Sitting the A-level Maths exam

Each moment pushes Christopher toward independence and understanding.

10. Writer's Purpose

Mark Haddon aims to:

- Offer a compassionate, respectful portrayal of a neurodivergent narrator
 - Explore how families cope with emotional strain, love, and misunderstanding
 - Show how truth and trust shape relationships
 - Reveal the extraordinary within the ordinary
 - Challenge assumptions about capability, intelligence, and independence
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11. Sample Essay Questions

- **Character:** How does Haddon present Christopher as both vulnerable and strong?
 - **Theme:** Explore the importance of truth in the novel.
 - **Technique:** How does the author use structure to reflect Christopher's mind?
 - **Turning Point:** Why is the discovery of the letters a key moment?
 - **Setting:** How does the journey to London highlight Christopher's challenges and growth?
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12. Model PEA Paragraph

Point: Haddon uses narrative voice to highlight Christopher's honesty and literal thinking.

Evidence: Christopher states, "I cannot tell lies."

Analysis: His straightforward language emphasises his commitment to truth. This creates tension when he discovers that his father has lied — the emotional impact is intensified because truth is central to Christopher's sense of safety and stability.

13. Quick-Revision Checklist

- **Themes:** truth, independence, communication, family, order vs chaos
- **Symbols:** prime numbers, animals, colour system, diagrams
- **Characters:** Christopher, Father, Mother, Siobhan, Mrs Alexander
- **Key quotes:**
 - "I cannot tell lies."
 - "I see everything."
 - "I can do anything."
 - "Father had murdered Wellington..."
- **Turning points:** letters discovery, confrontation with father, train journey, reunion

MINI-ESSAYS

Character: Christopher Boone

Christopher is defined not by disability but by clarity, logic, and honesty. Haddon uses his first-person narrative to immerse the reader in a mind that processes the world through pattern and structure. Christopher's difficulty lies in navigating emotions and ambiguity, not intelligence. His investigation into Wellington's death mirrors his search for stability in a world of unpredictable adults. When he discovers his father's lie about the dog—and later about his mother—his shock is fundamentally about **broken trust**, not abstract betrayal. Christopher's journey to London shows courage through perseverance rather than dramatic confrontation. His mathematical interludes—prime numbers, diagrams, proofs—act as coping strategies that restore order to chaos. Haddon does not romanticise Christopher; instead he presents him as a full human being whose limitations coexist with remarkable strengths. The closing image of Christopher believing he can "do anything" is not naïve—it reflects growth, independence, and a newfound ability to navigate a world that is not built with him in mind.

Turning Point

A. Turning Point: The Letter Discovery

Christopher's discovery of his mother's letters detonates his epistemology: his father's lie undermines the person he trusted most. The shock compels a solo journey to London—a functional rite of passage—where anxiety is processed through logic and pattern. The turning point converts the detective story into a story about agency.

B. Symbolism: Prime Numbers, Maps/Diagrams, Wellington

- **Prime numbers:** order amid chaos; an identity anchor.
- **Maps/diagrams:** navigational thinking; translating fear into steps.
- **Wellington:** the inciting problem—a mystery that opens family fissures.

C. Setting Analysis

Swindon's domestic spaces are treacherous because of secrets; London is sensory overload but also proof of competence. Trains, timetables and ticket barriers become tests that Christopher learns to pass.
