

Christopher and Asperger Syndrome

Simon Baron-Cohen



Christopher is a 15-year-old with Asperger Syndrome (AS), who attends a school for pupils with special needs. Although other pupils are in this school because of their epilepsy, learning difficulties, or lack of basic skills such as toileting, Christopher is there because his poor social understanding causes him such confusion that he reacts with major behavioural problems. He makes strange sounds, blocks his ears, hits out at people, and wanders off. His behaviour problems are triggered by things not going according to his plan, or people saying things where the meaning is not black and white, or by crowds and loud noises.

Christopher is supremely logical, and he uses his logic in two different ways. The first is at school, for mathematics. Indeed, he turns out to be the first person from his school ever to take maths A-level – and despite it being a special school, he is taking this exam three years earlier than is normal. Christopher sees patterns

in numbers, which enable him to solve even complex maths problems. He sees a mathematical dimension to everyday reality, and derives a sense of peace and satisfaction from the beauty of mathematics.

But the other way in which he uses his logic is to work out how things happen. To play detective. The story begins with the curious sight of his neighbour's dog, who has been killed with a pitch-fork. Christopher's hero is Sherlock Holmes, who can "detach his mind at will" so as to see the facts of reality behind social appearances and so solves the mystery of *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. So Christopher decides to ignore his father's order not to poke his nose into other people's business, and sets out to find out who killed his neighbour's dog. In the small neighbourhood in Swindon, a boy with AS digging up clues is a powerful device for exposing the social relationships of this community.

Christopher is not typical of everyone with AS. As Mark Haddon says in his comments, all people with AS are unique individuals. Not everyone with AS will be able to take maths A-level, for example. But Christopher fits the psychological theory of autism spectrum conditions outlined in *The Essential Difference* (Penguin, 2003): impaired empathizing alongside intact or even superior systemizing. In Christopher's case, the two foci of his obsessive systemizing are maths and forensics. Both involve seeing patterns in the data that point to rules governing events. For other individuals with AS, the 'system' of interest might be different. Christopher's understanding of maths is beautifully systematic, leading him to provide elegant proofs. And the curious incident of the dog in the night-time is connected via a series of clues, leading to the systematic proof of the cause of the crime.

The idea of the central character of fiction being socially naïve

is of course not new. Voltaire's *Candide*, or the child in *The Tin Drum*, or even the doll-turned-human in *Pinocchio*, are memorable examples of how – through the eyes of an innocent – the stormy, deceit-ridden, emotionally-charged world of adult relationships takes on a fresh perspective. Christopher has to struggle not only with his AS, but also with his parents' rows, his father's temper which occasionally spills over into child-abuse, and his mother's stress spilling over into depression. His parents too struggle with the challenge of bringing up a child with such severe behavioural problems, but their human weaknesses also come through, such that they neglect Christopher. This is a moving portrait of AS in the real world.

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