

## Book Club: Grade 12

### *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* by Mark Haddon

#### **Summary:**

Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* is a captivating story about Christopher Boone, an autistic 15 year-old boy who sets out to investigate the suspicious death of his neighbour's dog. The novel, written in the first-person perspective of Christopher, gives the reader insight into the mind of a person with autism.

#### **Activity One:**

**"It looked as if there were two very small mice hiding in his nostrils." (p. 17)**

*An introductory performance to jump-start students' reading*

#### **Learning Outcomes:**

Students will listen, speak, read, write and view to explore thoughts ideas, feelings and experiences as well as to respond personally and critically to oral and print texts.

#### **Context and Rationale:**

In order to prepare students for this novel and to identify elements of the first-person narrator's character that may present obstacles to understanding, we'll jump right in by performing chapter 31. This chapter is heavy on dialogue and full of details about Christopher and his mindset, and uses some British vocabulary that students will have to get accustomed to reading. This activity also allows students to encounter Christopher before knowing (via the book cover, for instance) that he is autistic. From this activity, students will have first experienced Christopher on his own terms, without interpretive labels. This will allow room for authentic discussion and comparison in following activities about what makes someone "normal". (Nelson 7)

#### **Grade and Timeline:**

This introductory activity can be used at any grade level. Students are actively engaged with the text immediately through performance and are removed from any preconceptions about the book, since they don't know what book they are reading from. This novel is suited to a more mature level of students as it deals with more

complex issues. Therefore it is more appropriate for grade 11 or 12 students. The activity will take one 60 minute class.

**Materials:**

Script from Chapter 31 (enough copies for all students) with enlarged margins for students to make notes in

**What to do:**

- ✓ With no introduction (i.e. don't say "This is from the new novel we'll be reading"), pass out **Lesson 1 script**, one for each student. Ask for four volunteers, one to play Christopher, one to play his father, one to play the inspector, and one to play the narrator (i.e. to read anything not in quotes, including the footnote). Having two students play Christopher as narrator and Christopher in dialogue will differentiate between narration and dialogue as well as allowing more students to participate.
- ✓ Ask all students who will not be performing to annotate their handouts (have extra-wide margins to allow for this). They should note: words or phrases they don't know; expressions or reactions that seem at all strange or that defy expectation; words or phrases that arouse a strong (negative or positive or in-between) reaction, for any reason; any questions or thoughts that occur to them, whether from the text itself or the performance of it. These directions should be included on the top of the script.
- ✓ Bring performers to center (or front) of room. Tell the class that the scene begins in a jail cell then moves to an interrogation room. From this information, have the rest of the class direct (while performers remain silent): how should the performer be situated? What should their body language be? What tone of voice should they use? Then let the performers act out the scene.
- ✓ After the performance, open discussion to entire class (performers included), based on what they noted during the performance. (For a quite large class, I might break them into smaller groups first, and then reconvene.) Where do they think this is taking place? What is going on? Who is Christopher? What has

happened? And, most importantly, *how*, based on textual clues, do they know (or suppose) these things? And how did the performers feel? What did they think of their characters? What was the effect of having, in effect, *two* Christophers? Perhaps these questions could be on a worksheet for them to respond to either in groups or independently after the performance and before the whole-class discussion. (Nelson 7)

### **Additional Considerations:**

The effectiveness of this activity will vary depending on the nature of the students in the class. A more outgoing class will be more willing to participate in and add creativity to the presentation aspect. For a more introverted class, allow students time to write and consider their responses first either in small groups or independently, before engaging in whole class discussion.

### **Personal Connection**

I have not had the opportunity to use this exact activity but have done similar performance pieces previously in a grade 11 IB English class. By acting out pieces from plays or novels, students are able to see the story come to life, which deepens their appreciation for and understanding of the plot, as well as engagement with the characters.

### **Activity Two:**

Found Poetry

*Playing with words as an approach to tone, voice, and theme*

### **Curricular Goals**

Students will listen, speak, read, write, view and represent to manage ideas and information and to enhance the clarity and artistry of communication.

### **Context and Rationale:**

At this point, students should have completed reading the first 43 chapters. (Since chapters are labeled in prime numbers, this is really only 30 pages or so.)

In order to promote students' understanding of the relationship between diction, syntax, tone, voice, and theme, they'll construct poems from the sentences they

decided were the most important (see “what to do” below). This activity will prime them to read closely and will demonstrate to them why such attention to detail is important to understanding what is going on in this novel, whose meaning is completely bound up in Christopher’s voice. (Nelson 15)

**Grade and Timeline:**

This activity could be used in grades 8-12 for various novels. Found poetry is a great way to make poetry more accessible to students and engage them in writing their own. In the context of this activity, it enables students to discover the significance of words and images that the author has used in the novel. The activity should take at least one 60 minute class, but it could be extended into following classes for students who really engaged with writing their own poetry.

**Materials:**

Compilation of emails that have been sent to you (enough copies for all students)

**What to do:**

- ✓ In the class preceding this activity, have students select a partner. Students should, via an email, decide between the two of them what they think are the 5 most important sentences in these first 43 chapters. Students can interpret “important” to mean whatever they would like – most important to the plot, most interesting sounding, most complicated, most straightforward, or any combination of these or other ideas. They should email you and print out the transcript of their conversation and bring it to class. They should also note what their reasoning was when choosing the sentences.  
(Depending on the group of students this can be an individual homework assignment as well)
- ✓ Give each student a printout of the class compilation (which will have been cut and pasted from their emails the night before) of all the sentences they chose as the most important in their reading assignment for today.
- ✓ Ask students to look over the sentences and spend about 15 minutes writing from them an original, 20-line, titled poem. They may use phrases, or they may

use only single words in a different order than they originally appear, but they may not use a whole sentence as it exists in the novel. The poems do not have to be about the novel.

- ✓ Spend about 5 minutes discussing what students' criteria were for choosing the most important sentences. Is there any consensus as to what makes a sentence important?
- ✓ Ask students to read their poems aloud then ask them what they noticed about each other's compositions. Is there a correlation between the words and phrases available to them and how they felt they could use those words and phrases? Did they find themselves aware of the words' original context? Did they try to align their poems with that context or subvert it? Would anyone's poem serve as an accurate distillation of the reading (chapters 1-43)? Why or why not? How is this "paraphrase" of the novel unlike the original? What's left out? What might be enhanced? (Nelson 15)

**Additional Considerations:**

The activity would work best with students who have been previously introduced to found poetry. Perhaps the unit should come after a unit on poetry or take some time to introduce the concept and provide examples. The activity also helps students develop an understanding of what constitutes an important sentence. This should help them in their own academic writing when they need to choose appropriate quotations to use as evidence for their arguments.

**Personal Connections:**

Poetry often instills a lot of fear among students. The more we expose them to it in unassuming ways, the more comfortable and confident they will be in reading and analyzing more complex forms. As a student, I think I would have been more comfortable with poetry had it been incorporated more frequently into novel study.

### **Activity 3:**

“A Picture’s Worth...”

*Exploring Motion and Stillness*

#### **Curricular Goals:**

Students will listen, speak, read, write, view and represent to comprehend and respond personally and critically to oral, print and other media texts.

#### **Context and Rationale:**

Prior to this activity, students will have studied film and film terminology and have watched clips from various films that discuss autism and/or the idea of being “normal” or outcasts in society like *Rain Man* and *Being There* in order to look for certain techniques, discuss their rhetorical effects, begin to see parallels between the textual features and visual features of films. In this activity, their prior knowledge of films is applied to photographs. The focus of this activity will be on the still photos of Diane Arbus and Mary Ellen Mark, both of whom have documented people traditionally on the fringes of society. By now students should be making connections between earlier discussions of point of view in writing and point of view in visual media and will be able to discuss where these 2 photographers seem to situate themselves. The issues of Christopher’s book as a text that incorporates language and pictures will be brought up, so that students may begin to apprehend and appreciate this novel as more than a typical “novel.” (Nelson 34)

#### **Grade and Timeline:**

This activity is related specifically to the novel and its subject matter. Due to the mature content, it is better suited to a grade 11 or 12 class. However, a similar activity can be applied to other novels with less complicated subject matter and could be used in lower grades. This activity, in combination with the prior activity of watching videos, will most likely take 4 classes.

#### **Materials:**

Slides of various photographs

### **What to do:**

- ✓ Show slides of several of Arbus's and Mark's photographs [following this activity are several representative images. For more of Mary Ellen Mark: <http://www.maryellenmark.com>]
- ✓ Hold class discussion of each photo as it's brought up on screen (as a class), reminding students to call up the issues and vocabulary they've been using to talk about the novel, stories, non-fiction writings, and films. Pertinent considerations: Are we meant to identify with the people in the photos? How do we know that? How are people framed? What does that framing lead us to conclude about them? About the photographer's attitude toward them? How would these photographers situate Christopher? His father? His mother? Siobhan? Would Christopher like how he was depicted in the photo? Would anyone else? How would Christopher's mother frame him? How would his father want him to stand? Would they use color or black and white? Encourage students to jot notes in their reading logs during discussion. (Nelson 34)

### **Additional Considerations:**

In assessing this effectiveness of this activity, consider the following questions: Did students enjoy the photos? Did they have a variety of reactions to these images in light of ongoing conversations about what's "normal"? Did they continue to make connections between narrative techniques in language and in photos and film? (Nelson 34) Perhaps an extension of this activity could be to actually construct their own images or films.

**Photographs:** See next page

### **Resources:**

Nelson, E. (2004). *Novel Unit Plan*. Retrieved from <http://www.geocities.com/erinlnelson/CuriousDog.doc>



Asylum Inmates, 1970-71 (Arbus)



King and Queen of a Senior Citizens Dance, N.Y.C., 1970 (Arbus)





**A Jewish giant at home with his parents in the Bronx, N.Y., 1970 (Arbus)**



**Marina Campa (Batman's Grandmother), Kimberly Crown Circus, Mexico City, Mexico, 1997 (Mark)**



**Miami Beach. South Beach, Florida, USA 1979 (Mark)**



**Leakey, Texas, USA 1991 (Mark)**